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UK forces in the Middle East region

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This short note outlines the main bases and facilities used by UK armed forces in the Middle East. Personnel numbers are given where known but be aware these may change at short notice. The Library does not intend to regularly update this paper with personnel numbers.

Key points

- Approximately 1,350 UK personnel are deployed in the region on **Operation Shader**, the UK contribution to the global coalition against Daesh/ISIS.
- The UK also permanently deploys military personnel to facilities and bases across the region in support of other operations, primarily **Operation Kipion**, the Royal Navy's maritime security presence in the Persian Gulf and the Indian Ocean.
- **Cyprus** is the only Permanent Joint Operating Base in the wider region. RAF combat aircraft fly from Cyprus for Operation Shader.
- The RAF's operational headquarters in the Middle East is at **Al Udeid air base in Qatar**. The RAF also has use of Al Minhad airbase in the **United Arab Emirates** and Al Musannah airbase in **Oman**.
- The **UK Naval Support Facility in Bahrain** is the main naval facility in the Persian Gulf for UK naval vessels. Four mine-counter measure vessels and one Type 23 frigate are permanently based there. These are supported by a Royal Fleet Auxiliary vessel. A new permanent **Joint Logistics Support Base in Oman**, opened in 2018, provides a permanent maritime base outside the Persian Gulf. It will support the new aircraft carriers when they are in the Indian Ocean/Persian Gulf.
- **Army units** are permanently deployed to Cyprus (on a rotating basis) and can be deployed to the wider region. Army personnel are also present in Iraq, Saudi Arabia and other Gulf countries.
- Numbers of personnel in the region vary depending on operational requirements. The Ministry of Defence does not disclose the location or deployments of UK Special Forces.

Personnel numbers

The Ministry of Defence does not always provide detailed information on personnel numbers for reasons of operational security. The location of personnel permanently stationed worldwide can be found in the Ministry of Defence's [Annual Location Statistics](#). However, these do not reflect numbers of personnel deployed on operations.

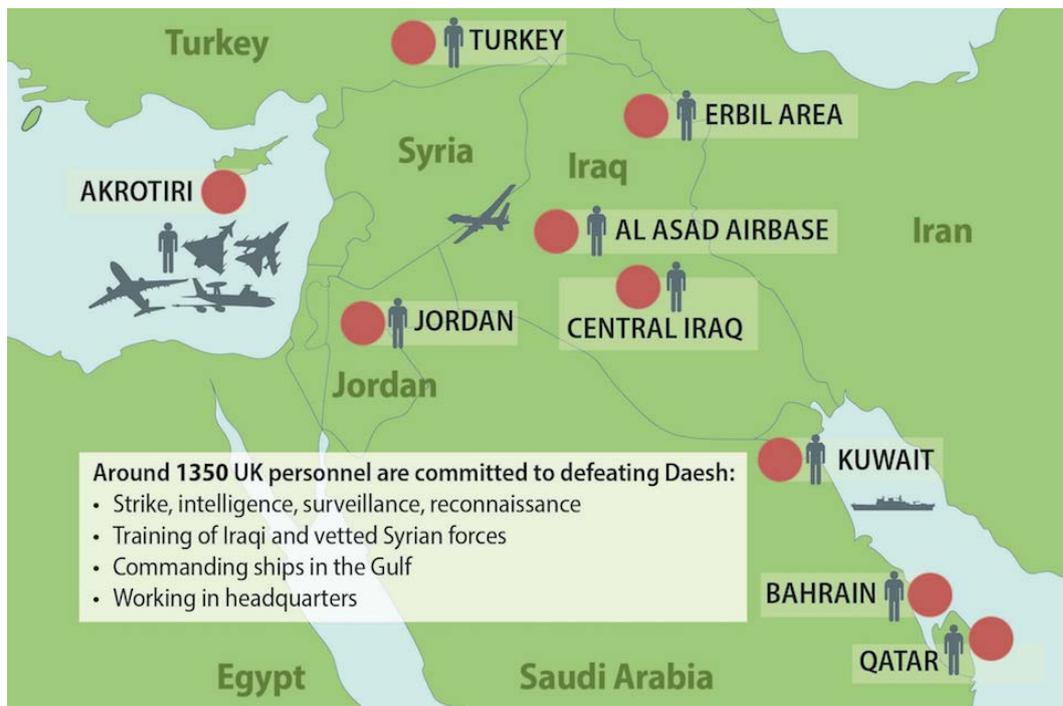
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According to these statistics, as of 1 April 2019 there were:

- 2,150 military personnel based in Cyprus
- 390 military personnel in the Middle East. The largest contingent (120) are in Saudi Arabia, with 90 in Oman, 40 in Kuwait and 20 in Bahrain.

Operation Shader

- 1,350 UK personnel are deployed in the region on Operation Shader (see map). The MOD's [annual report and accounts 2018-2019](#) gave a figure of 1,200 military personnel deployed to the region for Op Shader, a third of whom (approx. 400) are in Iraq.



Map of UK contribution to the fight against Daesh/ISIS, [Ministry of Defence](#), 27 September 2019

UK forces in Cyprus

3,370 MOD personnel are permanently stationed in Cyprus, of whom 2,150 are military.¹

There are two Sovereign Base Areas (SBAs) in Cyprus: Akrotiri and Dhekelia. The UK Government has sovereignty over the bases which are considered part of the [UK Overseas Territories](#).

[RAF Akrotiri](#) is the main operating base for aircraft in the region. It is a Permanent Joint Operating Base. 903 Expeditionary Air Wing is permanently based at the station supporting combat, intelligence, surveillance, airborne command and control, air mobility/transport and air-to-air refuelling aircraft. The RAF's newest combat aircraft, the F-35B Lightning, flew its [first operational sortie](#) from Cyprus for [Operation Shader](#) in June 2019. Two [army](#) infantry battalions are permanently deployed (on a rotational basis) supported by personnel from the Royal Logistics Corps among others. These units are wholly separate to those deployed on unaccompanied six-month tour with the [United Nations Forces in Cyprus](#) (UNFICYP).

¹ [Annual location statistics: 1 April 2019](#), 30 May 2019, table 1.1a

Royal Air Force

The RAF's operational headquarters for operations in the region is in **Qatar** at Al Udeid airbase, the hub of America's air operations in the region.² It is home to the RAF's [No 83 Expeditionary Air Group](#), which provides command and control to the 4 Expeditionary Air Wings supporting Operation Kipion and Operation Shader in the region. The RAF also has use of [Al Minhad](#) airbase, **United Arab Emirates**, and Al Musannah airbase, **Oman**. The RAF previously used Ali Al Salem air base, **Kuwait**, during the 1990s to enforce southern no fly zones and during Operation Telic in 2003. The MOD [does not comment](#) on the location of Reaper remotely piloted aircraft in the Middle East.

Naval facilities

The Royal Navy permanently bases four mine counter-measure vessels and, since late 2018, a type 23 frigate, at the **UK Naval Support Facility** (NSF) at Mina Salmon Port in **Bahrain** (note this is not a naval base).³ Crews are UK-based and rotate every few months. These ships are supported by a Royal Fleet Auxiliary ship. Additional frigates and/or destroyers are deployed when necessary. In addition, a new permanent **Joint Logistics Support Base** at Duqm port in **Oman** opened in 2018.⁴ Both the enhanced NSF and Duqm will support the future deployments of the Queen Elizabeth-class aircraft carriers and Duqm also has a dry dock facility. The MOD said Duqm gives the UK "[a strategically important and permanent maritime base east of Suez, but outside of the Gulf](#)". The MOD does not comment on submarine operations. The Library has a separate briefing paper on [Operation Kipion: Royal Navy assets in the Persian Gulf](#).

Army facilities

Except for Cyprus, there are no permanent army bases in the region. The Army is deployed in [Iraq](#) as part of the Global Coalition against Daesh in a non-combat role: they provide training to Iraqi Security Forces and Kurdish Security Forces. An [estimated 400 UK military personnel](#) are deployed in Iraq at [three main sites](#): Camp Taji near Baghdad, Union III in Baghdad, and Erbil in Iraqi Kurdistan.

Also of note

Approximately 120 military personnel and 100 MOD civilian personnel are in **Saudi Arabia** (as of 1 April 2019). This includes [personnel](#) employed by the Saudi Arabian National Guard Communications Project (SANGCOM) and the Ministry of Defence Saudi Armed Forces Projects (MODSAP). RAF personnel, including some [seconded](#) to BAE Systems, work in the Kingdom to support the Royal Saudi Air Force.

The UK has its "[largest military capacity building programme](#)" in the region in **Jordan**.⁵

² The Coalition's Combined Air Operation Centre controls air operations against Daesh/ISIS. Forces News featured a report on CAOC at al Udaid in September 2017: "[Inside mission control: directing the air campaign against Islamic State](#)".

³ The UK has long had a naval connection with Bahrain. In 1971 the Navy's Gulf Squadron withdrew from HMS Jufair as part of the wider policy to withdraw from 'east of Suez'. The UK has maintained a permanent naval presence in the Gulf region since 1980. In 2014 Bahrain [agreed](#) to let the UK enhance the existing facilities at Mina Salmon Port and in 2018 the new UK Naval Support Facility was officially opened. Armed Forces Minister Mark Lancaster discussed the new facilities in a Westminster Hall debate in [November 2018](#).

⁴ "[Defence Secretary strengthens ties between UK and Oman](#)", Ministry of Defence, 28 August 2017. In 2016 the UK concluded an agreement with Oman to establish a permanent Joint Logistics Support Base, including a dry dock capability, at the port of Duqm on the Arabian Sea. The facility opened in 2018. 5,500 UK armed forces personnel were involved in [Exercise Saif Sareea 3](#) in October 2018.

⁵ [PQ 137183](#), 26 April 2018

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