HMS Juffair: The thin line between human rights and defence

Philip Hammond recently scooped up the first lot of cement for the new British base east of Suez, HMS Juffair, the first major British base since the 1970s. [1] As this article says, Bahrain is a controversial choice for the UK's major military site, given its lack of support for democratic and human rights support. Hammond himself did acknowledge this but countered by indicating that Bahrain knows how to improve its human rights cases. This all still begs the question: Should the UK have military bases or relationships with governments that violate human rights? Jiesheng Li considers the issues

Human rights in all countries has been a never-ending chase, especially since the majority of these countries are members of the United Nations and have ratified the United Nations Charter. Despite decades of progress, no single country, developed or developing, can claim to be without any case of human rights abuses. At the same time, security and defence is the one of the core objectives for any British government. As with any other country, the UK secures itself not just at its borders but through engagements with other countries. In the defence realm, this has meant establishments and bases in several countries, despite decades of decolonisation and the end of the Cold War.

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The British military has partnerships and bases in many countries but I will focus on the major military relationships here. One of the key British Army establishments is British Army Training Unit Suffield (BATUS) in Alberta, Canada. Canada is a developed country and a relatively strong human rights record. Nevertheless, it has had cases of violence against indigenous women and the wider indigenous population. [2] A smaller training ground can be found in Kenya, British Army Training Unit Kenya (BATUK). Kenya is a more controversial choice, given that there is violence against LBGT people in the country [3]. Another example are the British Forces in Brunei. The UK has a long standing military relationship with that small nation, with a Gurkha battalion providing security. Brunei has strong cases of human rights violations, especially against non-Islamic minorities and women. Nevertheless, Prime Minister Cameron has extended the UK's military presence there until 2020. [4]

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I could continue with more examples but the picture is clear: the British have military training establishments and forward bases in countries that promote or allow human rights abuses. It therefore can be argued that the British are simply turning their eyes away when they are pursuing national security objectives. In the case of HMS Juffair, it can be argued that the UK should instead pressure Bahrain to reform before the base is built or a worst case scenario, cancel the contract. Conversely, one must consider that no ally of the UK has had a perfect human rights record. If the UK plays a simple carrot-and-stick approach regarding it military relationships, it might end up without any permanent forward base and not able to even achieve any change in human rights. The needs of defence and security may then trump that of human rights concerns.

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Human rights supporters may also use the economic card. The construction of any base and facility and the presence of off duty personnel would add to the economy of the host nation. It may be argued that revenue earned from UK bases could be used by governments to subjugate their political opponents or civilians. However, it should first be noted that there must be concrete evidence before the UK or any country accuses others of such actions. Second, this still does not mean that the UK should hold construction of its bases or withdraw its personnel. If the UK follows with this sort of approach, it would not have troops in Brunei, which would mean no jungle warfare school or no forward presence in the Asia Pacific. Likewise, it would mean no training in the environment of Kenya or African states, thus not allowing British troops to acclimatise to that sort of environment. To summarise, if you aggressively press for human rights reform, you may not get cordial military agreements and bases in return.

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What does that mean for the UK and human rights then? Should the UK simple give the excuse that defence and military basing is far more important than pursuing human rights reform? As one interested in international development, the simple answer is no. Human rights violations may spark further civil or state conflict, thus creating defence threats for the UK and its allies. The more complex answer is reform of a country’s human record cannot be made just by hard diplomacy or incentives and disincentives. It is a long term tricky balance of altering governments and societies so that there are benefits to both the UK and the other country. If there is an aggressive push for reform, the country may end up like those recipient countries who suffered due to stringent World Bank reforms in the 1980s. The UK on the other hand may

end up with no forward facility to base its ships or troops. The UK will have to use a delicate mix of hard and soft power to ensure that reforms and military bases produce positive results for all sides.

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HMS Juffair will be constructed in a country that does not have a strong record on human rights. In pure military terms, it will be a positive move providing forward basing and maintenance to Royal Navy ships east of Suez. The UK will most likely not halt or withdraw its construction, even if Bahrain's rights record does not improve. The UK thus will always have to walk a thin line between securing its defence and military relationships and its human rights objectives.

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[1] http://www.bbc.com/news/uk-34690895

[2] http://www.theglobeandmail.com/globe-debate/a-sobering-look-at-canadas-human-rights-record/article25405839/

[3] See for example https://www.hrw.org/news/2015/09/28/kenya-pervasive-homophobic-violence-coastal-region

[4]. See this article for example regarding Brunei's human rights violations http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/asia/brunei/10407476/Brunei-a-throwback-to-an-age-of-absolute-monarchy.html . This article http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/politics/david-cameron/11416872/Cameron-in-deal-to-extend-British-troops-stay-in-Brunei.html shows PM Cameron extended UK military presence in Brunei.

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