



BRIEFING PAPER

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Operation Kipion: Royal Navy assets in the Persian Gulf

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1. Historical presence: the Armilla Patrol

The UK has maintained a permanent naval presence in the Gulf region since October 1980, when the Armilla Patrol was established to ensure the safety of British entitled merchant ships operating in the region during the Iran-Iraq conflict. Initially the Royal Navy's presence was focused solely in the Gulf of Oman.

However, as the conflict wore on both nations began attacking each other's oil facilities and oil tankers bound for their respective ports, in what became known as the "tanker war" (1984-1988). Kuwaiti vessels carrying Iraqi oil were particularly susceptible to Iranian attack and foreign-flagged merchant vessels were often caught in the crossfire.¹

In response to a number of incidents involving British registered vessels, in October 1986 the Royal Navy began accompanying British-registered vessels through the Straits of Hormuz and in the Persian Gulf.

Later the UK's Armilla Patrol contributed to the Multinational Interception Force (MIF), a naval contingent patrolling the Persian Gulf to enforce the UN-mandated trade embargo against Iraq, imposed after its invasion of Kuwait in August 1990.²

In the aftermath of the 2003 Iraq conflict, Royal Navy vessels, deployed as part of the Armilla Patrol, were heavily committed to providing maritime security in the region, the protection of Iraq's oil infrastructure and to assisting in the training of Iraqi sailors and marines.

1.1 Assets

The Type 42 destroyer HMS Coventry was the first vessel to be deployed as part of the Armilla Patrol, followed by RFA Olwen.

After that the Royal Navy maintained at least one destroyer or frigate in the Persian Gulf, supported by a ship of the Royal Fleet Auxiliary. Later the UK's naval presence varied from

¹ The threat to Kuwaiti-flagged vessels eventually prompted the US to intervene to secure international shipping lanes. In July 1987 Operation *Earnest Will* was established and became the largest US naval convoy operation since the Second World War.

² UN Security Council Resolutions [661](#) and [665](#) (August 1990).

2 Operation Kipion: Royal Navy assets in the Persian Gulf

a single frigate or destroyer during periods of stability, to large Task Groups during times of crisis, such as the First Gulf War in 1990-1991 and the Iraq Conflict in 2003.

2. Operation Kipion

In June 2011 the Armilla Patrol evolved into [Operation Kipion](#), which represents the Royal Navy's current maritime security presence in the Persian Gulf and the Indian Ocean. With a broader remit, Operation Kipion is a combination of Royal Navy operations in the Middle East patrolling the Strait of Hormuz, Suez Canal and conducting counter piracy in the Indian Ocean.³

The aim of the operation is to promote peace and stability in the region, as well as ensuring the safe flow of oil and international trade.

2.1 Assets

Maritime security patrol

There is typically one Royal Navy vessel, with Royal Marines embarked, deployed on maritime security patrol supported by a tanker of the Royal Fleet Auxiliary.

At present the UK has two Royal Navy vessels deployed in the region in response to threats against international shipping: Type 45 destroyer HMS Defender⁴ and Type 23 frigate HMS Montrose, which is permanently deployed in the Middle East until 2022. Type 23 frigate HMS Kent returned to the UK in December 2019, after a four-month deployment.

At the end of September 2019, the Royal Navy estimated that over seven million tonnes of British shipping had been accompanied safely through the Strait of Hormuz since the beginning of July.⁵

Mine countermeasures squadron

A permanent mine countermeasures squadron is also deployed in the Gulf because of the large number of mines present in and around the Persian Gulf as a result of the Iran-Iraq War. Comprising four mine hunter vessels, and a support ship of the RFA, the role of the squadron is to seek out and destroy unexploded seas mines in order to ensure the safe transit of oil and global maritime trade.

At present, the Mine Countermeasures Squadron consists of:

- Two Hunt-class mine countermeasures vessels: HMS Ledbury and HMS Brocklesby
- Two Sandown-class mine hunters: HMS Shoreham and HMS Blyth
- RFA Cardigan Bay.

Command and Control

UK Maritime Component Command, which is based in Bahrain and responsible for the wider region, is the command element of Operation Kipion.

³ Ministry of Defence, [Quarterly UK Armed Forces and UK Entitled Civilians Operational Casualty and Fatality Statistics 1 June 2011 to 31 December 2016](#), January 2017

⁴ HMS Defender was initially expected to deploy to the Asia Pacific to undertake maritime security patrols in the region but was diverted to the Persian Gulf in August 2019 (Royal Navy press release, 12 August 2019).

⁵ [Royal Navy press release](#), 30 September 2019

3. UK support to the US-led International Maritime Security Construct (IMSC)

At the beginning of August 2019, the Government announced that the Royal Navy would join the US-led International Maritime Security Construct (IMSC) in ensuring freedom of navigation in the Persian Gulf, through the Strait of Hormuz and in the Gulf of Oman.⁶

Initially dubbed Operation Sentinel by the US, the maritime mission has been rebranded, although its aims remain the same. The intention of the IMSC is to provide a maritime security framework that will enable nations to accompany their flagged vessels, while taking advantage of enhanced maritime domain awareness and surveillance through coordination with other participating nations.

In joining the coalition, the MOD suggested that the UK's contribution would largely draw on assets already in the region, with the addition of HMS Defender, which was redeployed towards the end of August 2019. In announcing the change, the MOD confirmed that:

This deployment will ensure that the UK has the flexibility to continually commit a vessel to the international mission. Portsmouth-based HMS Defender will ensure the continuous availability of a ship to reassure and accompany merchant vessels.

The UK has also offered to lead one of the mission's Maritime Task Groups.

The IMSC task force is headquartered at the US' 5th fleet in Bahrain. Current members include: United States, Australia, the UK, Bahrain, Saudi Arabia, Albania and the United Arab Emirates.

Several European nations have refused to join the coalition, however, over concerns regarding the US' policy of maximum pressure towards Iran.

Operations formally began under the IMSC on 7 November 2019.

On 4 January 2020 the Defence Secretary, Ben Wallace, announced that HMS Montrose and HMS Defender would deploy specifically to the Strait of Hormuz to accompany British registered vessels through the strait, amidst fear of reprisals for the death of Iranian General Qassem Suleimani in a US drone strike in early January. Those vessels are already in the region as part of Operation Kipion and the IMSC and are not a new deployment of additional assets.

4. UK Naval Support Facility in Bahrain

For many years the Royal Navy's presence in the Gulf has been supported by US facilities at Mina Salman port in Bahrain.

However, in December 2014 the MOD announced that it would re-establish a permanent Royal Navy base at Mina Salman.⁷ It is the first permanent overseas Royal Navy facility operating 'east of Suez' in nearly 50 years and will be the hub for Royal Navy operations in the Persian Gulf, Red Sea and Indian Ocean.

⁶ [Ministry of Defence press release](#), 5 August 2019

⁷ A base (HMS Jufair) was first established by the Royal Navy in 1935. Following Bahraini independence in 1971 the United States took over the base.

4 Operation Kipion: Royal Navy assets in the Persian Gulf

The UK Naval Support Facility (UKNSF) was officially opened in April 2018. It can accommodate approximately 500 Royal Navy personnel and will allow the Royal Navy to provide better maintenance and support to its vessels operating in the region, which will include the new Queen Elizabeth class aircraft carriers.⁸

In October 2018 it was announced that HMS Montrose would be the first Royal Navy vessel to be permanently forward deployed in Bahrain, until 2022.

⁸ The Queen Elizabeth class will be able to access facilities at Mina Salman while at anchor. However, the vessel will not be able to berth directly alongside the support facility due to the shallow waters.

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