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Bases, Bases, Everywhere… Except in the Pentagon's Report

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The U.S. military is finally withdrawing (or not) from its base at al-Tanf. You know, the place that the Syrian government long claimed was a training ground for Islamic State (ISIS) fighters; the land corridor just inside Syria, near both the Iraqi and Jordanian borders, that Russia has called a terrorist hotbed (while floating the idea of jointly administering it with the United States); the location of a camp where hundreds of U.S. Marines joined Special Operations forces last year; an outpost that U.S. officials claimed was the key not only to defeating ISIS, but also, according to General Joseph Votel, the commander of U.S. forces in the Middle East, to countering "the malign activities that Iran and their various proxies and surrogates would like to pursue." You know, that al-Tanf.

Within hours of President Trump's announcement of a withdrawal of U.S. forces from Syria, equipment at that base was already being inventoried for removal. And just like that, arguably the most important American garrison in Syria was (maybe) being struck from the Pentagon's books — except, as it happens, al-Tanf was never actually on the Pentagon's books. Opened in 2015and, until recently, home to hundreds of U.S. troops, it was one of the many military bases that exist somewhere between light and shadow, an acknowledged foreign outpost that somehow never actually made it onto the Pentagon's official inventory of bases.

Officially, the Department of Defense (DoD) maintains 4,775 "sites," spread across all 50 states, eight U.S. territories, and 45 foreign countries. A total of 514 of these outposts are located overseas, according to the Pentagon's worldwide property portfolio. Just to start down a long list, these include bases on the Indian Ocean island of Diego Garcia, in Djibouti on the Horn of Africa, as well as in Peru and Portugal, the United Arab Emirates, and the United Kingdom. But the most recent version of that portfolio, issued in early 2018 and known as the Base Structure Report (BSR), doesn't include any mention of al-Tanf. Or, for that matter, any other base in Syria. Or Iraq. Or Afghanistan. Or Niger. Or Tunisia. Or Cameroon. Or Somalia. Or any number of locales where such military outposts are known to exist and even, unlike in Syria, to be expanding.

According to David Vine, author of *Base Nation: How U.S. Military Bases Abroad Harm America and the World*, there could be hundreds of similar off-the-books bases around the world. "The missing sites are a reflection of the lack of transparency involved in the system of what I still estimate to be around 800 U.S. bases outside the 50 states and Washington, D.C., that have been encircling the globe since World War II," says Vine, who is also a founding member of the recently established Overseas Base Realignment and Closure Coalition, a group of military analysts from across the ideological spectrum who advocate shrinking the U.S. military's global "footprint."

Such off-the-books bases are off the books for a reason. The Pentagon doesn't want to talk about them. "I spoke to the press officer who is responsible for the Base Structure Report and she has nothing to add and no one available to discuss further at this time," Pentagon spokesperson Lieutenant Colonel Michelle Baldanza told *TomDispatch* when asked about the Defense Department's many mystery bases.

> "Undocumented bases are immune to oversight by the public and often even Congress," Vine explains. "Bases are a physical manifestation of U.S. foreign and military policy, so off-the-books bases mean the military and executive branch are deciding such policy without public debate, frequently spending hundreds of millions or billions of dollars and potentially getting the U.S. involved in wars and conflicts about which most of the country knows nothing."

Where Are They?

The Overseas Base Realignment and Closure Coalition notes that the United States possesses up to 95% of the world's foreign military bases, while countries like France, Russia, and the United Kingdom have perhaps 10-20 foreign outposts each. China has just one.

The Department of Defense even boasts that its "locations" include 164 countries. Put another way, it has a military presence of some sort in approximately 84% of the nations on this planet — or at least the DoD briefly claimed this. After *TomDispatch* inquired about the number on a new webpage designed to tell the Pentagon's "story" to the general public, it was quickly changed. "We appreciate your diligence in getting to the bottom of this," said Lieutenant Colonel Baldanza. "Thanks to your observations, we have updated defense.gov to say 'more than 160.'"

The progressive changes made to the Defense Department's "Our Story" webpage as a result of questions from TomDispatch.

What the Pentagon still doesn't say is how it defines a "location." The number 164 does roughly track with the Department of Defense's current manpower statistics, which show personnel deployments of varying sizes in 166 "overseas" locales — including some nations with token numbers of U.S. military personnel and others, like Iraq and Syria, where the size of the force was obviously far larger, even if unlisted at the time of the assessment. (The Pentagon recently claimed that there were 5,200 troops in Iraq and at least 2,000 troops in Syria although that number should now markedly shrink.) The Defense Department's "overseas" tally, however, also lists troops in U.S. territories like American Samoa, Puerto Rico, the U.S. Virgin Islands, and Wake Island. Dozens of soldiers, according to the Pentagon, are also deployed to the country of "Akrotiri" (which is actually a village on the island of Santorini in Greece) and thousands more are based in "unknown" locations.

In the latest report, the number of those "unknown" troops exceeds 44,000.

Official Defense Department manpower statistics show U.S. forces deployed to the nation of "Akrotiri."

The annual cost of deploying U.S. military personnel overseas, as well as maintaining and running those foreign bases, tops out at an estimated $150 billion annually, according to the Overseas Bases Realignment and Closure Coalition. The price tag for the outposts alone adds up to about one-third of that total.

> "U.S. bases abroad cost upwards of $50 billion per year to build and maintain, which is money that could be used to address pressing needs at home in education, health care, housing, and infrastructure," Vine points out.

Perhaps you won't be surprised to learn that the Pentagon is also somewhat fuzzy about just where its troops are stationed. The new Defense Department website, for instance, offered a count of "4,800+ defense sites" around the world. After *TomDispatch* inquired about this total and how it related to the official count of 4,775 sites listed in the BSR, the website was changed to read "approximately 4,800 Defense Sites."

> "Thank you for pointing out the discrepancy. As we transition to the new site, we are working on updating information," wrote **Lieutenant Colonel Baldanza**. "Please refer to the Base Structure Report which has the latest numbers."

In the most literal sense, the Base Structure Report does indeed have the latest numbers — but their accuracy is another matter.

> "The number of bases listed in the BSR has long born little relation to the actual number of U.S. bases outside the United States," says Vine. "Many, many well-known and secretive bases have long been left off the list."

One prime example is the constellation of outposts that the U.S. has built across Africa. The official BSR inventory lists only a handful of sites there — on Ascension Island as well as in Djibouti, Egypt, and Kenya. In reality, though, there are many more outposts in many more African countries.

A recent investigation by the *Intercept*, based on documents obtained from U.S. Africa Command (AFRICOM) via the Freedom of Information Act, revealed a network of 34 bases heavily clustered in the north and west of that continent as well as in the Horn of Africa. AFRICOM's "strategic posture" consists of larger "enduring" outposts, including two forward operating sites (FOSes), 12 cooperative security locations (CSLs), and 20 more austere sites known as contingency locations (CLs).

The Pentagon's official inventory does include the two FOSes: Ascension Island and the crown jewel of Washington's African bases, Camp Lemonnier in Djibouti, which expanded from 88 acres in the early 2000s to nearly 600 acres today. The Base Structure Report is, however, missing a CSL in that same country, Chabelley Airfield, a lower-profile outpost located about 10 kilometers away that has served as a drone hub for operations in Africa and the Middle East.

The official Pentagon tally also mentions a site that goes by the confusing moniker of "NSA Bahrain-Kenya." AFRICOM had previously described it as a collection of warehouses built in the 1980s at the airport and seaport of Mombasa, Kenya, but it now appears on that

command's 2018 list as a CSL. Missing, however, is another Kenyan base, Camp Simba, mentioned in a 2013 internal Pentagon study of secret drone operations in Somalia and Yemen. At least two manned surveillance aircraft were based there at the time. Simba, a longtime Navy-run facility, is currently operated by the Air Force's 475th Expeditionary Air Base Squadron, part of the 435th Air Expeditionary Wing.

Personnel from that same air wing can be found at yet another outpost that doesn't appear in the Base Structure Report, this one on the opposite side of the continent. The BSR states that it doesn't list specific information on "non-U.S. locations" not at least 10 acres in size or worth at least $10 million. However, the base in question — Air Base 201 in Agadez, Niger — already has a $100 million construction price tag, a sum soon to be eclipsed by the cost of operating the facility: about $30 million a year. By 2024, when the present 10-year agreement for use of the base ends, its construction and operating costs will have reached about $280 million.

Also missing from the BSR are outposts in nearby Cameroon, including a longtime base in Douala, a drone airfield in the remote town of Garoua, and a facility known as Salak. That site, according to a 2017 investigation by the*Intercept*, the research firm Forensic Architecture, and Amnesty International, has been used by U.S. personnel and private contractors for drone surveillance and training missions and by allied Cameroonian forces for illegal imprisonment and torture.

According to Vine, keeping America's African bases secret is advantageous to Washington. It protects allies on that continent from possible domestic opposition to the presence of American troops, he points out, while helping to ensure that there will be no domestic debate in the U.S. over such spending and the military commitments involved.

> "It's important for U.S. citizens to know where their troops are based in Africa and elsewhere around the world," he told TomDispatch, "because that troop presence costs the U.S. billions of dollars every year and because the U.S. is involved, or potentially involved, in wars and conflicts that could spiral out of control."

Those Missing Bases

Africa is hardly the only place where the Pentagon's official list doesn't match up well with reality. For close to two decades, the Base Structure Report has ignored bases of all sorts in America's active war zones. At the height of the American occupation of Iraq, for instance, the United States had 505 bases there, ranging from small outposts to mega-sized facilities. None appeared on the Pentagon's official rolls.

In Afghanistan, the numbers were even higher. As *TomDispatch* reported in 2012, the U.S.-led International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) had about 550 bases in that country. If you had added ISAF checkpoints — small baselets used to secure roads and villages — to the count of mega-bases, forward operating bases, combat outposts, and patrol bases, the number reached an astounding 750. And counting all foreign military installations of every type — including logistical, administrative, and support facilities — hiked ISAF Joint Command's official count to 1,500 sites. America's significant share of them was, however, also mysteriously absent from the Defense Department's official tally.

There are now far fewer such facilities in Afghanistan — and the numbers may drop further

in the months ahead as troop levels decrease. But the existence of Camp Morehead, Forward Operating Base Fenty, Tarin Kowt Airfield, Camp Dahlke West, and Bost Airfield, as well as Camp Shorab, a small installation occupying what was once the site of much larger twin bases known as Camp Leatherneck and Camp Bastion, is indisputable. Yet none of them has ever appeared in the Base Structure Report.

Similarly, while there are no longer 500-plus U.S. bases in Iraq, in recent years, as American troops returned to that country, some garrisons have either been reconstituted or built from scratch. These include the Besmaya Range Complex, Firebase Sakheem, Firebase Um Jorais, and Al Asad Air Base, as well as Qayyarah Airfield West — a base 40 miles south of Mosul that's better known as "Q-West." Again, you won't find any of them listed in the Pentagon's official count.

These days, it's even difficult to obtain accurate manpower numbers for the military personnel in America's war zones, let alone the number of bases in each of them. As Vine explains, "The military keeps the figures secret to some extent to hide the base presence from its adversaries. Because it is probably not hard to spot these bases in places like Syria and Iraq, however, the secrecy is mostly to prevent domestic debate about the money, danger, and death involved, as well as to avoid diplomatic tensions and international inquiries."

If stifling domestic debate through information control is the Pentagon's aim, it's been doing a fine job for years of deflecting questions about its global posture, or what the late *TomDispatch* regular Chalmers Johnson called America's "empire of bases."

In mid-October, *TomDispatch* asked Heather Babb, another Pentagon spokesperson, for details about the outposts in Afghanistan, Iraq, and Syria that were absent from the Base Structure Report, as well as about those missing African bases. Among the other questions put to Babb: Could the Pentagon offer a simple count — if not a list — of all its outposts? Did it have a true count of overseas facilities, even if it hadn't been released to the public — a list, that is, which actually did what the Base Structure Report only purports to do? October and November passed without answers.

In December, in response to follow-up requests for information, Babb responded in a fashion firmly in line with the Pentagon's well-worn policy of keeping American taxpayers in the dark about the bases they pay for — no matter the theoretical difficulty of denying the existence of outposts that stretch from Agadez in Niger to Mosul in Iraq. "I have nothing to add," she explained, "to the information and criteria that is included in the report."

President Trump's decision to withdraw American troops from Syria means that the 2019 Base Structure Report will likely be the most accurate in years. For the first time since 2015, the Pentagon's inventory of outposts will no longer be missing the al-Tanf garrison (or then again, maybe it will). But that still potentially leaves hundreds of off-the-books bases absent from the official rolls. Consider it one outpost down and who knows how many to go.

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