

Oil, Military and Intelligence Ops in the Arabian Gulf: Britain's Dangerous and Ignored Special Relationship With Oman

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Outside significant mainstream media coverage, Britain is stepping up its support for the dictatorships in the Arabian Gulf and its ability to conduct military interventions in the Middle East. The strategy is illustrated in Whitehall's long-standing but ignored special relationship Whitehall with Oman, the secretive, oil-rich Gulf state run by a despot installed in a British coup as long ago as 1970.

Oman is a British client state welcoming major British intelligence and military operations whose principal economic asset – oil – is controlled by Anglo-Dutch company, Shell. Files leaked by Edward Snowden [show](#) that Britain has a network of three GCHQ spy bases in Oman – codenamed ‘Timpani’, ‘Guitar’ and ‘Clarinet’ – which tap in to various undersea cables passing through the Strait of Hormuz into the Arabian Gulf. These bases [intercept and process](#) vast quantities of emails, telephone calls and web traffic, which information is then shared with the National Security Agency in the United States.

The British government [announced](#) in March this year that it is developing a large new military base – described as a ‘strategic port’ – at the Duqm Port complex in central Oman. This will house the two 65,000-tonne aircraft carriers being built for the Royal Navy, and other navy ships, with the aim clearly being to better project power in the region. The base is [described](#) as enabling a ‘permanent’ British naval presence in the area. Defence Secretary Michael Fallon has [said](#) that the port ‘will offer an airport with a 4km runway close to a port large enough for a Queen Elizabeth class aircraft carriers to manoeuvre and will also be connected to other Gulf countries by the Gulf Rail Project’.

The new Omani base will sit alongside another new intervention platform in the region – the British military base being built at Mina Salman port in Bahrain, another long-standing British ally ruled by a brutally repressive state. Bahrain already [houses](#) the largest permanent detachment of the Royal Navy outside the UK as part of the ‘Combined Maritime Force’, which includes the US Navy 5th Fleet in Manama. Together, these bases will provide the UK with its largest military intervention capability in the region since the late 1960s, when some bases in the region were closed.

British leaders claim these bases will provide security and stability for the region. The reality is that their most strategic significance, aside from being able to conduct military strikes, is in guarding oil routes – Oman plays an important role in overseeing the passage of international shipping through the Strait of Hormuz, through which some 30 per cent of globally bound oil passes every day. The British oil stake in Oman is already huge: Shell has

a [34 per cent interest](#) (alongside the government's 60 per cent) in the Petroleum Development Corporation which manages the country's oil.

Oman is [described](#) by the government as 'a longstanding British ally... with shared interests across diplomatic, economic and security matters'. The UK and Omani armed forces regularly train together and this May, the two countries [signed](#) a new military Memorandum of Understanding in which Britain's armed forces plan to deploy 45 training teams to Oman in 2016. As part of this relationship, Oman naturally buys a lot of British weapons – most recently, a [£2.5 billion deal](#) agreed in 2013 to purchase 20 Typhoon and Hawk aircraft following a [visit](#) by David Cameron. 'The Typhoon fighter jet performed outstandingly in Libya', the government's [press release](#) at the time stated, referring to the British military intervention in that country that helped to plunge it into anarchy and civil war.

In recent years British defence secretaries, members of the Royal Family, Lord Mayors of London and heads of military and oil companies have all been streaming into Oman, with practically no attention paid whatsoever by the 24 hour British media. They routinely deliver extreme apologies for the nature of the Omani regime, and especially its leader, Sultan Qaboos. In February 2014, for example, then Foreign Office Minister Baroness Warsi, delivering a speech in Muscat, [praised](#) 'the Sultan's wise leadership' while Chris Breeze, the Oman country chairman of has [noted](#) the 'Sultan Qaboos bin Said's clear and inspirational vision for Oman'.

By contrast, Khalfan al-Badwawi, an Omani human rights campaigner who fled the country in 2013 after being repeatedly detained by police, recently told [Middle East Eye](#) that the high level of British military and diplomatic assistance for the Omani government was 'a major obstacle to human rights campaigners in Oman because of the military and intelligence support from London that props up the Sultan's dictatorship'.

Whilst Oman's repression is not as far-reaching or brutal as that in other UK-backed regimes in the region – notably Bahrain and Egypt – it remains serious and deep. According to [Human Rights Watch](#):

Oman's overly broad laws restrict the rights to freedom of expression, assembly and association. The authorities target peaceful activists, pro-reform bloggers, and government critics using short term arrests and detentions and other forms of harassment. Some detainees arrested since 2011 have alleg...

An especially odious feature of Oman's political system is that all public gatherings require advance official approval while the authorities arrest and prosecute participants in unapproved gatherings.

Sultan Qaboos is well and truly Britain's man in the Gulf. One of the longest serving dictators in the world, he was installed in power in a British-organised coup in 1970. British declassified [files](#) show that British military advisers in Oman, including the SAS, organised the overthrow of Qaboos' father. Qaboos served in the British army and attended the army training college at Sandhurst and the RAF officers' college at Cranwell.

By retaining faith in repressive pro-Western leaders in the region, backing them to the hilt, supplying them with arms and using their territory to militarily intervene in the region, Britain is continuing its [long standing Middle East policy](#), backed by the US. With the region on fire virtually everywhere from Libya to Afghanistan, it is as though British leaders simply

want to repeat all the counter-productive and immoral episodes of the past while simply stirring up even more war and instability in these areas. In fact, this view seems about right, judged by current policies. It really is time that British journalists find out where Oman is on the map and highlight what their country is actually doing there.

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