

British army practises expeditionary operations in Oman

Paul Stuart
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Since September 15, Britain's armed forces have been engaged in *Operation Swift Sword II* in the deserts of the Gulf state of Oman. The operation is expected to cover a six-week period through October. One quarter of Britain's total military capacity will be involved in the operation, at a cost of £93 million.

It is the UK's largest military deployment since the 1991 Gulf War and its largest naval operation since the Falklands/Malvinas War in 1982. Some 24 ships, 23,000 military personnel, 400 armoured vehicles and a squadron of fighter-bombers are involved. In the past, smaller military exercises in the region were used to showcase British defence manufacturers, but the size of *Operation Swift Sword* (*Saif Sareea* in Arabic) points to broader strategic considerations.

The operation was first announced on November 8 last year, and so precedes the present military offensive against Afghanistan, although the forces presently stationed in Oman may well be diverted to the anti-Taliban campaign should the need arise.

Planned by a small team at the military's permanent joint headquarters (PJHQ) in Northwood, Middlesex, and based on directives from the *Strategic Defence Review* completed in 1998, the operation's central purpose is to practice a Joint Rapid Reaction Force capability. Defence Secretary Geoff Hoon said this would, "demonstrate Britain's ability to plan, coordinate and execute major combined operations with the armed forces of a friendly nation. It will show too Britain's ability to deploy rapidly, a considerable force with real punch over strategic distances."

British involvement in Macedonia earlier this year, and the military build-up against Afghanistan, have not significantly altered the plans for *Operation Swift Sword II*. During a debate on September 14 on the US terror attacks, Hoon announced, "The House [of Commons] will be aware that we are preparing to undertake the largest exercise of British Armed Forces in the Gulf for many years. Exercise Saif Sareea will ensure that our armed forces are fully trained to meet their operational tasks... we have no plans to call off this exercise. We will not be deflected from ensuring that the effectiveness of our armed forces is maintained at the highest level that is possible. Nor will we be deflected from demonstrating our solidarity with our

many friends in the Islamic world."

On September 3, the British aircraft carrier *HMS Illustrious* left Portsmouth harbour with Fleet Air Arm Harriers and RAF Harriers, to join up with the Royal Navy's *Argonaut 01*. The Ministry of Defence website comments:

"*Illustrious* will serve as the flagship for *Argonaut 01*, which sees 24 ships and two submarines of the Royal Navy deploy to the Mediterranean and the Gulf, where they will participate in Saif Sareea II. Two other *Argonaut* task groups have already sailed; a squadron of mine countermeasures vessels left on August 14, followed by the amphibious task group centred on the helicopter carrier *HMS Ocean* and the assault ship *HMS Fearless*, carrying Royal Marines and soldiers of 3 Commando Brigade."

It went on to described the scale of preparations and what type of force was being readied, "In Oman, Omani and British Teams have been hard at work through the summer preparing for the arrival of over 20,000 British personnel and heavy equipment such as Challenger 2 tanks and As90 self-propelled guns."

"They will be supported by the full range of airpower, with Tornado F3, Tornado GR4, E-3D Sentry, Nimrod, VC-10k tanker and c-130 transport aircraft deployed ashore by the RAF...A major asset has proven to be the RAF's new C-17 heavy airlifter, which has been able to deliver up to 100,000lbs of cargo per flight direct to Oman."

The army, navy and airforce are integrated into one command structure to provide greater flexibility of response. Heading the group, Commander of the UK Maritime Forces, Rear Admiral Burnell-Nugent, said, "One of the advantages that a naval task group brings is that it carries all of its logistics with it, a full range of capabilities from cruise missiles to laser-guided bombs to Royal Marine Commandos." He added, "This is a significant display of maritime power, we are sending 8,500 sailors, airmen, and Royal Marines to the Gulf Region...In total the Argonaut task group consists of 40 separate commands, brought together into an integrated, self-sustaining joint fighting force."

The MoD website uses the term "expeditionary" to describe the character of the Rapid Reaction Force assembled in *Operation Swift Sword II*. This expression harks back to the

military language of 19th century colonialism. The scenario laid down for the operation shows that such a force could easily be deployed in future to remove the governments of any smaller nation deemed to be flouting Britain's strategic interests.

The scenario for the operation is a mock invasion of Oman by a small and desperate country, given the fictional name Alawham (Arabic for fantasyland), intent on resolving its own economic crisis by seizing Oman's oil fields.

The *Guardian* newspaper lays out the scenario in detail: "Within days, the aggressor forces were approaching their strategic goal: the Omani oil fields... But the Omani military regrouped, and after fierce fighting stopped the Alawham forces in their tracks, pushing them into a pocket of occupied territory west of the coastal city of Khaluf. An uneasy cease-fire was brokered by the UN, which called for military assistance to help Oman reclaim its land. With US forces tied up in operations around the Pacific Rim and several European countries preoccupied elsewhere, it has been left to Britain to step in."

The *Guardian* article continues, "On or around October 15 the cease-fire will be broken, probably by an armoured incursion across the cease-fire line. As the forces clash in the desert, the island-state of Alkhayl [Arabic for dream-world], located 800 nautical miles off the coast, will step in to support its beleaguered ally Alawham, with which it has a defence treaty. Amphibious assault craft will mount a landing on the beaches just north of the city of Duqm. What had been a small-localised war will suddenly turn into a conflict that threatens the security of the whole region. Over the following two weeks tanks will race around the desert, ships and submarines will engage in hostile manoeuvres, and the airforce will fly numerous bombing runs on strategic targets."

The military planners are seeking to make the exercise more true to life by including a range of political difficulties, such as government ministers getting jittery about "mission creep" and creating a simulated press corps, who will decide which side is winning the propaganda war. Working closely with the media to manipulate public opinion is thus made an integral part of the modern army's training exercises.

The *Guardian* concludes, "The planners have had to take into account how the operation will be perceived by the outside world. Even the wording of the 'road to war' scenario has been carefully written so as not to offend any of Britain's allies. God forbid the French or the Americans take umbrage at the suggestion they refused to get involved."

Despite such concern for allied sensibilities and those of the Middle Eastern regimes, the fundamental premise of the operation is to test out Britain's ability to assert its global interests independently.

Twice in the post-war period, once in 1957 and again in 1970, the British military and intelligence services have assisted Omani's ruling clique, presently headed by Sultan Qaboos bin

Said, in brutally repressing popular insurgent movements. However, Britain's long-established ties with Oman are coming under pressure and tension is rising between British and US corporations active in the region. Since Oman's oil supplies will be exhausted within 15-20 years time, the Sultan is being forced to rapidly diversify the economy, and is making every effort to secure major investment from the United States.

Oman recently purchased a squadron of F-16 fighters, the first time that the US has won a major contract for combat aircraft in what has been a traditional British and European market place. Oman is now considered to be wide open to US inward investment. According to a source at the US arms manufacturer Lockheed Martin, "In many countries, F-16 sales are also important because of the industrial participation that accompanies the sale."

Brian Constant, director general of the Middle East Association, which promotes ties between British and Middle-Eastern businesses, spoke about the tensions between British business and their US counterparts. On September 13, in the immediate aftermath of the terrorist attacks on New York and Washington, he warned, "This is an incredibly important region for British business. I am worried there is a crazy knee-jerk reaction on what turns out to be the wrong target as has happened in the past. If Britain gave its support for such a move it would be very serious for UK commercial interests."

According to press reports Shell, BAE Systems and HSBC are the leading British companies in the region. UK trade in the Middle East is worth £6 billion a year, and trade with Iran and Libya, despite US sanctions and prescriptions, is described in one report as being at a "robust level of contact in both directions". The same report continues, "State oil companies from Iran and Libya control substantial global purchasing operations in London. British oil companies are increasingly excited about prospects for contracts in both these nations."

Leading military figures have urged that the Rapid Reaction Force deployed to Oman should stay intact and complete its exercise. Rear Admiral James Burnell-Nugent said the operation was necessary for British "internal self-confidence and self-esteem."



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