

UK boosts maritime security in Gulf as tensions continue to escalate

Bahrain News

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ADDITIONAL military personnel from the UK are expected to arrive in Bahrain in the coming days as part of measures to boost maritime security in the Gulf, it has emerged.

The forces will be part of the UK Maritime Component Command (UKMCC), which jointly commands with the US the Bahrain-based Combined Maritime Force (CMF), according to reports by Sky News yesterday.

Tensions

It follows the arrival of the second British warship in the Gulf, HMS Duncan, as tensions continue to escalate over the seizure of UK-flagged tanker Stena Impero by Iran's Revolutionary Guard.

The British government on Thursday said it would provide a navy escort for British-flagged ships passing through the Strait of Hormuz amid increasing tensions in the region.

HMS Duncan aims to cover for frigate HMS Montrose while it undergoes maintenance in Bahrain, which has escorted 30 merchant vessels through the strait in 17 separate transits since July 19.

"Freedom of navigation in the Strait of Hormuz is vital not just to the UK, but also our international partners and allies," said UK Defence Secretary Ben Wallace in a statement yesterday.

"Merchant ships must be free to travel lawfully and trade safely, anywhere in the world.

"I'm pleased that HMS Duncan will continue HMS Montrose's fine work in helping to secure this essential route.

"While we continue to push for a diplomatic resolution that will make this possible again without military accompaniment, the Royal Navy will continue to provide a safeguard for UK vessels until this is the reality."

The UK previously announced it will send a third warship, HMS Kent, to the Gulf in mid-September.

Iran yesterday denounced the presence of UK warships in the Gulf as “provocative” and “hostile” – adding that it will “increase tensions”.

However, this claim has been dismissed by Nick Brown, the publisher of Jane’s Fighting Ships, an annual reference book of information on all the world’s warships.

He told the GDN that the role of the UK warships were to offer support to commercial shipping and were not considered as overtly hostile.

Deployed

“The UK Royal Navy has a long-standing presence in the region, with vessels continuously deployed there since 1980 under the Armilla patrol and Operation Kipion, and other vessels and task groups in theatre long before that of course,” he said.

“The navy’s current tasking is officially a maritime security role and so the ships’ posture is not overtly hostile in intent, operating in international and friendly national waters offering support to commercial shipping.

“In fact, the force is mostly comprised of four mine countermeasure vessels, which are in no way fighting ships, designed to look for mines that may pose a threat for commercial vessels.”

HMS Duncan, a Type 45 destroyer, is primarily an anti-air warfare vessel with its powerful Sampson radars proven to track small objects in space and Sea Viper missiles able to knock down aircraft and missiles over 50 nautical miles away.

In contrast, HMS Montrose, a Type 23 frigate, is designed specifically to hunt submarines.

Bahrain Centre for Strategic, International and Energy Studies (Derasat) analyst Mahmood Abdul Ghaffar also said that international presence in the region would reduce Tehran’s destabilising capacity.

“I think the UK deployment of HMS Duncan reflects on London’s commitment to the region after the opening of the UK naval support facility in Bahrain in 2018,” he told the GDN.

“Iran’s denouncement of HMS Duncan’s deployment to the region suggests that further international presence in the Arabian Gulf reduces Tehran’s destabilising capacity in the region.

“Tensions between the United Kingdom and Iran are long-standing, and this history reverberates deeply within Iran’s political system.

“The escalation between both countries reveals that the spat will linger in the short-term.”

Iran’s Revolutionary Guards also released a video yesterday revealing that it had warned HMS Montrose to back off as its naval patrol seized Stena Impero last week.

Intervene

In the audio exchange, the Iranian officer is heard telling the Montrose that the situation could escalate if it tried to intervene, with a warning “don’t put your life in danger”.

Tensions have spiked in recent months, with the US blaming Iran for a series of tanker attacks in and near the highly strategic Strait of Hormuz.

On average, up to 30 large British-flagged ships travel in the Gulf every day, with up to three passing through the Strait between Iran and Oman, where a pair of two-mile-wide (3.2km) shipping lanes provide the only routes in and out of the Gulf.

The US, the UK and other nations will meet in Florida on Thursday to discuss the tensions.