

CSS | ISSUE BRIEF

BRITISH ATTEMPTS TO MAINTAIN A GLOBAL MILITARY PRESENCE

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INTRODUCTION

The United Kingdom (UK) has the second largest military network in the world after the United States (US).¹ As far as permanent presence is concerned, Britain has 145 military base sites in 42 countries or territories around the world.

Some salient facts about this presence:

- In **Cyprus**, the UK has 17 separate military installations.
- In **Saudi Arabia** and **Oman**, there are 15 and 16 military installations, respectively. It is important to note that both these countries are dictatorships, and the UK has had especially close military relations with both for a long time.
- Of the 145 total bases, UK manages 60 entirely by itself and the other 85 are run by allies (with the significant presence of the UK).

Last year, Prime Minister Boris Johnson announced a big jump in planned expenditure for the Armed Forces. About 16.5 billion pounds will be spent over four years, according to a UK government report.² This is a 10% increase in the UK's military expenditure.

WEST ASIA AND THE GULF REGION

Royal Air Force (RAF) flights from Cyprus often find themselves landing in Gulf states like the **United Arab Emirates** and Qatar. Here, the UK has permanent bases at Al Minhad and Al Udeid airfields with 80 personnel are deployed there. These bases are used to supply troops to Afghanistan, Libya, Iraq and Syria.³

The Sultanate of Qatar partly funds the RAF base in Lincolnshire (UK) and **Qatar** also maintains a joint squadron with the RAF based here at Al Minhad and Al Udeid.

¹Kampmark, Binoy. "Keeping The Empire Running: Britain's Global Military Footprint." Scoop. November 25, 2020. Accessed July 16, 2021. <https://www.scoop.co.nz/stories/HL2011/S00114/keeping-the-empire-running-britains-global-military-footprint.htm>.

²Defence, Ministry Of. "Defence Secures Largest Investment since the Cold War." GOV.UK. November 19, 2020. Accessed July 16, 2021. <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/defence-secures-largest-investment-since-the-cold-war>.

³"Written Questions, Answers and Statements - UK Parliament." Written Questions and Answers - Written Questions, Answers and Statements - UK Parliament. Accessed July 20, 2021. <https://questions-statements.parliament.uk/written-questions/detail/2020-05-11/45505>.

15 sites across **Saudi Arabia** house UK military personnel. British armed forces are spread over 6 locations in Riyadh, where RAF officers observe Saudi-led air operations in Yemen.

Saudi Ministry of Defence has made 73 accommodation units available to British military personnel in Riyadh. They serve at King Fahad air base in Taif, King Khalid air base in Khamis Mushayt and King Faisal air base in Tabuk where Hawk jet pilots also train. Britain also has contracts to participate in the special security brigade, an elite unit that protects the Saudi royal family. Most other UK personnel in Saudi are stationed in its oil-rich eastern province.⁴

Britain has a naval base in the island kingdom of **Bahrain** near the international airport in Muharraq.

“Britain maintains a substantial military presence in seven Arab monarchies where citizens have little or no say in how they are governed. These include around 20 British troops supporting the Sandhurst-trained King Abdullah II of **Jordan**.”⁵ Jordan has also received over 4 million pounds in aid from Britain to maintain a quick reaction force, and a British colonel is on loan to the unit.

40 British troops are stationed in **Kuwait**, and they reportedly operate reaper drones from the Ali Al Salem air base and also undertake teaching responsibilities at the Mubarak Al-Abdullah Joint Command and Staff College. British personnel serve in senior capacities in all three branches of Kuwait’s military.

91 UK troops are on loan to the Sultan of **Oman**.⁶ This is known to be the most extensive UK military presence in the Gulf. They are stationed at 16 sites. The Royal Navy base in Duqm is being expanded as part of a 23.8 million pound-investment to support aircraft carriers during their deployments to the Indian Ocean region and beyond. There is also a joint training area some 70 kms south of Duqm at Ras Madrasah which the British and Omani forces use for tank firing practice. Plans are underway to move a majority of Britain’s tanks from Canada to Ras Madrasah.

There is a US military facility at Diego Garcia on the Chagos Islands (**Mauritius**). British forces at Duqm are likely to work together with the US military here in the Indian Ocean region. Britain claims the Chagos Islands and has refused to return them to Mauritius after having removed the indigenous population forcibly in the 1970s.

⁴ “UK’s Relations with Saudi Arabia and Bahrain.” UK’s Relations with Saudi Arabia and Bahrain (7th January 2013). Accessed July 20, 2021. <https://publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm201213/cmselect/cmfaff/writev/bahrain/sab40.htm>.

⁵ Miller, Phil. "Declassified UK: REVEALED: The UK Military's Overseas Base Network Involves 145 Sites in 42 Countries." Daily Maverick. November 24, 2020. Accessed July 20, 2021. <https://www.dailymaverick.co.za/article/2020-11-24-revealed-the-uk-militarys-overseas-base-network-involves-145-sites-in-42-countries/>.

⁶ Miller, Phil. “Declassified UK: Revealed: How the British Military Supplies ‘mercenary’ Forces to a Gulf Dictatorship.” Daily Maverick. Accessed July 20, 2021. <https://www.dailymaverick.co.za/article/2020-07-20-revealed-how-the-british-military-supplies-mercenary-forces-to-a-gulf-dictatorship/>

The **Iraqi** parliament recently voted to expel foreign forces, which includes 400 British personnel. If the bill, which was voted on in January, comes into effect, British troops would be removed from 4 sites – Camp Havoc in Anbar, Erbil International Airport, Camp Taji and Union III in Baghdad.

10 troops are stationed in **Israel** and **Palestine** – split between the British embassy in Tel Aviv and the US embassy in Jerusalem.

UK IN THE INDO-PACIFIC REGION (INCLUDING FORMER COLONIES)

There is a significant increase in the Asia-Pacific region from the military point of view for the UK. This is likely a response to the rise of China. The UK already has military bases in 5 countries neighbouring China. According to a Declassified UK report, “These include a naval logistics base at Sembawang Wharf in **Singapore**, where eight British military staff are permanently based. The base provides Britain with a commanding position overlooking the Malacca Strait, the world’s busiest shipping lanes which are a key choke point for vessels sailing from the South China Sea into the Indian Ocean.” Singapore is a strategically important location for commerce and trade, according to the UK’s Ministry of Defence (MOD).

Near the disputed Spratly Islands, British military has central basing in **Brunei**. This is seen as another attempt to encircle the South China Sea. In fact, the Sultan of Brunei pays for the upkeep of British military in his country.⁷ The Sultanate also allows British company Shell to have a major stake in Brunei’s rich oil and gas reserves. The Royal Gurkha Rifles of Britain (mostly recruited from Nepal) have a permanent battalion stationed in Brunei.⁸ Half of the Gurkha soldiers are stationed in three garrisons in Brunei - Sittang Camp, Medicina Lines, and Toker Lines. Special accommodation for these troops is provided using apartment complexes in Kuala Belait, totalling 545 in number. 27 British troops, who are experts in imagery analysis and sniper instruction, are also on loan to the Sultan of Brunei at three locations.

Further in the Indo-Pacific, Britain has 60 personnel spread across **Australia**, and 10 in **New Zealand**. The British army runs 3 facilities in **Nepal** as well – Gurkha recruitment camps in Pokhara and Dharan along with administrative centres in Kathmandu, the capital of Nepal. Nepal is strategic because it shares borders with China and is close to the disputed Tibetan plateau. 10 personnel are also based in **Pakistan**. Their roles include teaching pilots at the air force academy in Risalpur.

In **Afghanistan**, UK maintains a quick reaction force at the Hamid Karzai International Airport in Kabul.⁹ This is crucial because of peace talks that are underway between the government

⁷ Tossini, J. Vitor. "The UK in the Far East – The Relevance of the British Forces in Brunei." UK Defence Journal. May 27, 2021. Accessed July 16, 2021. <https://ukdefencejournal.org.uk/the-uk-in-the-far-east-the-relevance-of-the-british-forces-in-brunei/>.

⁸ "Royal Gurkha Rifles." The British Army. Accessed July 16, 2021. <https://www.army.mod.uk/who-we-are/corps-regiments-and-units/infantry/royal-gurkha-rifles/>.

⁹ "Permanent Joint Headquarters Facilities Management." KBR. 2017. Accessed July 17, 2021. <https://www.kbr.com/en/experience/permanent-joint-headquarters-facilities-management>.

and Taliban. The recent quick exit of the US forces from Afghanistan may prompt Britain to do the same in the near future.

UK MILITARY PRESENCE IN EUROPE

Six European countries find themselves sharing some space with British military. This includes 4 bases in **Germany** which house 540 personnel.¹⁰ This persists despite Britain's decade-long Operation Owl to scale down its Cold War-era military network and infrastructure. Northern Germany has two barracks in Sennelager, Monchengladbach and a storage facility in Wulfen.

Deep in the Arctic Circle, the British military has a helicopter base at Bardufoss airport in **Norway**. It is mostly used for mountain warfare exercises.

The fall of the USSR (Union of Soviet Socialist Republics) prompted Britain to expand its military presence into former Soviet states. Over twenty personnel from the British military are currently on loan to the **Czech Republic's** military academy in Vyskov.¹¹

The Royal Air Force has fighter jets at the Amari air base in **Estonia**¹² and the Siauliai air base in **Lithuania**.¹³ These are all part of NATO's air-policing mission to intercept Russian jets.

British military presence is far-reaching in **Cyprus** with two sovereign base areas of Akrotiri and Dhekelia with over 2290 British personnel stationed here. These sites were retained at the time of Cyprus' independence in 1960.

BRITAIN IN AFRICA

Some colonial-era British bases can still be found in Africa. After the independence of **Kenya**, the UK army retained its base at Nyati Camp in Nanyuki, Laikipia County. 5 other sites, and 13 training grounds in Kenya house British troops. In Nairobi, the troops of Britain have access to the Kifaru Camp and the training centre in Karen.¹⁴

¹⁰ "Written Questions, Answers and Statements - UK Parliament." Written Questions and Answers - Written Questions, Answers and Statements - UK Parliament. September 14, 2020. Accessed July 18, 2021. <https://questions-statements.parliament.uk/written-questions/detail/2020-09-02/hl7650>.

¹¹ "Garrison Town Vyškov, the Base of Training Command-Military Academy." Garrison Town Vyškov, the Base of Training Command-Military Academy | Training Command – Military Academy. Accessed July 20, 2021. <https://www.vavyskov.cz/en/content/garrison-town-vyskov-base-training-command-military-academy>.

¹² "RAF Typhoons Scramble For Fifth Time On Nato Mission." Royal Air Force. Accessed July 20, 2021. <https://www.raf.mod.uk/news/articles/raf-typhoons-scrambled-for-fifth-time-on-nato-air-policing-mission-in-the-baltic/>.

¹³ "The Royal Air Force Complete This Year's NATO Air Policing Mission." Royal Air Force. Accessed July 20, 2021. <https://www.raf.mod.uk/news/articles/the-royal-air-force-complete-this-years-nato-air-policing-mission/>.

¹⁴ "The Defence Training Estate." GOV.UK. Accessed July 20, 2021. <https://www.gov.uk/guidance/defence-infrastructure-organisation-and-the-defence-training-estate>.

In neighbouring **Somalia**, British troops are stationed at the Mogadishu International Airport. Camp Lemonnier in **Djibouti** also hosts British troops. These bases are used to conduct drone operations over Yemen.¹⁵

In **Malawi**, British soldiers are assigned to counter-poaching missions in Liwonder National Park and the Nkhotakota and Majete Wildlife Reserves.

In **Sierra Leone**, where the UK was involved in the country's civil war, a British officer is still assigned to run the Horton Academy – a military training centre.

In **Nigeria**, around 9 troops are on loan to the Nigerian armed forces. "Britain's military presence in Africa is set to grow substantially later this year with the deployment of a 'peacekeeping' force to Mali in the Sahara. The country has been rocked by civil war and terrorism since the NATO intervention in Libya in 2011."¹⁶

IN THE AMERICAS

Britain fought the Falklands war with Argentina 38 years ago, and it still maintains six separate bases across the islands – barracks and airport at RAF Mount Pleasant (the largest),¹⁷ dockyard at Mare Harbour, anti-aircraft missile silos on Mount Alice, Mount Kent and Byron Heights.

In the **Falkland Islands'** capital at Stanley,¹⁸ the Royal Navy of Britain maintains a defence camp to keep constant offshore patrol. The British Defence Infrastructure Organization (DIO) plans to spend 180 million pounds over 10 years in the Falkland Islands. The British Antarctic Territory, which is reserved for scientific exploration, is also served from the Falkland Islands. The research station at Rothera¹⁹ relies on logistical support from the UK military and is supplied with essentials by HMS Protector, an ice patrol ship with 65 UK personnel onboard at most times. Another expensive territory is maintained in the South Atlantic by Britain, i.e., the **Ascension Island**. The runway at this territory acts as an air bridge between Mount Pleasant and Oxfordshire. The US air force and the National Security Agency (NSA) also operate on Ascension Island.

¹⁵ Bowcott, Owen. "UK Troops Working with US Military at Base for Yemen Drone Operations." The Guardian. May 12, 2014. Accessed July 20, 2021. <https://www.theguardian.com/uk-news/2014/may/12/uk-troops-us-base-djibouti-drones-yemen-mod-reveals>.

¹⁶ Miller, Phil. "Declassified UK: REVEALED: The UK Military's Overseas Base Network Involves 145 Sites in 42 Countries." Daily Maverick. November 24, 2020. Accessed July 20, 2021. <https://www.dailymaverick.co.za/article/2020-11-24-revealed-the-uk-militarys-overseas-base-network-involves-145-sites-in-42-countries/>.

¹⁷ "Mount Pleasant Complex." Royal Air Force. Accessed July 20, 2021. <https://www.raf.mod.uk/our-organisation/stations/mount-pleasant-complex/>.

¹⁸ "Falkland Islands Jobs: July 2021 Vacancies." Falkland Islands Jobs | July 2021 Vacancies. Accessed July 20, 2021. <https://www.jobs.gov.fk/the-falkland-islands/>.

¹⁹ "Rothera Research Station." British Antarctic Survey. October 27, 2020. Accessed July 20, 2021. <https://www.bas.ac.uk/polar-operations/sites-and-facilities/facility/rothera/>.

730 British troops are spread across the **United States of America**. NATO sites in Virginia and US military command centres in Washington DC house most of these British troops. 900 personnel of the RAF are based at the Creech Air Force Base in Nevada. 80 British personnel conduct training at Edwards Air Force Base in California. Other sites include the Eglin Air Force Base in Florida, Marine Corps Air Station Beaufort in South Carolina and the Naval Air Station Patuxent River in Maryland.

British forces maintain a tank training range at Suffield in **Canada**, with 400 permanent troops maintaining over 1000 vehicles.

The UK has a small garrison at **Belize's** main airport,²⁰ from where they have access to 13 sites for jungle warfare training. British troops have access to one-sixth of Belize's land, which includes protected forest areas.

CONCLUSION

This article provided an extensive overview of the British military's attempts to maintain a global presence. Many of the UK's military bases are a legacy of its imperial past. Some of these exist in continuation even after the host country's independence. In many dictatorial countries, British forces have helped establish the ruling regimes and continue to support them. In friendly countries, Britain operates within NATO bases. The next phase seems to be focused on keeping a close eye on the Indian Ocean region.

²⁰ Miller, Phil, and Matt Kennard. "Declassified UK: EXCLUSIVE: Britain Uses Vast Swathes of One of the World's Most Biodiverse Countries for Military Training - and Pays Nothing ." Daily Maverick. June 12, 2020. Accessed July 20, 2021. <https://www.dailymaverick.co.za/article/2020-02-04-exclusive-britain-uses-vast-swathes-of-one-of-the-worlds-most-biodiverse-countries-for-military-training-and-pays-nothing/>.