British imperialism's return to "East of Suez"

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Sheikh Khalifa bin Zayed Al Nahyan, the president of the United Arab Emirates, got the full treatment on his state visit to Britain last week.

He was afforded a ride in a gilded horse-drawn coach to Windsor, complete with guards in bearskins and red tunics, a state banquet at Windsor Castle with Queen Elizabeth, and talks with Prime Minister David Cameron.

His visit comes just days after three Britons on vacation in Dubai, in the UAE, were found guilty of possessing drugs and each sentenced to four years. They were tortured by police following their arrest, given electric shocks, and had guns held to their heads to force them to sign confessions in Arabic—a language none of them understands. Cameron had expressed "concern" about their allegations of torture and called for an inquiry.

A record 94 activists—including judges, academics and lawyers—are currently on trial in Abu Dhabi, the UAE's capital, accused of plotting to overthrow the despotic regime. A report by local and international human rights groups has condemned the trial as a "flagrant disregard of fair trial guarantees". It notes that the judge failed to investigate "credible" allegations of torture of the defendants, who were denied access to lawyers until two weeks before the trial or even to the documents setting out the evidence against them.

International journalists and observers, including Amnesty International, were denied access to the trial.

The prime minister is courting the Persian Gulf monarchy in pursuit of lucrative trade deals and military bases, amid rising Western threats of war with nearby Iran. The UAE is Britain's biggest customer in the Middle East, with exports worth more than £10 billion in 2012. Last year, the UAE invested £8 billion in Britain, while more than 100,000 Britons live and work in the UAE.

Britain is seeking the sale of up to 60 Typhoon strike aircraft, made by BAE, for £3 billion, alongside 40 more Typhoons to Saudi Arabia and Oman, and faces stiff competition from France.

The UAE is home to Al-Minhad air base in Dubai, which houses the Royal Air Force's Tornado jets. According to the Royal United Services Institute (RUSI), it is used extensively as a "logistics hub for the mission in Afghanistan." The RUSI says that the Ministry of Defence is seeking to build up its military presence in the Gulf, which Britain controlled in the latter part of the 19th century and the first half of the 20th, with facilities, training areas, transit and take-off points for its jets and defence agreements that will enable Britain to intervene in the Middle East, Asia and Africa. So too is France, whose former president Nicolas Sarkozy opened the country's first base in the Gulf, in Abu Dhabi.

Last November, Cameron visited the Al-Minhad air base to inspect the RAF's Typhoon aircraft, and agreed "a long-term defence partnership" with the UAE that entails increasing the number of joint military and training exercises, and a commitment to invest "in the British military presence in the UAE."

Cameron's visit followed Defence Secretary Philip Hammond's visit to Bahrain to sign off a Defence Cooperation Agreement in October with its former colonial possession, home to a British naval base. Its purpose is provide "a framework for current and future defence engagement activity, including training and capacity building, in order to enhance the stability of the wider region."

The Al-Minhad base will be crucial as a significant base of operations alongside the Bahrain naval base. An accord with Oman and possibly Qatar is anticipated, following an exchange of visits between Cameron and Qatar's Sheikh Hamad bin Khalifa Al-Thani in 2010 and 2011.

This takes on additional significance with the

announcement last March that Britain is to withdraw, ahead of schedule, 11,000 of its troops in Germany by 2016 and the last 4,500 by the end of 2019. The Gulf will replace the Continental training grounds with one more suited to the challenges of desert warfare.

These developments were dubbed by RUSI as "Britain's return to East of Suez", referring to Britain's imperial interests beyond Europe and east of the Suez Canal—most notably its military base in Singapore. They signify a reversal of Labour Prime Minister Harold Wilson's famous announcement in 1968 that British troops would be withdrawn in 1971 from its military bases "East of Aden". This meant primarily the Persian Gulf, Aden (now part of Yemen), Malaysia, Singapore and the Maldives.

Britain never completely withdrew, retaining its base in Hong Kong till 1997, and still has facilities in Brunei, Diego Garcia and Singapore. In 1975, the elite SAS unit intervened to shore up the Sultan of Oman, with the Royal Navy returning with the US Navy a few years later to police the Persian Gulf during the 1980-88 Iran-Iraq war. Britain deployed its navy and troops in the US-led wars against Iraq in 1990-91 and 2003-2007.

At the same time, London signed major arms deals with the Gulf states, most notably the £40 billion Al Yamamah deals with Saudi Arabia that were mired in corruption. As oil prices have risen, the Gulf states have recycled their wealth via sovereign wealth funds into Britain's property market, corporations and banks. They have bankrolled British universities, funding Middle East and Islamic research centres, with UAE in particular providing homes for off-shore campuses.

As the RUSI report notes, a greater regional presence would permit a larger role in India and Pakistan and, crucially, interventions in Syria and Iran—even in Iraq, which it claims "is now firmly seen by Tehran as a key element in the preservation of its national security" because of the imminent demise of the Assad regime.

At its heart is the commitment to defend the reactionary petro-monarchies, as they come under threat from their own populations, such as in Bahrain.

General Sir David Richards, chief of Defence staff, in his Christmas lecture to RUSI last year, referred to the deployment of military assets to the Middle East, and in particular to some of the Arab Gulf states and to Jordan. Not only would it allow better cooperation with these countries, it would, he said, mean that Britain would be better prepared should the need arise for another Libya-style operation.

But Richards sees a role for Britain that is "wider still and wider" as the jingoistic *Rule Britannia* goes. He added, "In Africa, brigades would be tasked to support key allies in the east, west and south, whilst another might be given an Indian Ocean and SE Asian focus, allowing for much greater involvement with the FPDA [Five Powers Defence Agreements], for example."

The FPDA refers to the 1971 bilateral defence relationships signed between the UK, Australia, New Zealand, Malaysia and Singapore, whereby the five states will consult each other in the event of external aggression or threat of attack against Malaysia or Singapore. In today's context of Washington's "pivot to Asia", this implies preparation for a potential war with China.

Washington's greater pre-occupation with Asia has provided an opening for Britain to become "the leading European and indeed Western player in the Gulf", or so the top military brass hopes. Richards also envisaged that Britain's Joint Expeditionary Force (JEF) would "be capable of projecting power with *global effect and influence*. Nowhere is more important to us than our friends in the Middle East and Gulf and in line with clear political intent we would expect, with other initiatives, for JEF elements to *spend more time reassuring and deterring in the region* " (emphasis added).

The author also recommends:

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