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No Brexit From the Gulf: The New UK Training Base in Oman

For London, there's no Brexit from the Gulf. On the contrary, the United Kingdom has strongly come back to the Gulf's shores: the UK is pivoting on three strategic dots (Kuwait, Bahrain and Oman), with permanent military bases and tightened security agreements.

From a geostrategic perspective this means: maintaining a global posture after Brexit; protecting the waterways (as Hormuz) for oil and trade, with a special eye on Asia and the East; enhancing long-term partnerships with the Gulf monarchies *vis-à-vis* Iran, in a post-American Gulf.

On March 2019, the UK plans to open a permanent military base in Oman [*Gov.UK*, UK cements position in Gulf with new joint base in Oman, November 5, 2018]: it will host a military logistics and training facility, with hundreds of British troops to be deployed. The base will be placed in Duqm, the new commercial and industrial hub of Oman. Duqm symbolizes the Sultanate's holistic projection in the XXI Century, as well as it synthesizes the strength of the Omani partnerships with Asian powers (the Indian Navy can access the Duqm's facilities, while China has massively invested in the industrial area). In 2017, the Sultanate signed a deal with the UK allowing the British Navy to use the port of Duqm.

The British base in Oman will host a dry dock and will be able to accommodate nuclear vessels, plus Queen Elisabeth class vessels. Most of all, it will represent the hub for British training in the Gulf, and for UK-Gulf monarchies joint military exercises: for the Gulf armed forces, full professionalization and intra-GCC interoperability, as well as with external partners, are the challenges and the objectives of the next decade. On October 2018, the *Operation Saif Sareea 3* ("Swift Sword 3") [*Times of Oman*, On the ground with Saif Sareea 3, Oman's largest ever joint drill, November 4, 2018], gave the taste of the ambitious task ahead. For five weeks, British and Omani militaries engaged in impressive joint military drills, with the participation of 5.500 British and 70.000 Omani soldiers in addition to tanks, jets and warships, performing war games in the desert. The UK-Oman comprehensive military training agreement was signed in 2016.

On April 2018, the UK opened a permanent military base in Bahrain (HMS Juffair), at Mina Salman [*Al-Arabiya*, Bahrain hosts first British permanent military base in Gulf, April 5, 2018], a naval support facility with up to 500 British militaries: the US Navy Fifth Fleet is also located in Manama. For the UK, the Bahraini base is vital for long-term deployments in the Gulf. Bahrain also hosts the UK Maritime Component Command supporting the Royal Navy mine countermeasures vessels.

In 2017, the UK and Kuwait signed a new military cooperation agreement, triggering speculations regarding the creation of a military base in the emirate. In an interview, the UK Ambassador to Kuwait Michael Davenport stated in 2018 that London was considering a small but permanent troop deployment in Kuwait [Sian Grzeszczyk, “EXCLUSIVE: Britain ‘Considering Permanent Military Presence’ In Kuwait”, *Forces Network*, February 19, 2018].

It would be too much simplistic to depict the United Kingdom’s strategy in the Gulf evoking the “Trucial Coast” historical experience. But surely, this is the first permanent outpost of the UK in Oman since the British withdrawal from the area, in 1971. The “East of Suez” strategy has boldly re-entered London’s foreign policy [Jean-Loup Samaan, “Back to the East of Suez? Les Britanniques dans l’océan Indien”, *Politique étrangère*, 2017, 3, pp. 125-137], as well as the traditional maritime component of its external projection. For the Gulf monarchies, this means practically enhanced occasions for know-how transfer, capabilities and military build-up, plus a more robust deterrence position with respect to Iran.

Eleonora Ardemagni – *is Associate Research Fellow at the Italian Institute for International Political Studies (ISPI), regular analyst for the Aspen Institute Italy. She teaches at ASERI (Graduate School of Economics and International Relations, Catholic University, Milan, Master in Middle Eastern Studies).*