

Twenty-First Century Blowback? US Military Bases Sprouting like Mushrooms

As Prospects Dim in Iraq, the Pentagon Digs in Deeper Around the Middle East

By [Nick Turse](#)

Global Research, November 17, 2010

tomdispatch.com/ 17 November 2010

Region: [USA](#)

Theme: [Militarization and WMD](#), [US NATO](#)

[War Agenda](#)

Last year, it was Kuwait, Qatar, and Iraq. This year, it's Germany, Italy, Greece, the Netherlands, and the United Kingdom. Next year, it could easily be Afghanistan, Pakistan, Diego Garcia, Bahrain, and Turkey. Or of course they could choose to play in Japan (with a special stop [in Okinawa](#)), South Korea, Colombia, and for a little sun and surf, the Bahamas. And while they're at it, the same way bands used to love playing the Palladium, they could make a triumphal return to Guantanamo Bay to bring a little cheer back into American lives, just as they did in 2005. Or they could break out their new camouflage-colored b-ball (which on recent tours sometimes replaces their iconic red, white, and blue one), and as they've done in the past, slam dunk their way onto U.S. aircraft carriers on duty in places like the Persian Gulf.

Oh, come on! You haven't guessed by now? We're talking about the Harlem Globetrotters on their never-ending basketball tour and [dropping in no less eternally](#) at the "front lines" of the American war on whatever. In recent years, to entertain the troops, they've visited more than 25 U.S. military bases in all of the countries above, not to speak of Djibouti, Portugal, and others. (And yes, Virginia, aircraft carriers, with the populations of American small towns, are giant, floating military bases.) But here's the strange thing: let them tour those global bases year after year, let them play a baseball schedule of 162 games (and throw in the playoffs and the World Series, too), and they'll still barely scratch the surface of [America's baseworld](#). After all, the more than 25 bases they've visited since 2005 make up only about 15% of the approximately [400 American bases](#) in Afghanistan alone, as Nick Turse has reported for TomDispatch. Who even knows the total number of U.S. military bases globally?

Only one thing is certain: there are enough of them to keep the Globetrotters touring nonstop until hell freezes over. One great mystery of American journalism is that those bases, key to our imperial status on this planet, remain of next to no interest to reporters (unless the Pentagon threatens to close one in the U.S.). The strangest aspect of America's global garrisons is that, while millions of Americans — soldiers, spies, private contractors, Defense Department civilians, and civilian officials of every sort — cycle through them each year, most Americans know next to nothing about them and could care less. By the way, surprising numbers of American journalists pass through them, too, and yet, looking for a little "kinetic action" out in our war zones, they almost never bother to focus on and [report on](#) these [colossi of our imperial world](#).

Yet, if you don't pay attention to them, you know remarkably little about what our country actually means in, and to, the world. TomDispatch considers them an essential beat, and

Associate Editor Nick Turse, who has only recently produced the single (must-read!) book available on how to actually get out of our war in Afghanistan — [The Case for Withdrawal from Afghanistan](#) — has been [covering them](#) for years at this site and it looks as if he, like the *Globetrotters*, has years to go. In journalistic terms, they are — or should be — the gift that just keeps giving. Tom

The construction projects are sprouting like mushrooms: walled complexes, high-strength weapons vaults, and underground bunkers with command and control capacities — and they're being planned and funded by a military force intent on embedding itself ever more deeply in the Middle East.

If Iran were building these facilities, it would be front-page news and American hawks would be talking war, but that country's Revolutionary Guards aren't behind this building boom, nor are the Syrians, Lebanon's Hezbollah, or some set of al-Qaeda affiliates. It's the U.S. military that's digging in, hardening, improving, and expanding its garrisons in and around the Persian Gulf at the very moment when it is officially in a draw-down phase in Iraq.

On August 31st, President Obama took to the airwaves to [announce](#) "the end of our combat mission in Iraq." This may, however, prove yet another "mission accomplished" moment. After all, from the lack of a real Iraqi air force (other than the [U.S. Air Force](#)) to the fact that there are more American troops in that country today than were [projected](#) to be there in September 2003, many signs point in another direction.

In fact, within days of the president's announcement it was [reported](#) that the U.S. military was pouring money into improving bases in Iraq and that advance elements of a combat-hardened armored cavalry regiment were being [sent](#) there in what was politely dubbed an "advise and assist" (rather than combat) role. On September 13th, the *New York Times* [described](#) the type of operations that U.S. forces were actually involved in:

"During two days of combat in Diyala Province, American troops were armed with mortars, machine guns, and sniper rifles. Apache and Kiowa helicopters attacked insurgents with cannon and machine-gun fire, and F-16's dropped 500-pound bombs."

According to the report, U.S. troops were within range of enemy hand grenades and one American soldier was wounded in the battle.

Adhering to an [agreement](#) inked during George W. Bush's final year in office, the Obama administration has pledged to withdraw all U.S. troops from Iraq by the end of 2011. U.S. military [commanders](#) have, however, repeatedly spoken of the possibility of [extending](#) the U.S. military's stay [well into the future](#). Just recently, Secretary of Defense Robert Gates let the [Iraqi government know](#) that the U.S. was open to such a prospect. "We're ready to have that discussion if and when they want to raise it with us," he said. As the British *Guardian's* Martin Chulov [wrote](#) last month, "[T]he U.S. is widely believed to be hoping to retain at least one military base in Iraq that it could use as a strategic asset in the region."

Recent events, however, have cast U.S. basing plans into turmoil. Notably unnerving for the Obama administration was a deal reportedly brokered by Iran in which Shia cleric Moqtada al-Sadr — whose forces had repeatedly clashed with U.S. troops only a few short years ago — threw his support behind Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki, currently vying for a second term in office. This was allegedly part of a regional agreement involving Syria and Lebanon's

Hezbollah that could leave the U.S. military out in the cold. A source informed the *Guardian* that “Maliki told [his new regional partners that] he will never extend, or renew [any bases] or give any facilities to the Americans or British after the end of next year.”

Even if the U.S. was forced to withdraw all its troops from Iraq, however, its military “footprint” in the Middle East would still be substantial enough to rankle opponents of an armed American presence in the region and be a drain on U.S. taxpayers who continue to fund America’s “[empire of bases](#).” As has been true in [recent](#) years, the latest U.S. military documents indicate that base expansion and upgrades are the order of the day for America’s little-mentioned garrisons in the nations around Iraq.

One thing is, by now, clear: whatever transpires in Iraq, the U.S. military presence in the Persian Gulf and surrounding environs will be formidable well into the future.

Middle Eastern Mega-Bases

✘ As the “last” U.S. combat troops withdrew from Iraq under the [glare](#) of TV lights in the dead of night and rolled toward Kuwait, there was plenty of commentary about where they had been, but almost none about where they were going.

In the Gulf War of 1991, the U.S. military helped push Saddam Hussein’s invading Iraqi army out of Kuwait only to find that the country’s leader, Sheikh Jaber al-Ahmed al-Sabah, refused to return home “until crystal chandeliers and gold-plated bathroom fixtures could be reinstalled in Kuwait City’s Bayan Palace.” Today, the U.S. military’s Camp Arifjan, which grew exponentially as the Iraq War ramped up, sits 30 miles south of the refurbished royal complex and houses about 15,000 U.S. troops. They have access to all the amenities of strip-mall America, including Pizza Hut, Pizza Inn, Taco Bell, Starbucks, Hardees, Subway, and Burger King. The military talks little about its presence at Arifjan, but Army contracting documents offer clues about its intentions there. A recent bid solicitation, for example, indicated that, in the near future, construction would begin there on additional high strength armory vaults to house “weapons and sensitive items.”

In addition to Camp Arifjan, U.S. military facilities in Kuwait include Camps Buehring and Virginia, Kuwait Naval Base, Ali Al Salem Air Base, and Udairi Range, a training facility near the Iraqi border. The U.S. military’s work is also supported by a Defense Logistics Agency (DLA) distribution center in Kuwait, located not on a U.S. base but in the Mina Abdulla industrial zone about 30 miles south of Kuwait City.

Unlike other DLA hubs, which supply U.S. garrisons around the world, the Kuwaiti facility is contractor owned and operated. [Made up](#) of a walled compound spanning 104 acres, the complex contains eight climate-controlled warehouses, each covering about four acres, one 250,000-square-foot covered area for cargo, and six uncovered plots of similar size for storage and processing needs.

Typical of base upgrades in Kuwait — some massive, some modest — now on the drawing boards, recent contracting documents reveal that the Army Corps of Engineers intends to upgrade equipment at Kuwait Naval Base for the maintenance and repair of ships. In fact, the Department of Defense has already issued more than \$18 million in construction contracts for Kuwait in 2010.

The U.S. military also operates and utilizes bases and other facilities in the nearby Persian


Gulf nations of Qatar, Bahrain, the United Arab Emirates, and Oman.

During the 1930s, the British Royal Air Force operated an airfield on Oman's Masirah Island. Today, the U.S. Air Force and members of other service branches have settled in there, operating from the island as well as other facilities by special agreement with the sultanate. The Air Force is also supported in Oman by "War Reserve Materiel" storage and maintenance facilities, operated by defense contractor [Dyncorp](#), in Seeb, Thumrait, and Salalah Port.

From 2001 to 2010, the U.S. military spent about \$32 million on construction projects in Oman. In September, the Army upped the ante by awarding an \$8.6 million contract to refurbish the Royal Air Force of Oman's air field at Thumrait Air Base.

U.S. efforts in Bahrain are on a grander scale. This year, the U.S. Navy broke ground on a mega-construction [project](#) to develop 70 acres of waterfront at the port at Mina Salman. Scheduled for completion in 2015, the complex is slated to include new port facilities, barracks for troops, administrative buildings, a dining facility, and a recreation center, among other amenities, with a price tag of \$580 million.

There are similar expenditures in neighboring Qatar. In 1996, lacking an air force of its own, Qatar still built Al Udeid Air Base at a cost of more than \$1 billion with the goal of attracting the U.S. military. It succeeded. In September 2001, U.S. aircraft began to operate out of the facility. By 2002, the U.S. had tanks, armored vehicles, dozens of warehouses, communications and computing equipment, and thousands of troops at and around Al Udeid. In 2003, the U.S. moved its major regional combat air operations center out of Saudi Arabia and into neighboring Qatar where the government was ready to [spend](#) almost \$400 million on that high-tech command complex.

 From then on, Al Udeid Air Base has served as a major command and logistics hub for U.S. regional operations including its wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. Last year, the Pentagon awarded a \$52 million contract to further upgrade its airfield capabilities, a \$44 million deal to upgrade other facilities there, and a \$6 million contract for expanded warehousing capacity. Nor does the building boom there show any signs of abating. A report by the Congressional Research Service issued earlier this year noted:

"The Obama administration requested \$60 million in FY2010 military construction funds for further upgrades to U.S. military facilities in Qatar as part of an ongoing expansion and modernization program that has been underway since 2003 at a cost of over \$200 million. The administration's FY2011 military construction request for Qatar is \$64.3 million."

Jordan's Bunker Mentality

The Pentagon has also invested heavily in Jordanian military infrastructure. One major beneficiary of these projects has been the international construction firm Archirodon which, between 2006-2008, worked on the construction of the King Abdullah II Special Operations Training Center (KASOTC). It is a state-of-the-art military and counterterrorism training facility owned and operated by the Jordanian government, but built in part under a \$70 million U.S. Army Corps of Engineers contract.

In 2009, when that 1,235-acre \$200 million Jordanian training center was unveiled, King Abdullah II gave the inaugural address, praising the facility as a world-class hub for special

forces training. General David Petraeus, then-head of the U.S. Central Command overseeing the Greater Middle East, was also on hand to laud the facility as “a center of excellence not only for doctrinal development and refinement of TTPs [technology, tactics and procedures], but for strengthening the regional security network emerging in this area.”

Between 2001 and 2009, the Army awarded \$89 million in contracts for Jordanian construction projects. This year, it inked deals for another \$3.3 million (much of it for improvements to KASOTC). Recently, the Army also issued a call for bids for the construction of subterranean complexes at three locations in Jordan, the largest of them approximately 13,000 square feet. Each of these underground bunkers will reportedly boast a command-and-control operations center, offices, sleeping quarters, cafeterias, and storage facilities. The project is set to cost up to \$25 million.

1,001 Arabian Contracts

According to a 2009 Congressional Research Service report, from 1950 to 2006 Saudi Arabia purchased almost \$63 billion in weapons, military equipment, and related services through the Pentagon’s Foreign Military Sales (FMS) program. Just last month, the U.S. [announced](#) that it would conclude new arms deals with the Saudis which would equal that sum — not in another half century but in the next 15 to 20 years. Labeled a move to counter Iranian power in the region, the deal for advanced tactical fighter aircraft and state-of-the-art helicopters garnered headlines. What didn’t were the longstanding, ongoing U.S. military construction efforts in that country.

Between 1950 and 2006, Saudi Arabia experienced \$17.1 billion in construction activity courtesy of the Pentagon. In the years since, according to government data, the Department of Defense has issued more than \$400 million in construction contracts for the kingdom, including \$33 million in 2010 for projects ranging from a dining hall (\$6 million) to weapons storage warehouses and ammunition supply facilities (nearly \$1 million).

Bases and “the Base”

In his 1996 “Declaration of War Against the Americans Who Occupy the Land of the Two Holy Mosques,” Osama bin Laden [wrote](#):

“The presence of the USA Crusader military forces on land, sea and air of the states of the Islamic Gulf is the greatest danger threatening the largest oil reserve in the world. The existence of these forces in the area will provoke the people of the country and induces aggression on their religion, feelings, and prides and pushes them to take up armed struggle against the invaders occupying the land.”

Since then, the U.S. and bin Laden’s rag-tag guerrilla force, al Qaeda (“the Base”), have been locked in a struggle that has led to further massive U.S. base expansions in the greater Middle East and South Asia. At the height of its occupation, the U.S. had [hundreds](#) of bases throughout Iraq. Today, [hundreds](#) more have been built in [Afghanistan](#) where, in the 1980s, bin Laden and other *jihadists*, backed and financed by the CIA, the Saudis, and the Pakistanis, fought to expel the Soviet occupiers of that country.

As early as 2005, the U.S. military was floating the possibility of retaining some of its Afghan bases [permanently](#). In Iraq, plans for similar permanent garrisons have recently been thrown into doubt by the very government the U.S. helped install in power. Whatever

happens in either war zone, however, one thing is clear: the U.S. military will still be deeply dug into the Middle East.

While American infrastructure [crumbles](#) at home, new construction continues in oil-rich kingdoms, sultanates, and emirates there, courtesy of the Pentagon. It's a building program guaranteed to further inflame anti-American sentiment in the region. History may not repeat itself, but ominously — just as in 1996 when bin Laden issued his declaration — most Americans have not the slightest idea what their military is doing with their tax dollars in the Persian Gulf and beyond, or what twenty-first century blowback might result from such activities.

Nick Turse is the associate editor of TomDispatch.com. An award-winning journalist, his work has appeared in the Los Angeles Times, [the Nation](#), and [regularly](#) at TomDispatch. His latest book, [The Case for Withdrawal from Afghanistan](#) (Verso Books), which brings together leading analysts from across the political spectrum, has just gone into its second printing. Turse is currently a fellow at Harvard University's Radcliffe Institute. You can follow him on Twitter [@NickTurse](#), on [Tumblr](#), and on [Facebook](#). His website is [NickTurse.com](#).

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