

Power, Prudence and Presence: The Evolution of American Military Bases in the Middle East



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Abstract

The US military exerts extraordinary influence across the world due to its military involvement in almost all parts of the world. The Middle East has historically been viewed as a geopolitical arena of confrontation, conflicts and enduring instability. The US established its military bases in the Middle East due to strategic imperatives and geopolitical factors. Following the Second World War and during Cold War hostility, American military footprints in the Middle East were primarily aimed at regional influence to counter Communist forces. Thereafter, the US maintained its military presence due to the rising threat of terrorism and extremism, and ideological ambitions. In the post-9/11 period, the changing geopolitical scenario has led the US to consolidate its military presence in region, which can be attributed to concerns about political instability and strategic competition. It is against this background that this article seeks to examine the factors behind American military presence in the Middle East. Using publicly available information and data, the article offers historical overview, explores America's evolving approach to military bases in the Middle East, and also throws light on the transactional approach of the Trump administration. The article also explains in the way forward section that the present US stance appears to be more complex because President Trump has to balance the imperatives of retrenchment with long-standing American commitments in the Middle East. The article situates the American outlook towards military bases in the Middle East within a longer historical progression emphasizing continuity amid change.

Keywords: US Military, Gulf Region, Trump, Deployment, American Troops, Qatar

Introduction

It is generally believed that the United States was historically an isolationist country until the outbreak of the Second World War. Kenneth D. Rose has explained that during the period between two World Wars, America's foreign policy was dominated by isolationist impulses, driven by widespread public distrust of entanglements in foreign lands and debates on American identity and role in the changing international dynamics.¹ But this isolationist tendency did not survive long. The urgency to acquire military bases was made

acute as peril of the Nazi threat became apparent. Even though the US did not enter the World War until December 1941, President Franklin D. Roosevelt signed a deal in August 1940 with the United Kingdom that granted America 99-year leases to maintain its military bases in eight British territories in the North Atlantic and the Caribbean in exchange for 50 vintage American destroyers.² Hitler's destructive military campaigns in Europe as well as the sudden Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor further necessitated the establishment of US military sites in the Atlantic and Pacific theatres.

Although many of the military bases were closed after the end of the Second World War, the US continued to maintain about 1600 overseas military bases during the Cold War due to the pursuit of the policy of 'Containment'. American diplomat George Kennan sent his famous telegram from Moscow in which he underlined the looming threat of Moscow's expansionist policies and advocated the policy of 'Containment' against the USSR.³ Thus, Washington justified the need to maintain a large presence of troops outside its territory on the perceived Communist threat from the USSR. The US forward presence helped the West in countering the threat from the USSR. However, the Middle East saw exceptional rise in American military presence after the first Gulf War in 1991.

As the Cold War came to an end, the US decided to scale back its mammoth military presence. This resulted in the US withdrawing about 300,000 military personnel and closing down 60% of its military facilities in foreign locations, including Subic Bay Naval Base and Clark Air Base in the Philippines, Torrejón Air Base in Spain and many others in Panama.⁴ During the Bush administration in early 2000s, the US made a comprehensive review of its basing strategy, known as "Global Posture Review" to reflect changing geopolitical environment. Despite some reduction in the presence of overseas American troops, the 9/11 terror attacks orchestrated by al-Qaeda led to deployment of American troops in Iraq and Afghanistan. What this effectively meant was that it was "not so much an overall cutback in the use of US military force overseas as a massive realignment of its nature and aims."⁵

Washington's enhanced military presence in many parts of the world including in the Middle East has been seen through an imperial lens. After the decline of Britain's power and its increasing reliance on the US to secure its economic interests, most of the European powers began to identify them with America's strategic concerns to keep their former colonies away from Soviet influence. Many of them feared that the Soviet Union would exploit regional geopolitical insta-

bility to expand its influence in the Middle East, and encouraged the US to increase its military footprint in the region. Therefore, America's vast military infrastructure across many regions came to play a significant role in boosting its power projection capabilities. Since securing oil supplies in the Middle East was crucial, "Anglo-American interests sought to develop the pre-war system of mandates and protectorates by establishing military bases and reliable clients who were both anti-Soviet and anti-democratic."⁶ One scholar has termed these military bases as "strategic enclaves" which were "supervised by the Pentagon and sustained by—as much as they sustained—a vast military industrial complex. The bases were often highly privileged enclaves that frequently fostered arrogant attitudes toward the surrounding population, particularly in the non-European regions."⁷

It is a historical fact that Washington, with active support from its many NATO allies, often provided moral and ideological support to regimes that declared themselves against Communist forces regardless of the corruption or repression they practiced in their respective countries. The US showed leniency in giving political patronage and military assistance to those local actors who willingly served as regional allies and provided military bases for Western use. However, the US administration frequently turned a blind eye to the fact that most of these regimes were oppressive and authoritarian, and they often frustrated attempts at democratic reforms.⁸ There have been many accusations of Washington's covert involvement in regime changes in many countries perceived to be hostile to the US.

American Bases in the Middle East

Notwithstanding the US Navy maintaining a permanent presence in the Gulf since the establishment of the Middle East Force (MIDEASTFOR) in 1949⁹, the Middle East did not have sizeable US military bases during the Cold War. Primarily, it was aircraft-carriers afloat in the offshore areas, not military bases, which ensured America's military presence in the Gulf region to ensure that the USSR was not given a free hand to interfere

in the Gulf region.¹⁰ When the UK was the leading power in the Persian Gulf during 1950s and 1960s, America was comfortable with limited permanent military presence through sporadic port-visits. During any political or military crisis, the US seldom sent its own troops to intervene, relying mostly on local allies.¹¹ However, Britain's intention to withdraw from all military bases from the Gulf necessitated a change in American attitude. With the change in geopolitical scenario, Washington began to show greater eagerness to fill the vacuum. However, President Richard Nixon was reluctant to establish military bases due to the force of Arab nationalism, and therefore the US continued to pursue a policy of relying on "twin pillars" of Iran and Saudi Arabia to reinforce American security posture in the Middle East. This approach allowed the US to focus on providing arms sales, military training and technical support to Persian Gulf countries.¹² Started by the Nixon presidency, the twin pillars policy was continued by the Carter administration till some regional crisis forced him to change it.

One "pillar" of America's Middle East policy collapsed following the downfall of the Shah's rule and the rise of the Islamic Republic in 1979. The American embassy in Tehran also came under attack during which the US diplomats and personnel were held hostage by radical Islamists.¹³ Immediately thereafter, the Soviet Union invaded Afghanistan. Moreover, it was not easy to ignore Marxist South Yemen fighting against North Yemen.¹⁴ These events constituted unprecedented situations as they were seen as strategic setback for the US. Not only did Washington feel the need of Arab support for its Middle East policies but it also needed friendly regimes for countering the Soviets. Emphasizing the importance of deepening understanding and cooperation with the Middle Eastern regimes, then Secretary of State Zbigniew Brzezinski pressed the Pentagon to determine which countries were more receptive to provide military bases for American troops in the region. The Pentagon focused its attention primarily on Saudi Arabia, Oman, Somalia, Kenya and Egypt.¹⁵ Eventually, President Jimmy Carter

initiated the process of creating a Rapid Deployment Force for the Middle East, concluding a 'Facilities Access Agreement' with Oman in June 1980. Emphasizing that the Persian Gulf was vital for American security interests, Carter asserted that an attempt by any external power to control the Gulf would be "repelled by any means necessary, including military force." This introduced what came to be known as "the Carter Doctrine," implying a clear shift in the US strategic outlook from the Soviet threat to Europe to the Middle East.¹⁶

However what really transformed the US strategy towards the Middle East was Iraq's attack on Kuwait. Saddam Husain's ill-conceived invasion of Kuwait in 1990 triggered a process leading to the creation of vast American military presence in the Gulf region. The US gathered about 500,000 troops to throw the Iraqi forces out and defend Saudi Arabia. This extraordinary deployment depended on a network of new bases and logistics hubs quickly assembled in host nations.¹⁷ But after the war was over, Washington, instead of withdrawing American troops, decided to set up semi-permanent bases to enforce favourable security arrangement. Saudi Arabia's Dhahran and Prince Sultan Air Base housed thousands of US personnel with the aim to enforce the 'Operation Southern Watch' no-fly zone.¹⁸ The US military campaign during the Gulf War and the subsequent security arrangements between Washington and many Gulf capitals marked a new era of cooperation between them. This allowed the US to gradually expand its presence in the Middle East through establishment of military bases.

By the middle of 1990s, the US had acquired major military installations in Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, Bahrain, Qatar, Oman and the UAE. But the terrorist attacks of 11 September exacerbated tensions between Washington and its Arab partners and friends, besides stoking hostile popular sentiments towards the US in almost the whole of Arab world. Though these tensions affected many issues including the US bases, however the American response to the 9/11 attack with the war in Afghanistan reinforced the value of

the Gulf region as a vital hub in the US military operations.¹⁹ It is important to remember that Saudi Arabia was home to most of the US military bases in the Gulf region before the 9/11. But the Saudi regime was vulnerable to both internal and external threats despite its plentiful oil reserves. Since the legitimacy of its monarchy was frequently challenged by Islamist radical elements, Riyadh was extremely reliant on the US military bases. But after the 9/11 terrorist attacks, Saudi Arabia came to be regarded as the hotbed of terrorists, and this prompted Washington to make substantial adjustment with the base structure.²⁰ Therefore, the Bush administration de-activated the US Air Force in Saudi Arabia in August 2003, and gradually shifted America's military presence from Saudi Arabia to the new host countries of Kuwait, Bahrain and Qatar.²¹

The Bush administration's new global strategy "brought a potential reversal of alliances by tying the positioning of bases, and other military cooperation arrangements, purely to operational considerations," which meant that American insistence on freedom of action translated in disengaging from countries that could potentially regulate the use of bases for political or legal reasons.²² Since the trustworthiness of basing partners was measured on their posture on the 'Global War on Terrorism', it was hardly unforeseen that Saudi Arabia's standing declined quickly. Washington's proximity increased with some Gulf nations who claimed to be fighting the same enemies without placing less emphasis on how it was done.

At the same time, following the rise in the global jihadist threat, the US responded with a new concept of 'homeland security' which stressed on neutralizing terrorists posing a direct threat to American territory.²³ The US also became involved in what is known as 'democracy promotion'²⁴ and the dissemination of Western political ideas in many parts of the world, particularly in the Middle East. The crux of this argument in terms of overseas military presence was that it would marginalize extremists in their societies and make the local regimes more receptive to Western political preferences. As the US was keen

to make the populations of these countries less hostile towards American objectives, Washington began to prioritize the expansion of its forward presence.

Contemporary Scenario

After messy withdrawal from Afghanistan in 2021, it is beyond doubt that Washington's penchant for counterinsurgency operations in the Muslim world stands at its lowest levels.²⁵ This fatigue has raised expectations that the US would eventually aim for restrained military presence in many locations in the Middle East. From the US perspective, less troop deployment also means less regional defense infrastructure.

Scholars have observed that the US plays the most important role in maintaining the liberal international order by deterring aggression and preventing regional conflicts through its global military presence, and any retrenchment would have negative consequences because it would lead to political instability and compel American partners to fend for themselves.²⁶ However, President Donald Trump is known for his transactional approach to foreign policy, and therefore his government's policies about military bases in the Middle East would be dictated by the imperatives his transactional tendencies. Trump has publicly claimed many times that he is against all kinds of wars, and does not want presence of America's troops in foreign locations.

It has been argued that Trump's relentless pursuit of 'America First' policies has undermined the foundations of the US-led liberal international order.²⁷ Since America's global dominance has largely been premised on overseas military bases, it is being assumed that substantial reduction in American forward presence would undermine the US security posture. On the other hand, China is also trying to exploit ongoing tensions in the Middle East to improve its strategic position without getting directly involved in any conflict. Beijing's primary aim appears to be benefitting from Washington's multiple regional entanglements.²⁸ Therefore, growing multi-polarity within the Middle East means America's military bases

are now subject to more regional bargaining. Some regional powers like Turkey and Qatar have charted independent courses, engaging with all sides. Though Turkey is a NATO ally, it currently remains estranged from the US due to divergent perspectives on regional security. The fall of the Assad regime in Syria has prompted Turkey to fill the vacuum created by the disappearance of Tehran's influence.²⁹ Similarly, Qatar is a strong ally that hosts American bases, but it is not ready to abandon friendly ties with Iran. Unexpectedly, Israel, in a provocative and unilateral manner, carried out airstrikes in Doha in early September 2025, killing a Qatari security officer and several Hamas members.³⁰ Almost all countries across the Arab world vehemently criticized the Israeli attack, which was entirely expected. However, the failure of America to give advance warning of this attack has created a sense of unease in Qatar about the reliability and utility of having strong military ties with the US.³¹

The Way Forward

What does the emerging geopolitical environment mean for the Trump administration and the Middle East as far as American military bases are concerned? Does Washington still have enduring interests in the region that requires permanent military bases? Can the US secure these interests without sizeable military footprint in the Middle East? As we have observed in preceding sections, the primary interests of the US in the Middle East have involved ensuring smooth flow of oil, Israel's security and the prevention of threats which have evolved with the change in geopolitical scenario. Despite the fact that some evident changes have appeared in American priorities since President Trump assumed power again in early 2025, the transactional-oriented Trump administration cannot sacrifice these enduring interests.

Due to these factors, the US would continue to prevent Iran's nuclear weapon program and the emergence of religious extremism. The policies pursued by the Trump administration appear to be shaped more by transactional logic and less by ideological considerations. Nevertheless, the

recent pace of developments in the Middle East, particularly involving Israel's war against the Hamas, the US-Israel joint military attacks on Iranian nuclear sites, and Israel's unexpected missile attack on Qatar highlight the paradox faced by the US on how to secure its strategic interests with minimum costs.

Since the US faces greater competition from China, this perception is growing that the US should seriously think of reducing its military presence in the Middle East and focus more in Asia and Indo-Pacific. However, the complex regional environment in the Middle East makes the implementation of this approach quite difficult. The US cannot afford to let China gain economic and military influence in the Gulf region. Moreover, this apprehension is not exaggerated that any retrenchment from the Middle East would allow China to expand its economic role in the region at the cost of American interests.³² Political power within the Middle East also seems to be shifting towards the Gulf region, Israel and Turkey. Large scale displacement and suffering of Palestinians has become an emotive issue in the wider Arab world, rekindling global attention to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

Current discussions about redeployments of American troops reflect immediate political pressures within the US domestic politics and the evolving dynamics of America's historical alliances. However, the presence of American troops in the Middle East is a contentious issue, which is symptomatic of multiple debates on sovereignty and autonomy of Muslim countries, the imperatives of regime stability and great-power rivalry. It must also be highlighted that without serious efforts aimed at durable conflict resolution and transformation of local political preference in many parts of the Middle East, the absence or presence of American troops would not make much difference to underlying political and security dilemmas in the region. Therefore, all these strategic dilemmas make it harder for the Trump administration to extricate America from the region.

Conclusion

The US has maintained its military bases in many countries in the Middle East for a long time. As discussed in the article, the evolution of American military bases in the Middle East is driven by shifting strategic approach in the US foreign policy establishment. It reflects complex interplay of national interest, military power, threat perception and the strategic competition. The article has explained that from the Cold War to the post-9/11 period, American practices regarding military bases in the Middle East have relied on realist orientation that regards regional instability as a challenge to US national security. American strategy has often recalibrated without necessarily changing its historical dependence on forward presence.

Confronted with a fast changing regional scenario, the US seems to be reconsidering its strategic priorities including the basing policies. However, the main question before President Trump is not about having less boots on the ground but the reconsideration of how American power projection could be viewed by both partners and adversaries in the Middle East. The foremost conclusion is that the complexities involved in deterrence and accommodation are likely to be defining features of the Trump administration's policy towards the US military bases in the Middle East.

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