

**ORG EXPLAINS #11**

**THE UK  
MILITARY IN THE  
EASTERN  
MEDITERRANEAN**



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**September 2019**

## **Subject:**

This primer explains what presence, relations and obligations the UK military has in the Eastern Mediterranean region, including Cyprus, Egypt, Greece, Israel, Jordan, Lebanon, Libya, the Palestinian Territories, Syria and Turkey.

## **Context:**

The UK has had a continuous military presence in the Eastern Mediterranean since the 1870s and, despite its retreat from empire in the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century, retains sovereign territory on Cyprus exclusively for military purposes. Since 2014, RAF Akrotiri has been the UK's principal base for air strikes against the Islamic State group in Iraq and Syria as well as for the April 2018 air strikes on Syrian government targets. It previously supported British interventions in Libya and Iraq. The region is also a vital staging point for Royal Navy operations in the Persian Gulf and for NATO patrols of waters off Syria, Lebanon and Libya. Conservative-led governments since 2015 have looked to normalise and extend military relations with non-EU states in the region including Egypt, Israel and Turkey. The inclusion of Israeli Air Force jets in RAF-hosted exercises in the UK in September 2019 is the latest example of this active cooperation.

## **Key Points:**

- Retention of the Sovereign Base Areas (SBAs) on Cyprus gives the UK a permanent military and intelligence presence in the Eastern Mediterranean. By 2020 this will be the largest concentration of UK forces outside of mainland Britain.
- Factors motivating the UK to maintain its regional military presence include ambitions to: protect shipping on the Suez Canal route between Europe and Asia; conduct surveillance of key Middle Eastern states; support military interventions against regional opponents; and control migration into Europe.
- UK defence obligations in the region are through NATO, the EU and a separate treaty guaranteeing Cyprus' independence. Israel and Jordan, though widely seen as UK allies, have no defence treaty arrangements with the UK.
- Military relations between the UK and Egypt and Israel have been quietly stepped up since 2016. British warships now make regular port calls and joint land (Egypt) and air force (Israel) exercises resumed in 2019.
- British arms exports to the region are relatively minor but there is an ambition to sell more to major arms importers Egypt, Turkey and Israel, which are not under any arms embargoes.

## What is the Eastern Mediterranean region?

The Eastern Mediterranean is here defined as the Mediterranean Sea east of the narrowest point between eastern Libya and Crete as well as the lands close to the Sea: Greece, southwestern Turkey, Cyprus, western Syria, Lebanon, Israel, the Palestinian Territories, Jordan, northern Egypt and eastern Libya. Historically referred to as the **Levant**, the region's crowded coastal zone is home to over 150 million people, half of them in and around Egypt's Nile Delta.

## Is the UK a Mediterranean State?

While mainland Great Britain is far from the Mediterranean Sea, the UK can claim to be a Mediterranean state by possession of two British Overseas Territories (BOTs) that border the Sea. **Gibraltar** is the oldest and best known, providing the Royal Navy with a base to oversee all shipping entering and exiting the Western Mediterranean. The **Sovereign Base Areas of Akrotiri and Dhekelia** (SBAs) on Cyprus represent the sole remaining British presence in the Eastern Mediterranean.

Occupying 254 km<sup>2</sup> (3%) of Cyprus, the SBAs were retained by the UK in perpetuity when it

granted independence to the rest of the island in 1960. They are unique among BOTs in that they are explicitly and solely military bases under the control of the Ministry of Defence rather than colonial territories under the Foreign and Commonwealth Office. As such, they are under military administration and justice, claim no permanent civilian population (although about 12,000 Cypriot and British civilians do live there), and, unlike Gibraltar, are not part of the EU (although the Customs Union applies). Their geography is complex, being in two distinct clusters 73 km apart and partly forming the buffer zone (Green Line) that has divided territory controlled by the Republic of Cyprus and the largely unrecognised Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus since 1974.

Over 3,200 km from mainland Britain, the SBAs are the last vestige of what was once a major imperial presence in the Eastern Mediterranean. This began just after the opening of the Suez Canal and led to the UK being the dominant regional military power during the first half of the Twentieth Century. The UK has militarily occupied at least part of each of the region's nine modern countries within the last century.

**Table: British-Ruled Territory in the Eastern Mediterranean**

Territory	British Rule	Type of British Administration
Cyprus	1878-1925	Protectorate (Ottoman sovereignty)
	1925-1960	Crown Colony
	1960-ongoing	Sovereign Base Areas (3% of island)
Egypt	1882-1922	Protectorate (Ottoman sovereignty)
	1922-1956	Partial Military Occupation, incl. Suez Canal zone (by treaty)
Ottoman Levant	1918-1920	Military Occupation, with France (now Israel/Palestine, Jordan, Lebanon, Syria and parts of Turkey)
Palestine	1920-1948	League of Nations Mandate (now Israel & Occupied Palestinian Territories)
Transjordan	1921-1946	League of Nations Mandate (now Jordan)
Cyrenaica	1942-1951	Military Occupation (now eastern Libya)
Syria	1945-1946	Military Occupation
Dodecanese Islands	1945-1947	Military Occupation (now part of Greece)

Rapid post-war decolonisation left the UK with a presence in only Cyprus and the Suez Canal zone by 1951; growing resistance in these territories and Iraq led the British to withdraw from them (with the exception of the SBAs) by 1960. An RAF Station at Adem, near Tobruq in eastern Libya, was retained until just after the 1969 Libyan Revolution.

### **What is the significance of the Eastern Mediterranean for UK defence and security?**

Current British defence and security policy is summarised in the **Strategic Defence and Security Review (SDSR)** of November 2015. In relation to the Eastern Mediterranean, this largely makes reference to Operation Shader, the campaign against the Islamic State (IS) group in Iraq (Parliament did not authorise operations within Syria until December 2015). Specific commitments included defending Turkey via NATO, increasing manning at RAF Akrotiri, supporting border security in Lebanon and Jordan, training “moderate” elements of the Syrian opposition forces, preventing sexual violence in conflict, and pressuring Syria to comply with the Chemical Weapons Convention.

Reference is also made to combating terrorism in Libya. Egypt is mentioned separately as a country where the UK would “work to deliver a stronger bilateral relationship [...], focusing on promoting reform, security cooperation and prosperity.” Other than a line about taking “every opportunity to promote a peaceful two-state solution through the Middle East Peace Process”, no reference is made to either Israel or Palestine.

More broadly, at least four reasons may be discerned for the UK maintaining a military presence in the Eastern Mediterranean:

**Maritime Security:** The UK seeks to be able to monitor and exert some control over the globally vital shipping lanes that run through the Suez Canal to link Europe with Asia and

eastern Africa. These are crucial for energy supplies as well as general trade. British trade with the Eastern Mediterranean itself is not very significant, being less than 3% of exports or imports, with Turkey and Greece taking the majority.

**Intelligence:** The UK seeks to be able to conduct aerial, maritime and electronic surveillance over a large area of the Middle East that has, at least since the 1940s, been highly unstable and prone to conflicts with global impact. These include conflicts between Israel and its neighbours, the Islamic State insurgency as well as, at times, anti-British governments in Egypt, Iraq, Libya and Syria. Development, deployment or use of nuclear, chemical and biological weapons by several of these states has been of particular concern.

**Power Projection:** The UK seeks to be able to threaten or respond with force to elements in the wider Middle East and North Africa that London deems hostile to its interests, including states and insurgent or terrorist groups such as Islamic State. Thus, RAF Akrotiri has been used for recent interventions in Iraq, Libya and Syria. Historically, it has also been used to project power towards Egypt (1956 Suez Crisis) or the Soviet Union, when Akrotiri (1961-1975) hosted nuclear-armed British bombers.

**Migration Control:** Seeking to control migration, notably displaced persons from Syria and Iraq, into the EU from Turkey via Greece is a more recent driver of the UK’s regional presence. However, the EU Border and Coast Guard Agency (Frontex) Operation Poseidon is largely a paramilitary operation to which the UK has made infrequent contributions.

The UK military presence can also be seen to increase British diplomatic influence more widely since free access to the Suez Canal route and stability in the Middle East are goals shared by most governments, few of which have much capacity of their own to monitor



or influence events in this strategic region. This is also true of the UK-US defence and security relationship, with the United States valuing access to British surveillance facilities on Cyprus.

### What are the UK's defence commitments and responsibilities in the Eastern Mediterranean?

Beyond its responsibility to defend its own SBAs, the UK's primary defence commitment in the Eastern Mediterranean is through the **North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO)**. Despite tending to view one another as adversaries, Greece and Turkey are both full members of NATO and therefore treaty allies of the UK. According to NATO's charter, the North Atlantic Treaty, all the Mediterranean Sea is within the alliance's collective defence area should a member's shipping or aircraft be attacked on or above it.

Cyprus, like Greece, is a member of the **European Union (EU)** and the UK has a collective security commitment to defend it as long as it remains an EU member state.

Although Cyprus is not a member of NATO, its independence is in principle guaranteed by three NATO member states: Greece, Turkey and the UK. Signed by Cyprus and these three states on the day of its independence in 1960, the **Treaty of Guarantee** is still in force despite the crisis of 1974 when Greece attempted union (*enosis*) with the island and Turkey occupied and subsequently promoted the independence of Northern Cyprus. Arguably, the UK failed to honour its commitments under the treaty in 1974 in not intervening effectively against either sides' actions. Nonetheless, the treaty legally continues in force and one result has been the continued recognition by the contracting parties of British sovereignty over the SBAs.

The UK has no binding defence obligations to any other country or territory in the region. It has attempted to retain good relations with Israel, Jordan and (since the 1970s) Egypt,

despite conflict over Palestine. These three are all "partner countries" of the **NATO Mediterranean Dialogue (NMD)**, an initiative launched in 1994 to promote political and military cooperation between NATO and southern Mediterranean countries. This confers no mutual defence obligations and the NMD states are not applicants to join NATO.

### Does the UK have a standing military presence in the Eastern Mediterranean?

The UK has a significant standing military presence in the region, focused on Cyprus. This is bolstered by regular deployments of Royal Navy ships on patrol or exercises in the surrounding waters.

**Cyprus**, including both the SBAs and the Republic of Cyprus, is host to the largest concentration of UK forces in the Mediterranean. By 2020, as the 75-year presence of British combat units in Germany ends, it will be their largest concentration anywhere outside Britain. The presence is multifaceted, including over 3,000 personnel and several thousand civilian staff and dependents. **British Forces Cyprus (BFC)** includes:

- **Air Force** RAF Akrotiri is a large, fully equipped air combat base that since Operation Shader began in 2014 has typically accommodated 6-9 Typhoon fighter/attack aircraft, a tanker aircraft, several transport and surveillance aircraft as well as the four Bell 412 utility, firefighting and search and rescue helicopters that are its sole permanent residents. Fast jet training is also conducted by the RAF from Akrotiri due to its usually clear weather.
- **Army** Two resident light infantry battalions plus support elements of signals, engineers, military police and others are based at Episkopi and Dhekelia

cantonments. These are principally organised as:

- Cyprus Resident Infantry Battalion – to guard the SBAs;
- Regional Standby Battalion I – an acclimatised, high readiness reserve force for deployment on exercises or operations in the wider region.
- **Intelligence** Various signals intelligence units from the military and Government Communications Headquarters (GCHQ) manning the **Ayios Nikolaos Station**, just outside Famagusta, and other sites.

Various locations within the Republic of Cyprus were designated at independence as “**Retained Sites**” for British military use. These include two sites on the highest point in Cyprus – Mount Olympus Radar Station and Troodos Signals Station – to conduct surveillance of the Near East. Nicosia Airport and Famagusta Port are also retained sites but unusable since the 1974 conflict.

Additionally, some 260 British personnel serve as peacekeepers with **UN Forces in Cyprus** (UNFICYP) under separate UN command around Nicosia. This has been a continuous presence since the mission was founded in 1964 and is known as Operation Tosca.

**Egypt** is the only other country in which the UK military has a formal presence, with two personnel deployed with the **Multinational Force and Observers** (MFO), a non-UN peacekeeping force, in the Sinai on the Egypt-Israel border.

**Syria** is likely to have a larger informal (or covert) presence of UK military forces but these are not currently acknowledged by the British Government as they are **Special Forces** working alongside US and Syrian Kurdish forces in the campaign against IS in north and east Syria. Numbers are unknown as the British government does not comment on special forces operations. Flights into Syria by RAF C-130J transport aircraft have also been reported in the media. As of 2015, 86 British

personnel were acknowledged to be training Syrian rebel forces in Jordan and Turkey in a subsequently discontinued operation.

British Special Forces (SAS) were reported operating alongside Jordanian allies against IS in western **Libya** in 2016 but not since then.

**Greece** does not have a standing British presence but **Souda Bay** in northwest Crete is a designated NATO naval facility providing refuelling and resupply to Royal Navy warships operating in the Eastern Mediterranean. There is no British naval base on Cyprus.

There is no known standing UK military presence in Israel, Jordan or Turkey, although RAF aircraft flying from Cyprus rely on permission to fly over these countries to reach Iraq and eastern Syria.

The **Mediterranean Sea** has a nearly continuous presence of Royal Navy vessels, including destroyers and frigates, minesweepers and survey ships, amphibious and auxiliary vessels, and attack submarines. Principal naval deployments include contributions to:

- **Standing NATO Maritime Group 2** (SNMG2) – a continuous patrolling presence of five or so NATO frigates and destroyers in the Mediterranean and Black Seas.
- **Standing NATO Mine Countermeasures Group 2** (SNMCMG2) – an equivalent presence of several NATO minehunters.
- **Operation Sea Guardian** – a NATO operation to conduct surveillance of the wider Mediterranean, including upholding the UN arms embargo on Libya.

Each of these missions is commanded from NATO’s Allied Maritime Command at Northwood, near London, but none has a permanent British presence or is specific to the Eastern Mediterranean. Outside of these arrangements, Royal Navy vessels regularly

pass through the region en route to and from the Indian Ocean.

## Do UK forces conduct training in the region?

British forces have trained regularly with some regional militaries over decades with particular focus on naval and amphibious exercises with Greece, Turkey and other NATO states, and desert environment and special forces training exercises with the Jordanian army. There is also an annual search and rescue training exercise (Argonaut) with the Cypriot military.

New developments in training exercises have included Egypt, Israel and Lebanon.

In **Egypt**, Exercise Amhose I of March 2019 was the first joint training conducted by the British Army there in over 30 years. It focused on infantry counter-terrorism operations. In October 2016, HMS Ocean, a helicopter carrier and Royal Navy flagship, made the first port call of a British warship to Egypt since well before the Arab Spring upheavals. British naval helicopters and Royal Marines also exercised with the Egyptian and French navies in July 2017, and the frigate HMS Argyle called at Alexandria to host talks on future cooperation and training in July 2018.

**Israel** has also had a significant increase in port calls and exercises with the Royal Navy. After an eight-year hiatus in visits, five of the Navy's largest warships made separate calls to Israel between 2016 and 2018. Since 2018 the RAF has also begun joint training exercises with the Israeli Air Force. F-35 joint strike fighters from the UK, Israel and United States exercised together between Cyprus and Israel in June 2019. Israeli F-15 fighter aircraft visited the UK in September 2019 for Exercise Cobra Warrior, the first time Israeli combat aircraft had flown within the UK. RAF combat aircraft are due to make their first

acknowledged visit to Israel in 2020 to participate in Exercise Blue Flag.

British-funded training of the **Lebanese** Armed Forces since 2012 has been conducted under a programme to reinforce Lebanon's control of its border with Syria. These are trainings of rather than with Lebanese forces.

## How important are UK arms sales to the region?

Despite accounting for around one-eighth of global arms imports in recent years, the Eastern Mediterranean region is currently not a major market for UK arms exports. This is in marked contrast to the Arab Gulf States, which buy large volumes of British-produced arms. The United States, France and Russia are very much the dominant suppliers to Eastern Mediterranean states.

Since 2014, Egypt has been the world's third largest importer of arms and stands out as the largest potential regional market for UK industry given its large recent orders of French warships and combat aircraft.

UK industry has also been keen to pursue opportunities to sell systems or technologies to Turkish and Israeli arms companies that are increasingly designing and producing weapons locally, especially in the aerospace sector. The UK's largest aerospace companies, Rolls Royce and BAE Systems, have been heavily involved in the design of Turkey's own stealth fighter project, the TF-X, for example.

Israel stands out as a significant exporter of military systems and components to the UK. These include the Army's Watchkeeper observation drones, armour for Royal Navy warships, RAF reconnaissance pods and many electronic components and software integrated into British-built equipment. UK arms exports to Israel tend to be components for complex electronic systems rather than ships, aircraft or missiles and are harder to track.

Unlike other Middle Eastern states with close security relationships with the UK, Jordan and Cyprus buy little new equipment from the UK. Like Egypt, Jordan receives highly subsidised equipment from the United States in return for having recognised Israel. Cyprus buys mainly from Russia, France and Greece. Libya and Syria have been under UN arms embargoes since 2011 and have not imported significant arms from the UK since at least the 1970s. Such restrictions do not apply to other regional states despite concerns about severe human rights abuses in most of them.

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