

Research Paper

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# US Military Policy in the Middle East

## An Appraisal



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## Summary

- Despite significant financial expenditure and thousands of lives lost, the American military presence in the Middle East retains bipartisan US support and incurs remarkably little oversight or public debate. Key US activities in the region consist of weapons sales to allied governments, military-to-military training programmes, counterterrorism operations and long-term troop deployments.
- The US military presence in the Middle East is the culmination of a common bargain with Middle Eastern governments: security cooperation and military assistance in exchange for US access to military bases in the region. As a result, the US has substantial influence in the Middle East and can project military power quickly. However, working with partners whose interests sometimes conflict with one another has occasionally harmed long-term US objectives.
- Since 1980, when President Carter remarked that outside intervention in the interests of the US in the Middle East would be ‘repelled by any means necessary’, the US has maintained a permanent and significant military presence in the region.
- Two main schools of thought – ‘offshore balancing’ and ‘forward engagement’ – characterize the debate over the US presence in the Middle East. The former position seeks to avoid backlash against the US by maintaining a strategic distance from the region and advocates the deployment of forces in the ‘global commons’, where the US military enjoys unparalleled supremacy. The latter group believes in the necessity of a robust military footprint to provide access to oil and gas markets and to prevent the emergence of a regional hegemon, such as Iran.
- American public opinion is roughly evenly split on whether the US should maintain a military presence in the Middle East. However, the status quo enjoys wide support in elite US circles.
- Despite President Trump’s criticism of major elements of the US military’s presence in the Middle East, US troop levels have increased since he took office. This demonstrates the difficulty in altering the status quo due to the risk of rupturing relations with friendly governments in the region.
- Key US objectives include reducing instability in the region, containing Iran’s influence, preventing the emergence of safe havens for terrorist organizations, assuring the free flow of oil and natural gas, and building up the capacities of local militaries to defend their own territory. The goal of allowing the flow of oil has been largely successful, while the others have had decidedly mixed outcomes.

# 1. Introduction

I say it so much and it's so sad, but we have \$7 trillion in the Middle East. You might as well throw it out the window. Seven trillion dollars.

*President Donald Trump, 21 June 2018<sup>1</sup>*

The sentiment expressed above by President Trump reflects frustrations shared by several presidents over the past three decades: the rigidity of approach, the seemingly thankless allies, the suboptimal outcomes, and both the human and financial costs. This paper addresses these frustrations through three broad questions:

- What is the current scope of the US military's presence in the Middle East?
- Have US policy objectives been achieved in the post-Cold War era?<sup>2</sup>
- What are the benefits, costs and consequences of recent US military policy in the Middle East?

While this last question has been the subject of some debate by American scholars and pundits, the full scope and mission of the military in this relatively unstable region remains largely unexamined and unquestioned. An unusual combination of widespread bipartisan support for military policy in the Middle East, limited congressional oversight of the US armed forces more generally, low public interest in foreign policy, and Israel/Palestine-issue fatigue has created and enabled a situation in which there is a lack of honest scrutiny and appraisal of this policy.<sup>3</sup>

The US military presence in the region is not only physical in the form of troop deployments, planes stationed at air bases, or naval port visits. Its presence is also furthered and reinforced by security cooperation programmes in the form of weapons sales, training and advice, and essential logistics and intelligence support. The reciprocal relationship between the Pentagon and most Middle East countries assures US military access to the region to support a range of activities and operations. In exchange, the US provides military and diplomatic support – or, at least tolerance – for partner countries' own political and security requirements. The need for reliable access to bases, ports and airspace throughout the Middle East is itself the foremost policy concern for the US. In practice, without the consent of host-nation governments the US military could not exercise the latent and direct influence it has within the region. However, since predictable military access is the ultimate objective, the United States has willingly partnered with local governments and undertaken military operations that have harmed certain US interests over the longer-term. This paper attempts to detail and understand the extent of this co-dependency that has emerged because of the US military's access requirements.

There is no universally accepted definition of 'the Middle East'. However, for the purposes of this paper, the term refers to: Egypt, Israel, Lebanon, Syria, Turkey, Jordan, Iraq, Kuwait, Saudi Arabia, Yemen, Oman, United Arab Emirates (UAE), Qatar, Bahrain and Iran.<sup>4</sup> US Central Command (CENTCOM) is responsible for military operations in all of these countries, excluding Turkey

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<sup>1</sup> White House (2018), 'Remarks by President Trump at Protecting American Workers Roundtable', <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefings-statements/remarks-president-trump-protecting-american-workers-roundtable/> (accessed 23 Aug. 2018).

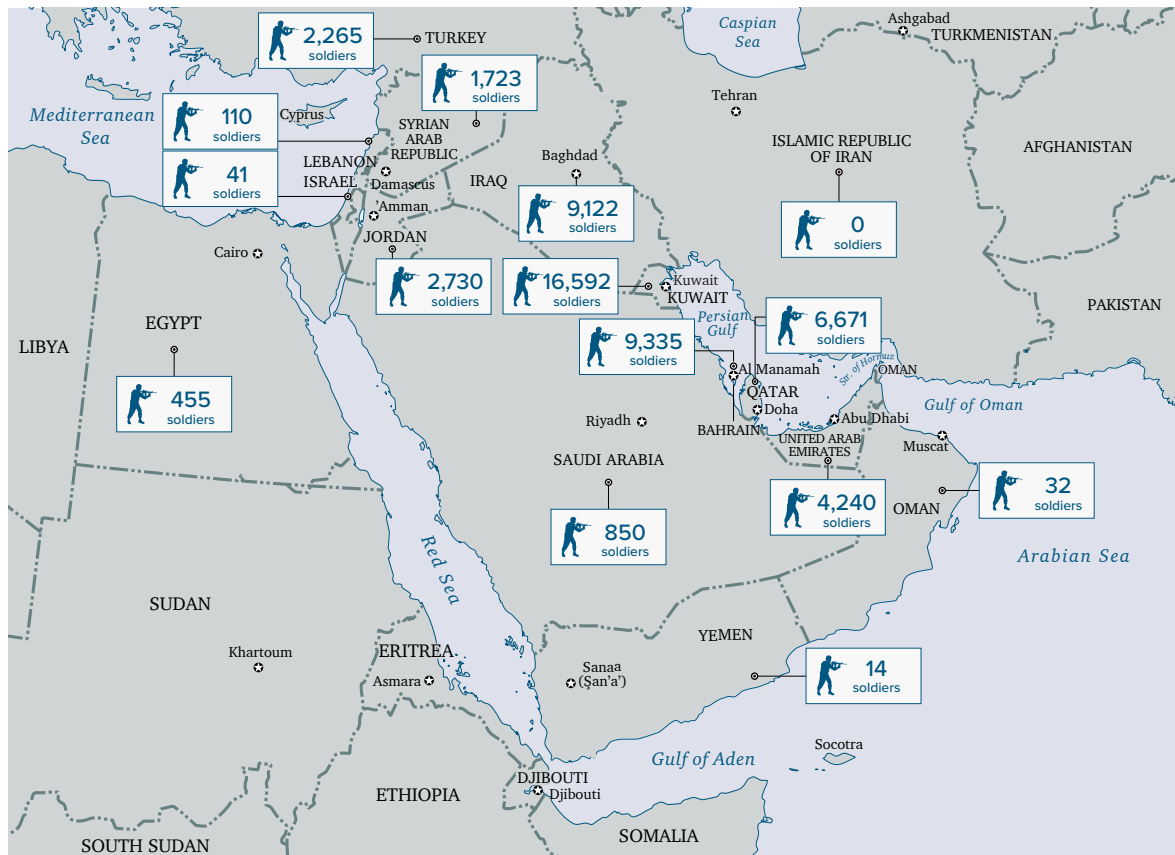
<sup>2</sup> These policy objectives in the Middle East are presented and evaluated later in the paper.

<sup>3</sup> Military policy refers to the principles, courses of action and subsequent tasks that both guide and describe what the US armed forces do. It is the why, what and how of US military actions within the Middle East.

<sup>4</sup> Palestine is not included because the US military has not stationed troops or engaged in the consequential security cooperation activities documented in this paper.

and Israel. These two countries fall under the remit of US European Command (EUCOM), due to Turkey’s membership of NATO and diplomatic sensitivities regarding Israel and its location within the Muslim-majority region.<sup>5</sup> This paper does not include the countries of Central Asia, where US military operations are also the responsibility of CENTCOM. Finally, the geographic breadth of this paper incorporates the major regional waterways – the Persian Gulf, Gulf of Oman, North Arabian Sea, Gulf of Aden and the Red Sea – upon which there has been a near-continuous US naval presence since the establishment of the regionally-focused Fifth Fleet in 1995.

**Map 1: Estimated US troop numbers stationed in the Middle East in 2017**



Source: US Department of Defense (2018), Defense Military Data Center, [https://www.dmdc.osd.mil/appj/dwp/dwp\\_reports.jsp](https://www.dmdc.osd.mil/appj/dwp/dwp_reports.jsp) (accessed 4 Jul. 2018); White House (2017), ‘Text of a Letter from the President to the Speaker of the House of Representatives and the President Pro Tempore of the Senate’, 11 December 2017, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefings-statements/text-letter-president-speaker-house-representatives-president-pro-tempore-senate-2/> (accessed 23 Aug. 2018); UN Geospatial Information Section, <http://www.un.org/Depts/Cartographic/map/profile/mideastr.pdf>. The boundaries and names on this map do not imply endorsement or acceptance by Chatham House.

Wherever possible, this paper highlights relevant official government data, the highest-quality non-governmental data sources and the latest social science research to enable readers to reach their own conclusions.

<sup>5</sup> Author interviews with US military officials. See also, Jordan, B. (2018), ‘Why the U.S. Military Puts Israel, Gaza in Europe’, Military.com, 7 August 2018, <https://www.military.com/daily-news/2014/08/07/why-the-us-military-puts-israel-gaza-in-europe.html> (accessed 23 Aug. 2018). When CENTCOM was founded in 1983, Syria and Lebanon were intentionally omitted from the command’s area of responsibility, because the Joint Chiefs of Staff considered them ‘confrontation states’ at the time. It was only in early 2002 that Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld overrode the unanimous opinion of the Joint Chiefs of Staff by moving both countries from EUCOM to the more geographically-appropriate CENTCOM. Rumsfeld believed that placing the countries within CENTCOM at that time would deter malicious Syrian actions in the region by demonstrating America’s military resolve. See, Drea, E. J. et al. (2013), *History of the Unified Command Plan, 1946–2012*, Washington, D.C.: Office of the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, 2013, pp. 87–88, [http://www.jcs.mil/Portals/36/Documents/History/Institutional/Command\\_Plan.pdf](http://www.jcs.mil/Portals/36/Documents/History/Institutional/Command_Plan.pdf) (accessed 23 Aug. 2018).

## A brief history

An attempt by any outside force to gain control of the Persian Gulf region will be regarded as an assault on the vital interests of the United States of America, and such an assault will be repelled by any means necessary, including military force.<sup>6</sup>

*President Jimmy Carter, 23 January 1980*

The US military has maintained a significant and permanent military presence throughout the Middle East since 1980, when President Carter made the above declaration. At that time, the administration was concerned about the possibility of the Soviet Army seizing the Khuzestan oil fields in revolutionary Iran. The Middle East became an area of vital and growing US national interest mainly because of the regional politics that caused oil-price shocks in 1973/74 and 1979, the fall of the Shah, and the US-brokered Camp David Accords between Israel and Egypt. However, at that time, the United States had no forward operating bases and a poor understanding of the cultural and political context of the governments in the region. As Carter's number-two Pentagon official Robert Komer declared at the time: 'The viability of this military policy depends critically on our access to facilities in the area... we do not seek permanent garrisons or sovereign base areas as existed in the colonial past. Instead we are seeking cooperation with friendly states.'<sup>7</sup>

After several bureaucratic false starts and inadequate congressional funding, on 1 January 1983, CENTCOM emerged with a newfound strategic appreciation for the region. Headquartered at MacDill Air Force Base near Tampa, Florida, it has consistently been the most active of all the geographic commands that have been established by the Unified Command Plan – the Pentagon document that defines the missions and geographic responsibilities for the military.<sup>8</sup> CENTCOM's initial primary responsibility was to plan and prepare for President Carter's original intended mission, which its then-commander General George Crist colourfully proclaimed to be: 'to go to Iran and wage World War III against the Russians in a conflict restricted solely to our theater of operations.'<sup>9</sup>

CENTCOM has since grown tremendously in size and now oversees an enormous range and number of consequential military-led activities and combat operations in the Middle East.<sup>10</sup> These include operations that fell under the Clinton administration's dual containment strategy (targeted at Iran and Iraq); the George W. Bush administration's regime change in Iraq and subsequent aspiration for regional democratization; the Obama administration's partial rapprochement with Iran and its focus on the emergence of terrorist 'safe havens' that presaged the August 2014 war against the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS); and the Trump administration's abandonment of the Iran nuclear deal.

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<sup>6</sup> The American Presidency Project (undated), 'Jimmy Carter: The State of the Union Addressed Delivered Before A Joint Session of the Congress', 23 January 1980, <http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/?pid=33079> (accessed 23 Aug. 2018).

<sup>7</sup> Komer, R. (1980), Testimony before the Subcommittee on Europe and the Middle East, House Committee on Foreign Affairs, 2 April 1980, US Congressional Record.

<sup>8</sup> US Department of Defense (undated), 'Unified Command Plan 'Commanders' Area of Responsibility', <https://www.defense.gov/About/Military-Departments/Unified-Combatant-Commands/> (accessed 23 Aug. 2018).

<sup>9</sup> Crist, G. (undated), Commander-in-Chief, U.S. Central Command, end of tour Oral History Interview with Dr Hans Pawlisch, p. B-4, US Congressional Record.

<sup>10</sup> For example, in the dozen years after 9/11, CENTCOM grew from 1,600 civilian and military positions to 2,730. US Government Accountability Office (2014), *Defense Headquarters: Guidance Need to Transition U.S. Central Command's Costs to the Base Budget*, June 2014, p. 14, <https://www.gao.gov/assets/670/663939.pdf> (accessed 23 Aug. 2018).

In theory, the State Department is supposed to take the lead in developing, implementing and overseeing foreign policy in the Middle East. However, the Department of Defense via CENTCOM is the predominant foreign policy voice and the first point of contact for concerned regional government officials (including those serving outside of defence ministries). CENTCOM is also the practical coordinator of US governmental efforts, through its theatre campaign plans.<sup>11</sup> CENTCOM officials make every effort to collaborate with US civilian agencies in the region, but CENTCOM's considerable powers stemming from its diplomatic and military relations and unmatched personnel and resources, have consistently made it the most powerful and substantial US government actor in the Middle East. In her close examination of the roles and responsibility of these combatant commanders, *Washington Post* reporter Dana Priest described them as 'the modern-day equivalent of the Roman Empire's proconsuls – well-funded, semi-autonomous, unconventional centers of U.S. foreign policy.'<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> For an overview of these plans, see, Department of Defense (2017), *Joint Publication 5-0, Joint Planning*, 16 June 2017, [http://www.jcs.mil/Portals/36/Documents/Doctrine/pubs/jp5\\_0\\_20171606.pdf](http://www.jcs.mil/Portals/36/Documents/Doctrine/pubs/jp5_0_20171606.pdf) (accessed 23 Aug. 2018).

<sup>12</sup> Priest, D. (2004), *The Mission: Waging War and Keeping Peace with America's Military*, New York: W.W. Norton.

## 2. Domestic Academic and Political Debates

Despite being in a region of significant political tensions, the existence of a large US military presence in the Middle East has been widely accepted by the American public over the past quarter of a century.<sup>13</sup> The enduring military-to-military relationships the US has developed have survived countless diplomatic disputes. Other than obvious peaks during the Afghanistan and Iraq conflicts, the scope and size of US troops stationed or rotated through the region remains relatively unchanged from that of 25 years ago. In the US, domestic academic and political debates about the role and effectiveness of the country's military policy in the region intensified only after the 2003 invasion of Iraq and the 2011 Arab Spring. In 2005, former CIA director John Deutch, writing in the *New York Times*, observed that since the US was not achieving its key objectives in Iraq, and the region was no more peaceful or stable as a result of the increased US presence inside Iraq, American troops should be swiftly redeployed to the homeland.<sup>14</sup> Deutch contended that this would allow the US to focus on its security interests in East Asia and force itself to fully engage that region through its diplomacy and economic power.

The debate on US military positioning around the globe has coalesced around two major schools of thought. The first of these, as expressed by Deutch, is best represented in academic circles as one of 'offshore balancing'. This strategic concept, most prominently espoused by realist scholars of international relations, contends that the existence of forward-deployed US forces creates dependencies on American security guarantees, which regional governments take advantage of and use to influence policymaking in Washington. Offshore balancing also proclaims that an outsized American presence in the Middle East engenders retaliation against the US and its interests in the region and beyond.<sup>15</sup> The practical strategic adjustment these scholars call for is to significantly reduce the US military footprint in the region and to redeploy those forces and capabilities in the global commons (the open seas, skies and outer space), where the US enjoys a relatively dominant position given its unmatched power projection capabilities and technological supremacy.<sup>16</sup>

The alternative school of thought is that of the forward engagers. They claim that the US needs a large-scale military presence in the Middle East to achieve American vital interests. From this perspective, fewer security commitments and a smaller military footprint would reduce US influence in shaping the choices and political direction of governments in the Middle East. Moreover, as seemingly unstable as the region has been, if there were a reduction in the visible US support for its partners and allies in the region, it would cause far greater uncertainty and potentially more chaos.<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> Cohen, R (2018), *The History and Politics of Defense Reviews*, Washington, D.C.: Rand Corporation, [https://www.rand.org/pubs/research\\_reports/RR2278.html](https://www.rand.org/pubs/research_reports/RR2278.html) (accessed 23 Aug. 2018).

<sup>14</sup> Deutch, J. (2005), 'Time to Pull Out. And Not Just from Iraq', *New York Times*, 15 July 2005, <https://www.nytimes.com/2005/07/15/opinion/time-to-pull-out-and-not-just-from-iraq.html> (accessed 23 Aug. 2018).

<sup>15</sup> For example, Layne, C. (1997), *From Preponderance to Offshore Balancing, America's Future Grand Strategy*, International Security, Summer 1997, <https://www.mitpressjournals.org/doi/10.1162/isec.22.1.86> (accessed 23 Aug 2018); Mearsheimer, J. and Walt, S. (2016), 'The Case for Offshore Balancing: A Superior U.S. Grand Strategy', *Foreign Affairs*, July/August 2016, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/usa/2016-06-13/case-offshore-balancing> (accessed 23 Aug. 2018).

<sup>16</sup> Use of the term 'capabilities' throughout is as common military parlance for any non-human resource or asset that can be used to generate military power, i.e. logistics, fuel, weaponry, or anything needed for a modern military to function.

<sup>17</sup> Brooks, S. and Wohlforth, W. (2016), *America Abroad: Why the Sole Superpower Should Not Pull Back From the World*, Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press; Brands, H. (2015), *The Limits of Offshore Balancing*, Carlisle, PA: Strategic Studies Institute, US Army War College.

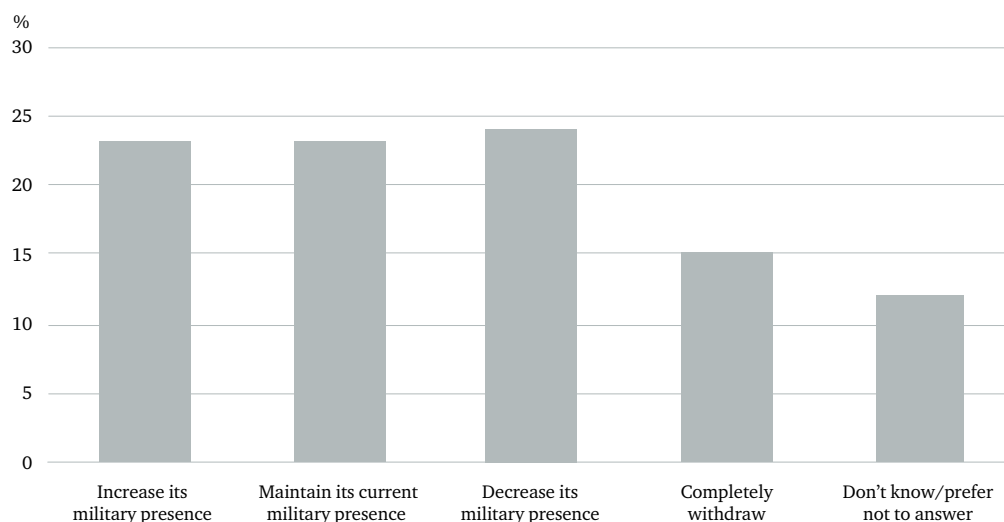


Forward engagers believe that only a robust US military presence can provide the degree of stability crucial to assure a predictable supply of oil and natural gas from the Middle East. If the United States pulls out of the region, as proposed by John Deutch, it would increase the likelihood of three outcomes that could damage the oil infrastructure of exporting states or make shipping oil too perilous: the emergence of a dominant regional hegemon that controls energy supplies; the internal political collapse of Saudi Arabia; and the forced closure of the Strait of Hormuz. As is detailed below, Iran has repeatedly threatened to do precisely this in retaliation for perceived US threats.<sup>18</sup>

The 2008 presidential election saw a genuine national debate between senators Barack Obama and John McCain, regarding the Iraq War and the utility and presence of large ground forces in the region. Obama pledged to withdraw all combat troops from Iraq and pursue a diplomacy-first approach vis-à-vis Iran, while McCain promised ‘victory’ in Iraq before any troops would return home and raised the prospect of bombing Iran.<sup>19</sup> Obama won that debate at the polls and adhered to the status of forces agreement signed by the Bush administration in 2008 to wind down US troop presence in Iraq. However, since the summer of 2014, President Obama re-deployed an estimated 15,000 to 20,000 additional troops to the region in support of the counter-ISIS campaign.

Though support varies depending on the mission, Americans are deeply split when it comes to US military policy in the region (see figure 1 and 2). However, opinion polls of US elite circles, like those conducted by the Chicago Council, show much greater support for a sustained military role in the Middle East and for all missions.<sup>20</sup>

**Figure 1: When it comes to the US role in the Middle East, do you think the US should...?**



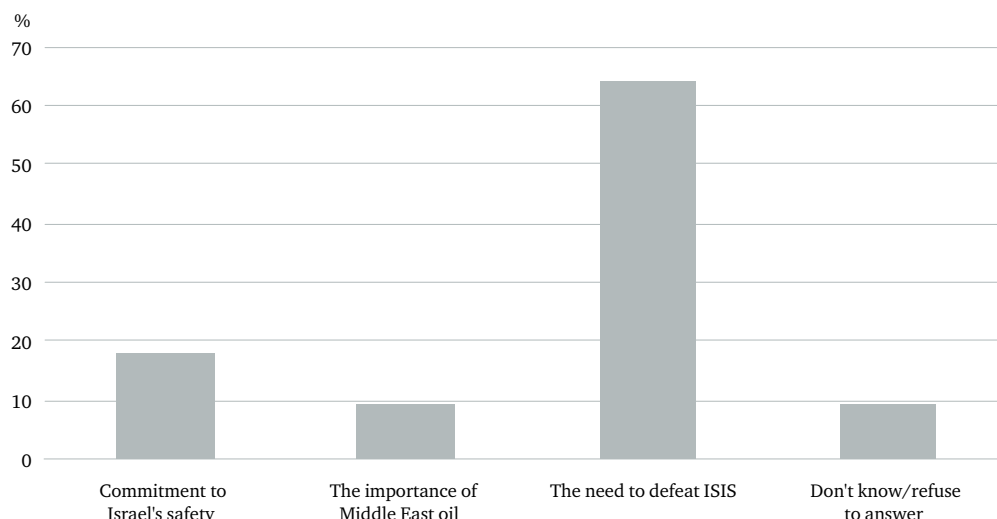
Source: Jewish Virtual Library (undated), <http://www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/american-opinion-regarding-u-s-middle-east-policy-2> (accessed 23 Aug. 2018).

<sup>18</sup> For a well-reasoned debate on US dependence on Middle Eastern oil and corresponding security requirements, see, Gholz, E. and Press, D. (2010), ‘Protecting “The Prize”: Oil and the U.S. National Interest’, *Security Studies*, 19(3), 2010; Levi, M. A. (2013), ‘The Enduring Vulnerabilities of Oil Markets’, *Security Studies*, 22(1), <https://doi.org/10.1080/09636412.2013.757171> (accessed 3 Oct. 2018).

<sup>19</sup> Associated Press (2007), ‘McCain: Energy, warming are twin threats’, via NBC News, [http://www.nbcnews.com/id/18269994/ns/politics-decision\\_08/t/mccain-energy-warming-are-twin-threats/#.W3w2385Kjcs](http://www.nbcnews.com/id/18269994/ns/politics-decision_08/t/mccain-energy-warming-are-twin-threats/#.W3w2385Kjcs) (accessed 24 Sep. 2018).

<sup>20</sup> The Chicago Council on Global Affairs annual surveys, <https://www.thechicagocouncil.org/issue/public-opinion> (accessed 18 Aug. 2018).

**Figure 2: Regardless of whether or not you think the US should have a military role in the Middle East, which of the following do you think is the best reason for staying involved in the region?**



Source: Jewish Virtual Library (undated), <http://www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/american-opinion-regarding-u-s-middle-east-policy-2> (accessed 23 Aug. 2018).

President Donald Trump has repeatedly and forcefully advocated less US military involvement in the region, but to no avail. His populist rhetoric shows that he objects almost entirely to the financial burden that it places upon the United States. This was coarsely set forth by Trump in April 2018:

Countries that are in the area, some of which are immensely wealthy, would not be there except for the United States... they wouldn't last a week. The United States is embarrassingly into the Middle East as of a few months ago, as you've heard me say before... And yet we've spent \$7 trillion in the Middle East and we've got nothing for it. Nothing, less than nothing, as far as I'm concerned. That's over an 18-year period. The countries that are there, that you all know very well, are immensely wealthy.<sup>21</sup>

Despite President Trump's strident belief that Middle East governments are 'ripping off' the US, and that the United States should receive some form of reimbursement or that US troops should return home, in the first 18 months of his presidency he has directed no noticeable shift in military policy towards the region. He has reiterated his call for a change in the US approach, but presented no actual material policy changes in his first National Security Strategy, or in the Pentagon's 2018 National Defense Strategy.<sup>22</sup> In fact, the size of America's military footprint has only increased since he entered office, and there have been no known reimbursements in exchange for US troops and capabilities stationed in the region.

That President Trump has proven unwilling to or incapable of altering America's military policy in the Middle East – all the while decrying it publicly and repeatedly – demonstrates the policy's bipartisan political endorsement, as well as the unspoken approval of Pentagon officials. Even when a president

<sup>21</sup> White House (2018), 'Remarks by President Trump and President Macron of France in Joint Press Conference', 24 April 2018, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefings-statements/remarks-president-trump-president-macron-france-joint-press-conference/> (accessed 23 Aug. 2018).

<sup>22</sup> White House (2017), *National Security Strategy of the United States of America, December 2017*, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/wp-content/uploads/2017/12/NSS-Final-12-18-2017-0905.pdf> (accessed 23 Aug. 2018); US Department of Defense (2018), *Summary of the 2018 National Defense Strategy of the United States of America: Sharpening the American Military's Competitive Edge*, January 2018, <https://www.defense.gov/Portals/1/Documents/pubs/2018-National-Defense-Strategy-Summary.pdf> (accessed 23 Aug. 2018).

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has the support of their own political base to change this policy, they may struggle to do so. Thus, the status quo Middle East strategy that President Trump inherited remains largely in place to this day, albeit with a slightly larger military footprint. The reason Trump has made no practical steps towards advancing his stated positions is that to do so could rupture relations with regional governments, which must be placated to permit US military access to their country's sovereign territory.

### 3. Enduring and Current Presence

Much of the US security approach to the Middle East has been dictated by the realities of geography, distance and logistics. American forces in the region routinely undertake a few core activities as part of a distinct, phased campaign. In addition, they carry out one-off discrete operations. The six core activities are best summarized as: 1) shaping operations through military-to-military engagements that attempt to influence political, social and security outcomes, or establish the conditions for other military activities; 2) security cooperation in the form of facilitating weapons sales and training in order to enhance partner military and security capabilities; 3) peacetime shows of force by moving troops or capabilities with the intent of deterring or compelling the behaviour of specific governments or adversaries; 4) peacekeeping and stability operations; 5) special operations raids and limited strikes by drones, piloted aircraft, or missiles from offshore ships; and 6) full-scale combat operations that are intended to destroy the military assets of another country, or to capture and control territory or maritime waterways.

As noted earlier, to effectively conduct any of these six core activities requires reliable and assured access to the Middle East. This mandates a well-established command and control structure, an enduring and tolerated permanent presence (to facilitate the rush of additional forces into a theatre when needed), and host-nation contingency relationships for basing and overflight rights (so the US military has alternatives if it is denied access to first-choice regional countries). These latter rights, while little-appreciated, are essential since they govern and dictate every aspect of how American armed forces can operate inside US bases or another country's sovereign airspace. For example, host nations can determine the number and type of combat aircraft permitted, the frequency with which those aircraft can fly, the total number of aircraft per mission, the type of surveillance or strike missions that launch from their territory, and even the rules of engagement for aircraft.

Regarding personnel, it is difficult to determine the number of troops, Department of Defense (DOD) civilians, Pentagon contractors, and military capabilities located within the Middle East at any given time. Some personnel are deployed on temporary duty and therefore not included in official estimates. For example, in August 2017, after claiming for over a year that there were only 8,400 US troops in Afghanistan, the Pentagon acknowledged that there were actually 11,000 troops there.<sup>23</sup> In addition, there are special mission units operating within the Middle East under covert authorities (operations intended to have plausible deniability by the US government) or clandestine authorities (operations intended to assure secrecy or concealment), making their very presence a highly classified matter.<sup>24</sup> Nevertheless, the Pentagon publishes a quarterly document that lists the unclassified total for (almost) every country.<sup>25</sup> In addition, the White House is mandated under the War Powers Resolution Act of 1973 to produce a biannual letter to Congress

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<sup>23</sup> Cooper, H. (2017), 'U.S. Says it Has 11,000 Troops in Afghanistan, More Than Formerly Disclosed', *New York Times*, 30 August 2017, <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/08/30/world/asia/afghanistan-troop-totals.html> (accessed 23 Aug. 2018).

<sup>24</sup> For the distinctions in these authorities, see, DeVine, M. E. and Peters, H. (2018), *Covert Action and Clandestine Activities of the Intelligence Community: Selected Definitions in Brief*, Washington, D.C.: Congressional Research Service, 25 April 2018, <https://fas.org/sgp/crs/intel/R45175.pdf> (accessed 23 Aug. 2018).

<sup>25</sup> US Department of Defense (2018), *Defense Military Data Center*, [https://www.dmdc.osd.mil/appj/dwp/dwp\\_reports.jsp](https://www.dmdc.osd.mil/appj/dwp/dwp_reports.jsp) (accessed 4 Jul. 2018).

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that covers the deployment of all US armed forces that are ‘equipped for combat’.<sup>26</sup> Recent troop levels are shown in Map 1, these figures come from two official government data sources, as well as open-source reporting.

It is important to recognize that the number of forces deployed in Middle Eastern countries, including those on active duty, National Guard and Reserves, and DOD civilians grew significantly – by nearly one-third – in mid-2017. In June 2017, there were 40,517 US troops in the Middle East, and by September this figure had jumped to 54,180. In April 2018, it became impossible to know how many troops are presently in the region. For reasons that were never fully explained, the Pentagon unexpectedly stopped releasing US troop data for Iraq, Afghanistan and Syria – America’s three most high-profile, politically controversial and troop-intensive combat zones.<sup>27</sup> Pentagon officials have claimed that releasing these data had somehow aided America’s enemies, but did not provide any example or evidence supporting this assertion.

Supporting these troops and weapons systems are thousands of Pentagon contractors, employed by large US firms such as Service Employees International, DynCorp and Triple Canopy. The top areas that require these contractors are: logistics and maintenance, translation services, base support, construction and security. As of July 2018 – again, excluding Afghanistan – there were 22,323 Pentagon contractors working in the CENTCOM area of operations in the Middle East including 9,762 US citizens, 12,020 third-country nationals and 541 host-country nationals.<sup>28</sup> This represents a 15 per cent year-on-year increase in Pentagon contractors utilized in the region.<sup>29</sup> The deployment of contractors to fulfil missions that 15 to 20 years ago would have been conducted by US troops gives the impression of a smaller American military footprint in the region. Indeed, whenever politicians or media pundits debate putting ‘boots on the ground’ in the Middle East they never mention these essential private sector employees, without whom a range of military operations could not be carried out, or at least not without even greater risks to US troops and overall mission success.

**The deployment of contractors to fulfil missions that 15 to 20 years ago would have been conducted by US troops gives the impression of a smaller American military footprint in the region.**

In April 2018, the Pentagon’s quarterly contractor report first acknowledged that contractors were being used in Syria.<sup>30</sup> No previous reports had mentioned contractors being used in Syria since President Obama first authorized intervention in the country in the autumn of 2014. However, the Department of Labor Office of Workers’ Compensation Programs annually publishes its own data on the number of US government contractors injured and killed (and the firms they worked for) while

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<sup>26</sup> White House (2017), ‘Text of a Letter from the President to the Speaker of the House of Representatives and the President Pro Tempore of the Senate’, 11 December 2017, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefings-statements/text-letter-president-speaker-house-representatives-president-pro-tempore-senate-2/> (accessed 23 Aug. 2018).

<sup>27</sup> Copp, T. (2018), ‘Pentagon Strips Iraq, Afghanistan, Syria Troop Numbers from Web’, *Stars and Stripes*, 9 April 2018, <https://www.militarytimes.com/news/your-military/2018/04/09/dod-strips-iraq-afghanistan-syria-troop-numbers-from-web/> (accessed 23 Aug. 2018).

<sup>28</sup> US Department of Defense (2018), ‘Contractor Support of U.S. Operations in the USCENTCOM Area of Operations’, [https://www.acq.osd.mil/log/PS/.CENTCOM\\_reports.html/5A\\_July%202018\\_Final.pdf](https://www.acq.osd.mil/log/PS/.CENTCOM_reports.html/5A_July%202018_Final.pdf) (accessed 23 Aug. 2018).

<sup>29</sup> US Department of Defense (2017), ‘Contractor Support of U.S. Operations in the USCENTCOM Area of Operations’, [https://www.acq.osd.mil/log/ps/.CENTCOM\\_reports.html/5A\\_July2017\\_Final.pdf](https://www.acq.osd.mil/log/ps/.CENTCOM_reports.html/5A_July2017_Final.pdf) (accessed 23 Aug. 2018).

<sup>30</sup> Ibid. Unusually, in July 2016, the Pentagon announced that Six3 Intelligence Solutions, Inc. had been awarded a contract to perform intelligence analysis services in ‘Germany, Italy, and Syria’, which was the first time that Syria had been acknowledged as a location that uses contractors. But, two weeks later, the Pentagon published a correction claiming that the Six3 Intelligence Solutions contract, ‘incorrectly announced where work will be performed. The announcement should have read that work will be performed in Germany, Italy, and Kosovo.’ Kosovo had replaced Syria. See, US Department of Defense (2016), ‘Contracts’, 27 July 2016, <https://www.defense.gov/News/Contracts/Contract-View/Article/873473/> (accessed 23 Aug. 2018); US Department of Defense (2016), ‘Contracts’, 10 August 2016, <https://www.defense.gov/News/Contracts/Contract-View/Article/910906/> (accessed 23 Aug. 2018).

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working overseas. In the autumn of 2017, the Department of Labor first published data showing that contractors had been injured and killed in Syria during the previous fiscal year.<sup>31</sup> Thus, it is possible that the Department of Labor – by routinely publishing its own data – forced the Pentagon to admit that contractors were indeed operating inside Syria.<sup>32</sup>

### Breakdown of US troops deployed in the Middle East

While contractors play an indispensable – though largely hidden – role in sustaining America’s military-led approach in the region, the most politically sensitive aspect for host nations is the troops themselves, who often serve as the default face of US foreign policy. These troops – and the bases, depots, airfields and ports that they build and maintain – represent the multinational edifice sustained through the region that facilitates the US military to conduct its six core military activities. A breakdown of the scope and mission of US troops by country in the Middle East is as follows:

#### *Egypt*

The US provides the largest contingent of personnel for the Multinational Force and Observers Mission (MFO).<sup>33</sup> The MFO is an independent organization that was established by Egypt and Israel in 1981 to supervise the implementation of the Camp David Accords. Since 2002, rotating Army National Guard infantry battalions have provided the bulk of the US contribution to the MFO mission.<sup>34</sup> In addition, a US naval medical research unit – the Pentagon’s largest overseas laboratory – conducts medical research in support of disease prevention for troops deployed throughout the Middle East and Africa.<sup>35</sup>

#### *Israel*

Due to the regional sensitivities surrounding expanding settlements and the military occupation of portions of the West Bank, and strong antipathies towards Israel among other Middle Eastern countries more generally, the US military has long downplayed its active cooperation with Israel. According to American and Israeli national security officials interviewed by the author, the movement of US troops in and out of the country is largely tied to the use of specific ports and airfields in support of discrete military operations. Also, US troops are utilized for largely defensive missions to protect Israel. For example, at Mashabim Air Base in the Negev Desert, several dozen US troops are permanently deployed to support radars and interceptors associated with Israel’s Iron Dome missile defence system.<sup>36</sup>

#### *Lebanon*

In August 2017, after years of refusing to acknowledge the permanent stationing of American forces in country, a Pentagon spokesperson declared, ‘I can confirm the presence of US Special Forces in Lebanon... providing training and support to the Lebanese Armed Forces.’<sup>37</sup> In December 2017, the

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<sup>31</sup> US Department of Labor (undated), ‘Defense Base Act Case Summary by Nation: DBA FY2017 REPORT BY NATION (10/01/2016–09/30/2017)’, [https://www.dol.gov/owcp/dlhwc/dbaallnation\(fy2017\).htm](https://www.dol.gov/owcp/dlhwc/dbaallnation(fy2017).htm) (accessed 23 Aug. 2018).

<sup>32</sup> Inquiries made by the author to the relevant Department of Labor and Pentagon personnel could not determine why the Pentagon suddenly acknowledged contractors that it had previously hidden.

<sup>33</sup> MFO (undated), ‘MFO Troop Contributors’, <http://mfo.org/en/contingents> (accessed 23 Aug. 2018).

<sup>34</sup> Greenhill, J. (2017), ‘National Guard Contributes to U.S.-Egypt Strategic Partnership’, National Guard Bureau, 25 May 2017, <https://www.defense.gov/News/Article/Article/1194485/national-guard-contributes-to-us-egypt-strategic-partnership/> (accessed 23 Aug. 2018).

<sup>35</sup> US Navy (undated), ‘Naval Medical Research Unit—No. 3’, Fact Sheet, <https://www.med.navy.mil/sites/nmrc/news/SiteAssets/Pages/Fact-Sheets/NAMRU3.pdf> (accessed 24 Sep. 2018).

<sup>36</sup> Vandiver, J. (2017), ‘U.S. Troops Deployed to Israel to Get New Barracks’, *Stars and Stripes*, 19 September 2017, <https://www.stripes.com/news/us-troops-deployed-to-israel-get-a-new-barracks-1.488440> (accessed 23 Aug. 2018).

<sup>37</sup> The New Arab (2017), ‘U.S. Special Forces operating in Lebanon “close to Hizballah”’, 6 August 2017, <https://www.alaraby.co.uk/english/news/2017/8/6/us-special-forces-operating-in-lebanon-close-to-hizballah> (accessed 23 Aug. 2018).

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White House biannual War Powers Resolution letter to Congress acknowledged, ‘approximately 100 United States military personnel are deployed to Lebanon.’<sup>38</sup>

### Syria

After multiple pledges between August 2013 and July 2015 that there would be no American ‘boots on the ground’ in Syria, in December 2015, President Obama admitted the existence of a ‘specialized expeditionary targeting force’ in the country.<sup>39</sup> Since then – if not earlier – the United States has had both a covert and overt troop presence deployed throughout the country to train, advise and supply partner ground forces. As if to demonstrate the poor transparency of America’s military commitment, on 16 November 2017, the Director of the Joint Staff, Lieutenant General Kenneth McKenzie, claimed there were ‘about 503’ US troops operating in Syria; the following day the Defense Manpower Data Center quarterly report was published, stating there were 1,723; two weeks later, Pentagon officials announced that the figure was 2,000.<sup>40</sup> Whatever the actual number, these troops are supported with several temporary military outposts and airfields. In July 2017, Turkish media outlets published a list of a total of nine US military outposts in northern Syria alone.<sup>41</sup> Of these, Pentagon officials acknowledged expanding an airfield near Kobani, 90 miles north of Raqqa, for use by military transport aircraft, including C-17 and C-130 military transports.<sup>42</sup> The presence of combat troops on the ground has been combined with an extensive US-led air campaign against ISIS that has consisted of more than 15,500 strikes in Syria.<sup>43</sup>

### Jordan

Most US troops in the kingdom are stationed at King Faisal Air Base at Al Jafr, where a Jordanian Air Force guard shot and killed three US Army special forces soldiers in November 2016. In addition, an undisclosed drone and helicopter base in northeast Jordan known as ‘H4’ was established in 2014, and expanded in early 2016, according to satellite imagery.<sup>44</sup> Another secret drone base was also reported at Muwaffaq Salti, 33 miles south of the Syrian border.<sup>45</sup> Finally, US ground forces – the Central Command Forward-Jordan (CF-J) element – operate from the King Abdullah II Special Operations Training Center (KASOTC) outside of Amman. The KASOTC is a 6,000-acre state-of-the-art training and simulation centre that was partially paid for by the DOD and built on land that was donated by the King.<sup>46</sup>

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<sup>38</sup> White House (2017), ‘Text of a Letter from the President to the Speaker of the House of Representatives and the President Pro Tempore of the Senate’, 11 December 2017, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefings-statements/text-letter-president-speaker-house-representatives-president-pro-tempore-senate-2/> (accessed 23 Aug. 2018).

<sup>39</sup> Korte, G. (2015), ‘16 Times Obama Said There Would Be No Boots on the Ground in Syria’, *USA Today*, 30 October 2015, <https://eu.usatoday.com/story/news/politics/onpolitics/2015/10/30/16-times-obama-said-there-would-no-boots-ground-syria/74869884/> (accessed 23 Aug. 2018).

<sup>40</sup> US Department of Defense (2017), ‘Press Briefing by Pentagon Chief Spokesperson Dana W. White and Joint Staff Director Lt. Gen. Kenneth F. McKenzie Jr. in the Pentagon Briefing Room’, 16 November 2017, <https://www.defense.gov/News/Transcripts/Transcript-View/Article/1374801/departement-of-defense-press-briefing-by-pentagon-chief-spokesperson-dana-w-whit/> (accessed 23 Aug. 2018); Garamone J. (2017), ‘Pentagon Announces Troop Levels in Iraq, Syria’, Department of Defense News, 6 December 2017, <https://www.defense.gov/News/Article/Article/1390079/pentagon-announces-troop-levels-in-iraq-syria/> (accessed 23 Aug. 2018).

<sup>41</sup> Andalou Agency (2017), ‘U.S. Increases Military Posts Supporting PKK/PYD in Syria’, 20 July 2017, <http://aa.com.tr/en/americas/us-increases-military-posts-supporting-pkk-pyd-in-syria/863895> (accessed 23 Aug. 2018).

<sup>42</sup> Copp, T. (2017), ‘U.S. Expands Air Base in Northern Syria for use in Battle for Raqqa’, *Stars and Stripes*, 3 April 2017, <https://www.stripes.com/news/us-expands-air-base-in-northern-syria-for-use-in-battle-for-raqqa-1.461874> (accessed 23 Aug. 2018); Hendi, A. A. and Babb, C. (2017), ‘U.S.-Led Coalition Boosting Airfield Capabilities in Syria’, *Voice of America*, 31 March 2017, <https://www.voanews.com/a/us-led-coalition-increasing-airfield-capabilities-in-syria/3791891.html> (accessed 23 Aug. 2018).

<sup>43</sup> US government data compiled by Airwars, <https://airwars.org/> (accessed 13 Jul. 2018).

<sup>44</sup> Axe, D. (2017), ‘Satellites Reveal U.S. Military Bases Emerging in the Desert’, *The Daily Beast*, 11 July 2017, <https://www.thedailybeast.com/satellites-reveal-us-military-bases-emerging-in-the-desert> (accessed 23 Aug. 2018).

<sup>45</sup> Offiziere.ch (2016), ‘Predators Join Reapers at Jordan’s Muwaffaq’, 7 June 2016, <https://www.offiziere.ch/?p=27938> (accessed 26 Sep. 2018).

<sup>46</sup> Eells, J. (2003), ‘Sleep-Away Camp for Postmodern Cowboys’, *New York Times Magazine*, 19 July 2003, <https://www.nytimes.com/2013/07/21/magazine/sleep-away-camp-for-postmodern-cowboys.html> (accessed 23 Aug. 2018).

### Yemen

Until March 2015, approximately 100 US troops and special operations forces had been stationed at Al Anad Airbase in southern Yemen. Those forces were withdrawn amid growing instability and violence resulting from the civil war between Houthi rebels and forces loyal to President Abed Rabbo Mansour Hadi.<sup>47</sup> In late 2016 and early 2017, a handful of US special operations teams were re-deployed to Yemen to develop intelligence assets and situational awareness related to Al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP) and ISIS-affiliated groups.<sup>48</sup> Making this latest deployment official, in December 2017, the White House acknowledged, 'A small number of United States military personnel are deployed to Yemen to conduct operations against [AQAP] and ISIS.'<sup>49</sup>

### Iraq

In 2008, the George W. Bush administration and the government of Iraq signed a status of forces agreement that declared, 'All the United States Forces shall withdraw from all Iraqi territory no later than December 31, 2011.' The Obama administration fulfilled this agreement, but in June 2014 began re-deploying a few hundred military and intelligence advisers in response to spreading ISIS insurgency. By early 2016, there were as many as 5,000 US combat forces in country, a total that grew to nearly 9,000 by September 2017.<sup>50</sup> Presently, the acknowledged US troops in country are primarily stationed at Al Asad Air Base and focused on building-up Iraqi military forces, while maintaining the necessary infrastructure should a substantial amount of US troops and capabilities be required in country in the future.

### Saudi Arabia

In the fall of 2003, the Saudi government and Washington agreed that the US should withdraw its permanent forces from Prince Sultan Air Base near Riyadh, which had served as the US regional headquarters for its air operations. To support counterterrorism strikes in Yemen, the CIA built a covert drone base in southeast Saudi Arabia in 2011, the existence of which was not revealed until 2013.<sup>51</sup> In early 2018, a Pentagon official claimed that there were only 50 troops in country, predominantly helping to defend against ballistic missile threats from Houthi rebels in Yemen. However, in May of that year, the Pentagon acknowledged that there were also a dozen Green Berets stationed along Saudi Arabia's southern border.<sup>52</sup>

### Bahrain

The bulk of the US military presence on the island nation is maintained at Manama's Naval Support Activity Bahrain, which has been the home of the Fifth Fleet since its re-establishment in 1995. The Fifth Fleet is responsible for patrolling 2.5 million square miles of water – the Persian Gulf, Red Sea,

<sup>47</sup> Lackey, K. (2015), 'US Forces Evacuating Yemen Air Base', *Defense News*, 22 March 2015, <https://eu.usatoday.com/story/news/world/2015/03/21/yemen-us-military/25138325/> (accessed 23 Aug. 2018).

<sup>48</sup> Author interview with Pentagon official, March 2017.

<sup>49</sup> White House (2017), 'Text of a Letter from the President to the Speaker of the House of Representatives and the President Pro Tempore of the Senate', 11 December 2017, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefings-statements/text-letter-president-speaker-house-representatives-president-pro-tempore-senate-2/> (accessed 23 Aug. 2018).

<sup>50</sup> Thompson, M. (2016), 'Number of U.S. Troops in Iraq Keeps Creeping Upward', *Time*, 18 April 2016, <http://time.com/4298318/iraq-us-troops-barack-obama-mosul-isis/> (accessed 23 Aug. 2018); Copp T. (2017), '26,000 U.S. Troops in Iraq, Afghanistan and Syria, DoD Reports', *Military Times*, 27 November 2017, <https://www.militarytimes.com/news/your-military/2017/11/27/26000-us-troops-total-in-iraq-afghanistan-and-syria-dod-reports/> (accessed 23 Aug. 2018).

<sup>51</sup> Miller, G. and DeYoung, K. (2013), 'Brennan Nomination Exposes Criticism on Targeted Killings and Secret Saudi Base', *Washington Post*, 5 February 2013, [https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/national-security/2013/02/05/8f3c94f0-6fb0-11e2-8b8d-e0b59a1b8e2a\\_story.html?noredirect=on&utm\\_term=.bb58fbbcb26e](https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/national-security/2013/02/05/8f3c94f0-6fb0-11e2-8b8d-e0b59a1b8e2a_story.html?noredirect=on&utm_term=.bb58fbbcb26e) (accessed 23 Aug. 2018).

<sup>52</sup> Cooper, H., Gibbons-Neff, T. and Schmitt, E. (2018), 'Army Special Forces Secretly Help Saudis Combat Threat from Yemen Rebels', *New York Times*, 3 May 2018, <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/05/03/us/politics/green-berets-saudi-yemen-border-houthi.html> (accessed 23 Aug. 2018).



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Gulf of Aden, Gulf of Oman and Arabian Sea – and is comprised of rotating carrier battle groups and submarines, as well as permanently stationed amphibious, mine clearing, logistics and maritime surveillance forces. In addition, Shaikh Isa Air Base south of Manama hosts a variety of US military aircraft, including F-16s, F/A-18s and P-3 surveillance aircraft.<sup>53</sup>

### *Kuwait*

In September 1991, after the US-led Operation Desert Storm that reversed the Iraqi military invasion and occupation of Kuwait, the US and Kuwait signed a wide-ranging defence cooperation agreement. Since then, the US military has enjoyed a nearly unconstrained presence at multiple facilities located throughout the kingdom, including Ali Al Salem Air Base, home of CENTCOM's primary airlift unit the 386th Air Expeditionary Wing, and Camp Arifjan, the regional headquarters for CENTCOM's land component command.<sup>54</sup>

### *UAE*

While the US military has stationed aircraft in the UAE since 1990, after 9/11 the degree of cooperation with the Emirati government has grown dramatically, with former CENTCOM commander General Anthony Zinni describing it as 'the strongest relationship that the United States has in the Arab world today'.<sup>55</sup> Al Dhafra Air Base serves as one of the most critical military facilities for operations throughout the region, the US has maintained a military presence there for over a quarter of a century.<sup>56</sup> Owing to its important role in sustaining air operations throughout the region, the Pentagon stores more jet fuel at Al Dhafra than anywhere else in the world.<sup>57</sup> In addition, American forces enjoy continuous access to Jebel Ali, a deep-water port near Dubai, which is the US Navy's most frequently visited foreign port in the world.<sup>58</sup>

### *Qatar*

After the US military left Saudi Arabia in 2003, its regional headquarters was relocated to the Al Udeid Air Base southwest of Doha.<sup>59</sup> The base is now the US military's largest facility in the Middle East. It hosts up to 10,000 personnel at any time and boasts two 12,000-foot runways on which all military aircraft can operate, as well as the Combined Air Operations Center (CAOC). The CAOC, run by the 379th Air Expeditionary Wing, serves as the command centre for all allied surveillance, strike and logistics air operations throughout the Middle East and Afghanistan. In addition, the US Army operates out of Camp As Sayliyah, where there are enough prepositioned logistical supplies maintained to support one armoured brigade.<sup>60</sup>

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<sup>53</sup> Katzman, K. (2014), 'Bahrain: Reform, Security, and U.S. Policy', Congressional Research Service, 11 June 2014, pp. 22–23, <http://www.refworld.org/pdfile/53b5055c4.pdf> (accessed 24 Sep. 2018).

<sup>54</sup> Gittler, J. (2003), 'War HQ in Kuwait to Move from Camp Doha to Arifjan', *Stars and Stripes*, 1 August 2003, <https://www.stripes.com/news/war-hq-in-kuwait-to-move-from-camp-doha-to-arifjan-1.10194> (accessed 23 Aug. 2018).

<sup>55</sup> Chandrasekaran, R. (2014), 'In the UAE, the United States has a Quiet, Potent Ally Nicknamed "Little Sparta"', *Washington Post*, 9 November 2014, [https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/national-security/in-the-uae-the-united-states-has-a-quiet-potent-ally-nicknamed-little-sparta/2014/11/08/3fc6a50c-643a-11e4-836c-83bc4f26eb67\\_story.html?utm\\_term=.16f35a517982](https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/national-security/in-the-uae-the-united-states-has-a-quiet-potent-ally-nicknamed-little-sparta/2014/11/08/3fc6a50c-643a-11e4-836c-83bc4f26eb67_story.html?utm_term=.16f35a517982) (accessed 23 Aug. 2018).

<sup>56</sup> Pawlyk, O. (2017), 'Air Force Acknowledges Clandestine Base in UAE', *Military.com*, 28 August 2017, <https://www.military.com/dodbuzz/2017/08/28/air-force-acknowledges-clandestine-base-in-uae> (accessed 23 Aug. 2018).

<sup>57</sup> Pawlyk, O. (2017), 'Inside the Air Force's Largest Fuel Farm in Fight vs. ISIS', *Military.com*, 19 August 2017, <https://www.military.com/daily-news/2017/08/19/inside-air-forces-largest-fuel-farm-in-fight-against-isis.html> (accessed 23 Aug. 2018).

<sup>58</sup> Katzman, K. (2017), 'The United Arab Emirates (UAE): Issues for U.S. Policy', Congressional Research Service, 2 November 2017, p. 20, <https://www.hsdl.org/?abstract&did=805660> (accessed 23 Aug. 2018).

<sup>59</sup> Gordon, M. and Schmitt, E. (2003), 'U.S. Will Move Air Operations Base to Qatar', *New York Times*, 28 April 2003, <https://www.nytimes.com/2003/04/28/world/aftereffects-bases-us-will-move-air-operations-to-qatar-base.html> (accessed 23 Aug. 2018).

<sup>60</sup> Katzman, K. (2018), 'Qatar: Governance, Security, and U.S. Policy', Congressional Research Service, 13 August 2018, p. 15, <https://fas.org/spp/crs/mideast/R44533.pdf> (accessed 23 Aug. 2018).

### Oman

Since 2000, the US military has enjoyed reliable access to Thumrait Air Base and Al Mussanah Air Base, where prepositioned war reserve materiel (WRM) is maintained.

The WRM programme provides logistical support to ensure regional commanders have the necessary resources (fuel, vehicles, munitions, medical equipment and rations) on hand to start and sustain operations before a routine supply chain can be established to the continental United States.<sup>61</sup> These WRM stockpiles in Oman – maintained by the defence logistics firm DynCorp – are essential for CENTCOM forces to be capable of implementing a range of contingency and operational plans with little preparation or warning.<sup>62</sup>

### Turkey

Turkey is the only country covered in this paper that has a mutual defence arrangement with the US, which is treaty-bound to defend Turkey if it is attacked.<sup>63</sup> (Although other Middle East countries are commonly labelled ‘allies’, none mandates a comparable defence commitment by the US.<sup>64</sup>) Consequently, Turkey is also the only country in the region where the US routinely maintains nuclear weapons. At Incirlik Air Base, an estimated arsenal of 50 B-61 nuclear gravity bombs are stored on racks in secure underground vaults located beneath protective aircraft shelters.<sup>65</sup> However, since the B-61s can only be delivered by US nuclear-capable attack aircraft, which Turkey does not permit to be permanently stationed at Incirlik, in a crisis the United States or other NATO countries would need to fly nuclear-capable aircraft into Incirlik to retrieve and deploy the bombs.<sup>66</sup> Incirlik Air Base and Diyarbakir Air Base have been used by the United States for conventional operations, most recently against ISIS.

### Iran

There are no acknowledged US forces in the country. However, in 2001 and 2002, Iran did consent to its airspace being used during the initial stages of the military campaign to topple the Taliban. To this day, Iran also consents to US forces being transported through its airspace on what are nominally civilian charter flights from Afghanistan to Gulf military airfields.<sup>67</sup> Similarly, prior to the 2003 Iraq War, US diplomats received assurances from their Iranian counterparts that if American aircraft accidentally flew over Iranian territory they would not be fired upon.<sup>68</sup> Obviously, Iran does not consent to US spy operations, as was evidenced by its downing and capture of an American RQ-170 surveillance drone reportedly monitoring suspected nuclear weapons sites in December 2011.<sup>69</sup>

<sup>61</sup> US Air Force (2015), ‘Air Force War Reserve Materiel (WRM) Policies and Guidance’, Air Force Instruction 25–101, 14 January 2015, [http://static.e-publishing.af.mil/production/1/af\\_a4/publication/afi25-101/afi25-101.pdf](http://static.e-publishing.af.mil/production/1/af_a4/publication/afi25-101/afi25-101.pdf) (accessed 23 Aug. 2018).

<sup>62</sup> DynCorp International (2014), ‘DynCorp International War Reserve Materiel Program is Committed to Continuous Improvement’, 16 September 2014, <http://www.di-atworknow.com/operations-maintenance/war-reserve-materiel-program> (accessed 23 Aug. 2018).

<sup>63</sup> US Department of State (2018), ‘Collective Defense Arrangements’, <https://www.state.gov/s/1/treaty/collectivedefense/> (accessed 4 Jun. 2018).

<sup>64</sup> Bahrain, Egypt, Israel, Jordan and Kuwait have all been designated a ‘Major Non-NATO Ally,’ which allows for greater cooperative research and development related to defence technologies, streamlined security assistance and enhanced counterterrorism cooperation. See, ‘US Code of Federal Regulations 22, sec. 120.32: Major non-NATO Ally’, <https://www.gpo.gov/fdsys/pkg/CFR-2016-title22-vol1/pdf/CFR-2016-title22-vol1-sec120-32.pdf> (accessed 23 Aug. 2018). In 2014, Congress passed a law that was subsequently signed by President Barack Obama, which declared Israel to be a ‘major strategic partner of the United States’, which had no practical change on the already close connections between the countries. See, Public Law (2014), ‘United States-Israel Strategic Partnership Act of 2014’, 19 December 2014, <https://www.gpo.gov/fdsys/pkg/PLAW-113publ296/pdf/PLAW-113publ296.pdf> (accessed 23 Aug. 2018).

<sup>65</sup> Kristensen, H. M. (2015), ‘Upgrades at U.S. Nuclear Bases in Europe Acknowledge Security Risk’, *Federation of American Scientists*, 10 September 2015, <https://fas.org/blogs/security/2015/09/nuclear-insecurity/> (accessed 23 Aug. 2018).

<sup>66</sup> Woolf, A. F. (2016), ‘U.S. Nuclear Weapons in Turkey’, CRS Insight, Congressional Research Service, 2 August 2016, <https://fas.org/sgp/crs/nuke/IN10542.pdf> (accessed 23 Aug. 2018).

<sup>67</sup> Rosen, A. (2014), ‘This Loophole Lets the U.S. Use Iranian Airspace to Fly its Personnel to and From Afghanistan’, *Business Insider*, 9 September 2014, <https://www.businessinsider.com/the-us-flies-its-personnel-over-iran-2014-9?IR=T> (accessed 23 Aug. 2018).

<sup>68</sup> Khalilzad, Z. (2016), *The Envoy: From Kabul to the White House, My Journey Through a Turbulent World*, New York: St. Martin’s Press.

<sup>69</sup> Lister T. (2011), ‘Crashed Drone Was Looking at Iran Nuclear Sites’, *CNN*, 15 December 2011, <http://security.blogs.cnn.com/2011/12/15/crashed-drone-was-looking-at-iran-nuclear-sites/> (accessed 23 Aug. 2018).

Beyond these bases, airfields and ports, the United States has maintained a robust naval presence in the Middle East since the establishment of the Fifth Fleet. At any given time, as many as two of the navy's three forward-deployed aircraft carriers are also maintained in the region. Each carrier battle group is equipped with up to 7,500 personnel, an aircraft carrier, at least one cruiser, at least two destroyers or frigates, and a carrier air wing of 65–70 aircraft. Each carrier can conduct up to 230 strike sorties a day – in limited surges of a few days or more. In addition, an unknown number of submarines traverse through the region, supporting conventional and nuclear weapons payloads. For example, one Ohio-class submarine can carry up to two dozen intercontinental ballistic missiles, each of which can carry eight independently-targetable warheads that yield 100–475 kilotonnes of explosive power. Though it never formally comments on submarine activities, the Pentagon has been known to regularly rotate nuclear-armed vessels through CENTCOM's area of responsibility in order to provide flexibility in its strategic nuclear operational plans.

In addition to these conventional and nuclear mobile naval assets, in 2012, the *USS Ponce*, an amphibious ship, was converted to become a floating base in the Persian Gulf used for counter-mine, helicopter and special operations force missions. In the summer of 2018, this floating 'forward staging base', was replaced by the *USS Lewis B. Puller*, the first purpose-built Expeditionary Mobile Base vessel. The *Puller* ports in Bahrain but is afloat almost permanently in the Persian Gulf serving primarily as a launch platform for special operations forces, especially Navy SEALs.<sup>70</sup>

### US military operations and shows of force

There is a perception that the US has been 'at war' in the Middle East for more than a quarter of a century. The accuracy of this impression depends on whether this concept of warfare is inclusive of the purposeful movement of warships, combat aircraft or troops intended to signal resolve or to compel a government to change its behaviour. Nevertheless, when compared to other regions of the world, the US has used force in the Middle East far more frequently and in support of a broader range of political and military objectives.<sup>71</sup> The military operations and shows of force detailed below are not an exhaustive list. According to a Congressional Research Service report of US Armed Forces abroad since 1798 there are dozens of examples within the Middle East alone.<sup>72</sup> Rather, what appears below is a distillation of four politically sensitive, strategically consequential, but less well-known activities that American armed forces have conducted in the region over the past few decades. These four instances were chosen for the breadth of the missions (some were stability-focused, others involved kinetic military action), diversity of domains (air, land and sea), and different results (failures, successes and mixed-outcomes). Collectively, they are representative of the broad scope of operations that the US military is capable of routinely undertaking, because of its enduring presence and access.

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<sup>70</sup> US Navy (2017), 'Navy to Commission USS Lewis B Puller (ESB 3)', 16 August 2017, [http://www.navy.mil/submit/display.asp?story\\_id=101985](http://www.navy.mil/submit/display.asp?story_id=101985) (accessed 23 Aug. 2018).

<sup>71</sup> Torreon, B. S. (2017), 'Instances of Use of United States Armed Forces Abroad, 1798–2017', Congressional Research Service, 12 October 2017, <https://fas.org/sgp/crs/natsec/R42738.pdf> (accessed 23 Aug. 2018).

<sup>72</sup> Ibid.

### Lebanon

In 1982, 1,800 US Marines were deployed to Lebanon as part of a multinational force that was tasked to support a truce between Israeli forces, on one side, and militias loyal to the Palestine Liberation Organization and the Syrian military. In September 1983, the *USS New Jersey* shelled Druze militia and Syrian forces occupying territory that overlooked the Beirut International Airport where the marines were stationed. Six weeks later, a massive suicide truck bomb exploded just outside these marine barracks, killing 241 US military personnel. In retaliation, on 4 December 1983, US combat aircraft bombed several Syrian military installations east of Beirut. Two US planes were shot down in this action, which resulted in the death of one pilot and another held hostage for 30 days. On 7 February 1984, President Ronald Reagan ordered the withdrawal of all US forces from Lebanon within a three-week period. As such, a military operation that was intended to stabilize Lebanon ended up doing the opposite, at great human cost to the US troops deployed there.

### Persian Gulf

After six years of both Iraq and Iran attacking oil tankers transiting the Persian Gulf under the flags of numerous countries, in 1987 Kuwaiti tankers began to fly the US flag, which afforded them the protection of US Navy vessels, specifically from Iranian mines and missiles.<sup>73</sup> Between July 1987 and July 1988, the US Navy and Iranian forces engaged in a series of tit-for-tat skirmishes: a Kuwaiti tanker with a US flag hit Iranian maritime mines, in response the US Navy seized and sunk an Iranian mine laying vessel; an Iranian missile struck a flagged tanker in Kuwaiti waters, so the US Navy destroyed an Iranian oil platform; and a US destroyer hit an Iranian mine, in response the navy destroyed two oil platforms and sank or disabled six Iranian navy ships. On 3 July 1988, a destroyer, the *USS Vincennes*, shot down an ascending Iranian Airbus 300 carrying 290 civilians, because the commander of the destroyer believed it to be an Iranian F-14 combat jet descending to attack US Navy ships.<sup>74</sup> Within two months of the end of the Iran–Iraq war, Iran ceased its explicit threats and attacks against maritime shipping, and the US mission of escorting Kuwaiti oil tankers concluded soon after. The short-lived ‘Tanker War’ was successful while it lasted, but the US military mission did little to deter longer term Iranian threats to maritime shipping.

### Iraq no-fly zones (NFZs)

In February 1991, after the US-led coalition expelled Iraqi forces from Kuwait, 14 of Iraq’s 18 provinces rebelled and were no longer under the control of the central government. By April, Saddam Hussein’s security forces had crushed the uprisings, including Kurdish fighters in the north and Shia militias in the south. The US issued a demarche warning Iraq not to fly its aircraft over displaced Kurdish civilians, and by July, US, UK and French aircraft began enforcing an NFZ above the 36th parallel over northern Iraq. In August 1992, the coalition began enforcing a similar NFZ beneath the 32nd parallel to protect Shia populations and to deter Saddam Hussein’s ability to mass his armoured divisions to threaten Kuwait.<sup>75</sup> The NFZs were effective at denying the Iraqi

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<sup>73</sup> O’Rourke, R. (1988), ‘The Tanker War’, *Proceedings*, Vol. 114/5/1023, <https://www.usni.org/magazines/proceedings/1988-05/tanker-war> (accessed 24 Sep. 2018).

<sup>74</sup> Evans, D. (1993), ‘Vincennes: A Case Study’, *Proceedings*, Vol. 119/8/1086, <https://www.usni.org/magazines/proceedings/1993-08/vincennes-case-study> (accessed 24 Sep. 2018).

<sup>75</sup> In September 1996, the Clinton administration would unilaterally expand the northern edge of this southern NFZ to the 33rd parallel in response to an Iraqi military ground offensive against the Kurds in the north.

government the use of airpower over nearly two-thirds of its territory. However, the Iraqi leader still brutally suppressed uprisings by Shia groups in the south and Kurdish fighters in the north with armoured ground forces, all while US pilots orbited overhead with strict orders not to intervene. A decade into their existence, the NFZs would eventually serve a more momentous role: in June 2002, President Bush authorized a secret plan – Operation Southern Focus – that permitted pilots enforcing the southern NFZ to bomb Iraq’s air defence, artillery and command and control assets – in total, 606 bombs hit 391 targets. In effect, due to the access that the NFZs allowed, efforts to change the Iraqi regime commenced 10 months before the ‘shock and awe’ airstrikes and ground invasion in 2003.<sup>76</sup>

### Yemen

On 3 November 2002, the US conducted its first ever non-battlefield drone strike in the Marib Province of Yemen, when a Predator drone launched a Hellfire missile at a vehicle transporting Abu Ali al-Harithi, an Al-Qaeda operational planner, four Yemenis and Ahmed Hijazi, a naturalized US citizen. After a seven-year period of no further counterterrorism strikes, in late 2009, President Obama authorized a new campaign of airstrikes against targets associated with AQAP. The first of these was a navy attack of five cruise missiles armed with cluster munitions against a suspected AQAP training camp in southern Yemen; reportedly 14 militant fighters and 41 civilians, including nine women and 21 children, were killed.<sup>77</sup> Since 2009, there have been an estimated 308 airstrikes against suspected AQAP and ISIS-affiliated groups, killing nearly 1,000 people.<sup>78</sup> US strikes against AQAP targeted transnational terror threats and those threatening government security forces. While the amount of territory controlled by AQAP and ISIS has decreased since 2002, both remain active and are thriving in Yemen.<sup>79</sup>

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<sup>76</sup> Knights, M. (2005), *Cradle of Conflict: Iraq and the Birth of Modern U.S. Military Power*, Annapolis, MD: Naval Institute Press, p. 257; Gordon, M. (2003), ‘U.S. Air Raids In ‘02 Prepared For War in Iraq’, *New York Times*, 20 July 2003, <https://www.nytimes.com/2003/07/20/world/after-the-war-preliminaries-us-air-raids-in-02-prepared-for-war-in-iraq.html> (accessed 23 Aug. 2018).

<sup>77</sup> Human Rights Watch (2013), ‘*Between a Drone and Al Qaeda*’, 22 October 2013, <https://www.hrw.org/report/2013/10/22/between-drone-and-al-qaeda/civilian-cost-us-targeted-killings-yemen> (accessed 23 Aug. 2018). At the time, US officials denied America’s role in the attack, with CENTCOM commander General David Petraeus describing his command’s role as only providing ‘firepower, intelligence, and support’, author interview with David Petraeus, 10 February 2010.

<sup>78</sup> The Bureau of Investigative Journalism (2017), ‘Drone Wars: The Full Data’, 1 January 2017, <https://www.thebureauinvestigates.com/stories/2017-01-01/drone-wars-the-full-data> (accessed 2 Jul. 2018).

<sup>79</sup> Raghavan, S. (2018), ‘A Defiant Al-Qaeda: U.S. Airstrikes are Pounding the Group in Yemen, Yet the Militants Fight on Fiercely’, *Washington Post*, 6 July 2018, [https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/world/wp/2018/07/06/feature/as-a-u-s-shadow-war-intensifies-in-yemen-al-qaeda-is-down-but-not-out/?utm\\_term=.df94749b74ea](https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/world/wp/2018/07/06/feature/as-a-u-s-shadow-war-intensifies-in-yemen-al-qaeda-is-down-but-not-out/?utm_term=.df94749b74ea) (accessed 23 Aug. 2018).

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## 4. Security Cooperation: Training, Advice and Weapons Sales

The Pentagon defines security cooperation as, ‘interactions with foreign security establishments to build security relationships that promote specific United States security interests, develop allied and partner nation military and security capabilities for self-defense and multinational operations, and provide U.S forces with peacetime and contingency access to allied and partner nations.’<sup>80</sup> Until recently, it was unknown how many of these programmes existed. A 2013 RAND Corporation study estimated that the US government was engaged in 165 security cooperation programmes directed by 184 separate legislative authorities.<sup>81</sup> A separate 2017 Government Accountability Office investigation determined that there are 194 security cooperation programmes.<sup>82</sup>

US security cooperation programmes provide support for military operations conducted by allies and partners in the region. These routine activities range from educating and training regional military officers on basic tactics, techniques and procedures, to serving as a co-combatant in Middle East wars by providing the essential support to allow regional militaries to conduct and sustain high-intensity combat operations.<sup>83</sup> These security cooperation programmes demonstrate the breadth of capacity-building and partnership-enhancing activities that are undertaken all the time. In the absence of such programmes and the clear benefit that they provide to regional governments, US military access to these territories would be severely constrained.

For 2017 over 75,000 students from 154 countries participated in some training activities... including training in tactical combat skills, English-language instruction, civil–military relations, maritime security, and the law of armed conflict and human right.

Over several decades, these programmes include extensive US military training programmes with Middle East countries. The State Department publishes a congressionally-mandated report every two years detailing the ongoing and planned training for foreign militaries. This includes training in tactical combat skills, English-language instruction, civil–military relations, maritime security, and the law of armed conflict and human rights. For 2017, the last year for which there are comprehensive data, over 75,000 students from 154 countries participated in some training activities.<sup>84</sup> For the Middle East countries covered in this paper, the 9,007 officers shown in Figure 3 received US military training.

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<sup>80</sup> Department of Defense (2016), ‘DoD Directive 5132.03: DoD Policy and Responsibilities Relating to Security Cooperation’, 29 December 2016, [https://open.defense.gov/portals/23/Documents/foreignasst/DoDD\\_513203\\_on\\_Security\\_Cooperation.pdf](https://open.defense.gov/portals/23/Documents/foreignasst/DoDD_513203_on_Security_Cooperation.pdf) (accessed 23 Aug. 2018).

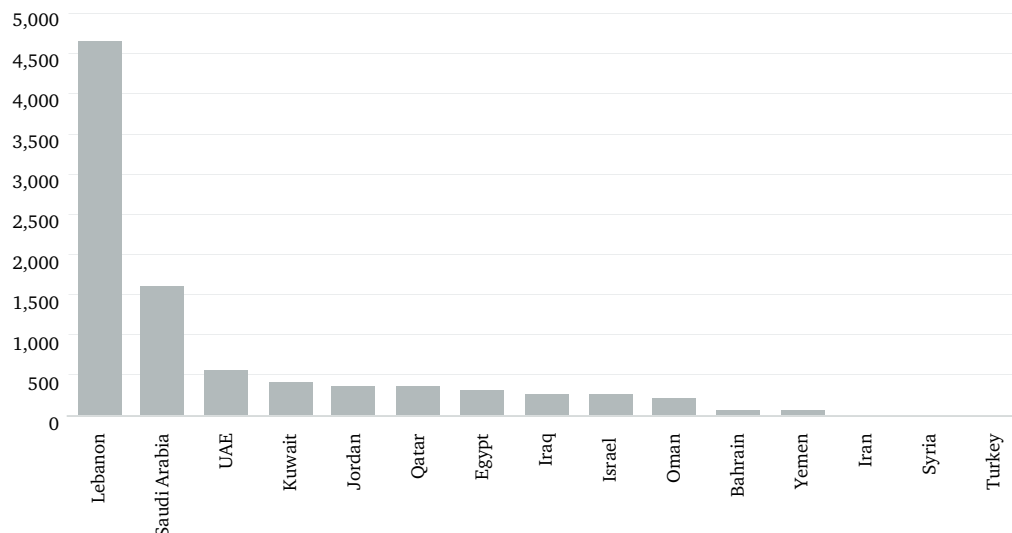
<sup>81</sup> Moroney, J. D. P., Thaler, D. E. and Hagler J. (2013), ‘Security Cooperation Database’, Appendix A, in *Review of Security Cooperation Mechanisms Combatant Commands Utilize to Build Partner Capacity*, Washington, D.C.: Rand Corporation, 2013.

<sup>82</sup> US Government Accountability Office (2017), ‘Building Partner Capacity: Inventory of Department of Defense Security Cooperation and Department of State Security Assistance Efforts’, 24 March 2017, <https://www.gao.gov/assets/690/683682.pdf> (accessed 23 Aug. 2018).

<sup>83</sup> Undoubtedly, additional security cooperation initiatives are never reported, but have a material impact on shaping options and outcomes in the region. For example, in March 2003, 18 months before the Iraq War began, every time CENTCOM conducted a military exercise in the region, it would send in more troops than were required, and then leave them behind to support the regime change effort. See, DeLong, M. (2007), *A General Speaks Out: The Truth About the Wars in Afghanistan and Iraq*, St. Paul, MN: MBI Publishing, p. 71.

<sup>84</sup> US State Department and US Department of Defense (2018), *Foreign Military Training Report: Fiscal Years 2016 and 2017, Joint Report to Congress, Volume 1*, <https://www.state.gov/documents/organization/275295.pdf> (accessed 24 Sep. 2018).

Figure 3: Numbers of officers receiving US training, 2017



Source: US State Department and US Department of Defense (2018), *Foreign Military Training Report: Fiscal Years 2016 and 2017, Joint Report to Congress, Volume 1, 2018*.

In addition to these military-to-military training and education programmes, the US provides a range of further security cooperation support for Middle East militaries that conduct their own combat operations. For example, successive administrations have provided extensive operational support to Israel during several of its recent military campaigns. Such as when, five days into its 34-day war against Hezbollah in Lebanon in 2006, the Israeli Air Force ran out of precision-guided munitions, the Bush administration approved an expedited resupply of those bombs, as well as 5,000-pound bunker buster bombs, anti-armour missiles and jet fuel.<sup>85</sup> In a further example, since 2007, the US and Turkey have cooperated in the city of Ankara, which processes US-supplied overhead surveillance and intelligence analysis that is used for Turkish airstrikes against forces associated with the Kurdistan Workers’ Party (PKK) – a State Department-designated foreign terrorist organization – located in northern Iraq. Similarly, at Al Dhafra Air Base, US and Emirati military personnel staff a joint planning cell where the US shares targeting and intelligence information that the UAE uses in bombing operations against ISIS.<sup>86</sup>

The decisions by the Obama and Trump administrations, since March 2015, to back Saudi-led bombing campaigns against suspected Houthi fighters in Yemen have been far more consequential. This support has included in-air refuelling, combat search and rescue for downed pilots, and intelligence analysis (including at one time up to 45 analysts) to assist in the development and refinement of targets. Moreover, US defence contractors provide much of the training, advice and logistical assistance that allows the Royal Saudi air, naval and land forces to operate. One representative example is S&K Aerospace, which, in September 2017, was awarded a six-year contract worth \$560 million to provide logistical support for the Saudi Air Force fleet

<sup>85</sup> Cloud, D. S. and Cooper, H. (2006), ‘U.S. Speeds up Bomb Delivery for the Israelis’, *New York Times*, 22 July 2006, <https://www.nytimes.com/2006/07/22/world/middleeast/22military.html> (accessed 23 Aug. 2018); Cloud, D. S. (2006), ‘Israel Asks U.S. to Ship Rockets with a Wide Blast’, *New York Times*, 11 August 2006, [https://www.nytimes.com/2006/08/11/world/middleeast/11military.html?rref=collection%2Fbyline%2FDavid-S.-Cloud&action=click&contentCollection=undefined&region=stream&module=stream\\_unit&version=latest&contentPlacement=202&pgtype=collection](https://www.nytimes.com/2006/08/11/world/middleeast/11military.html?rref=collection%2Fbyline%2FDavid-S.-Cloud&action=click&contentCollection=undefined&region=stream&module=stream_unit&version=latest&contentPlacement=202&pgtype=collection) (accessed 23 Aug. 2018).

<sup>86</sup> Chandrasekaran (2014), ‘In the UAE, the United States has a Quiet, Potent Ally Nicknamed “Little Sparta”’.

of F-15Es, the workhorse of the kingdom's strikes in Yemen.<sup>87</sup> The bombing campaign in Yemen has been unusual for contemporary conflicts employing advanced weaponry for its relatively indiscriminate nature and high numbers of civilian casualties.<sup>88</sup>

Finally, the most expensive, lethal and politically consequential component of US security cooperation with the Middle East is exports of weapons and munitions. US arms export policy has remained consistent over the past three decades and can essentially be defined as: support the defence of allies and partners; enhance regional security; assure the interoperability between the US military and partners; and provide high-paying jobs for American workers – US aerospace and defence exports support more than 1.4 million jobs.<sup>89</sup> In April 2018, the Trump administration announced a series of executive orders and initiatives to streamline the interagency review process, push weapons sales and actively promote the sale of armed drones (overturning an Obama administration policy).<sup>90</sup> President Trump also reversed Obama's suspension of attack aircraft sales to Bahrain and sales of precision-guided munitions to Saudi Arabia. Subsequently, the first year of Trump's presidency saw an 8 per cent year-on-year increase in the total value of US weapons sold worldwide in 2017 – rising from \$76 billion to \$82 billion – with the Middle East once again the top regional recipient.<sup>91</sup>

There are several reliable data sources for tracking weapons sales, including from non-profits, such as the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (SIPRI) and the International Institute for Strategic Studies (IISS), in addition to government sources such as the State Department and the Congressional Research Service.<sup>92</sup> Though their estimates differ slightly, by every measure imaginable, for the past two decades the US has been the largest weapons exporter to the Middle East and the wider world. Indeed, for the period between 2013 and 2017, 49 per cent of all global US weapons exports by value were shipped to Middle East countries.<sup>93</sup> In 2017, the US sold \$52 billion worth of weapons to the region, far ahead of suppliers in Western Europe, Russia or China.<sup>94</sup> The majority of those sales went to Saudi Arabia, a country that has ramped up its defence spending over the past decade – even surpassing Russia to be the third highest global defence spender in 2016.

<sup>87</sup> US Department of Defense (2017), 'Contracts for Sept. 22, 2017', 22 September 2017, <https://www.defense.gov/News/Contracts/Contract-View/Article/1321878/> (accessed 23 Aug. 2018).

<sup>88</sup> According to the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights, more than 60 per cent of all documented civilian fatalities between March 2015 and August 2017 were the result of airstrikes. See, UN (2017), 'Yemen: UN Report urges Probe into Rights Violations amid "Entirely Man-Made Catastrophe"', 5 September 2017, <https://news.un.org/en/story/2017/09/564302-yemen-un-report-urges-probe-rights-violations-amid-entirely-man-made> (accessed 23 Aug. 2018). Since March 2015, Pentagon officials have claimed that US military assistance plays a critical role in reducing collateral damage and civilian casualties.

<sup>89</sup> Lineberger, R. S. et al. (2017), *2017 U.S. Aerospace and Defense Sector Export and Labor Market Study*, Deloitte Consulting, <https://www2.deloitte.com/content/dam/Deloitte/us/Documents/manufacturing/us-2017-us-A&D-exports-and-labor-market-study.pdf> (accessed 23 Aug. 2018).

<sup>90</sup> White House (2018), 'National Security Presidential Memorandum Regarding U.S. Conventional Arms Transfer Policy', 19 April 2018, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/presidential-actions/national-security-presidential-memorandum-regarding-u-s-conventional-arms-transfer-policy/> (accessed 23 Aug. 2018); US Department of State (2018), 'United States Conventional Arms Transfer Policy', Bureau of Political-Military Affairs, 19 April 2018, <https://www.state.gov/t/pm/rls/fs/2018/280621.htm> (accessed 23 Aug. 2018); US Department of State (2018), 'U.S. Policy on the Export of Unmanned Aerial Systems', Office of the Spokesperson, 19 April 2018, <https://www.state.gov/t/pa/prs/ps/2018/04/280619.htm> (accessed 23 Aug. 2018).

<sup>91</sup> Hartung, W. (2018), *Trends in Major U.S. Arms Sales in 2017: A Comparison of the Obama and Trump Administrations*, Washington, D.C.: Center for International Policy, March 2018.

<sup>92</sup> Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (2017), *SIPRI Yearbook 2017: Armaments, Disarmament and International Security*, <https://www.sipri.org/yearbook/2017> (accessed 23 Aug. 2018); International Institute for Strategic Studies (2018), *The Military Balance 2018*, <https://www.iiiss.org/publications/the-military-balance/the-military-balance-2018> (accessed 23 Aug. 2018); US State Department (2018), *World Military Expenditures and Arms Transfers 2017*, <https://www.state.gov/t/avc/rls/rpt/wmeat/2017/index.htm> (accessed 23 Aug. 2018); Thomas, T. (2017), *Arms Sales in the Middle East: Trends and Analytical Perspectives for U.S. Policy*, Congressional Research Service, 11 October 2017, <https://fas.org/sgp/crs/mideast/R44984.pdf> (accessed 23 Aug. 2018); Theohary, C. A. (2016), *Conventional Arms Transfers to Developing Nations, 2008–2015*, Congressional Research Service, 19 December 2016, <https://fas.org/sgp/crs/weapons/R44716.pdf> (accessed 23 Aug. 2018).

<sup>93</sup> Wezeman, P. D. et al. (2018), 'Trends in International Arms Transfers, 2017', SIPRI Fact Sheet, March 2018, p. 2, <https://www.sipri.org/publications/2018/sipri-fact-sheets/trends-international-arms-transfers-2017> (accessed 23 Aug. 2018).

<sup>94</sup> Thomas C. (2017), 'Arms Sales in the Middle East: Trends and Analytical Perspectives for U.S. Policy', Congressional Research Service, 11 October 2017, <https://fas.org/sgp/crs/mideast/R44984.pdf> (accessed 23 Aug. 2018).



From 2000–09, the US agreed to \$17.3 billion in weapons sales to Saudi Arabia. Since the start of 2010, sales to Saudi Arabia have reached \$136 billion.<sup>95</sup>

**Table 1: Military sales over time – US weapons exports to Middle East (in millions)**

Country	2008	2009	2010	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017
Bahrain	2	–	68	–	–	60	–	15	–	4
Iraq	281	311	343	397	340	255	285	791	898	506
Israel	663	134	41	59	107	65	121	252	529	515
Jordan	32	15	6	24	38	39	53	58	81	127
Kuwait	–	1	37	36	22	52	681	311	165	55
Lebanon	–	16	10	–	31	21	5	36	27	56
Oman	71	2	2	–	38	35	468	–	127	87
Qatar	–	280	–	150	280	–	–	385	595	496
Saudi Arabia	248	244	358	397	394	607	1,411	1,759	1,796	3,425
Syria rebels*	–	–	–	–	–	–	–	–	–	1
Turkey	49	21	11	333	1,009	363	1,109	320	201	94
UAE	677	394	153	863	923	1,063	542	814	779	499
Yemen	5	–	–	12	–	4	–	11	–	–
Iran	–	–	–	–	–	–	–	–	–	–
<b>Total</b>	<b>2,028</b>	<b>1,418</b>	<b>1,029</b>	<b>2,271</b>	<b>3,182</b>	<b>2,564</b>	<b>4,675</b>	<b>4,752</b>	<b>5,198</b>	<b>5,865</b>

\* No data for Syria.

Source: Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (2017), SIPRI Yearbook 2017: Armaments, Disarmament and International Security, <https://www.sipri.org/yearbook/2017> (accessed 23 Aug. 2018); Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (2017), SIPRI Importer/Exporter TIV Tables, <https://sipri.org/databases/armstransfers> (accessed 11 Sep. 2018).

US weapons exports to the region are not simply the various physical weapons platforms or bombs. The exports include sustained military-to-military relationships over the entire life cycle of those weapons, such as training and simulations at test ranges in the US or in the region, upgrades of avionics and sensors, logistical support, joint exercises with US pilots, and intelligence and targeting support when those weapons are used in combat. Regional militaries buy US weapons not simply to integrate them into their own armed forces, but also for the much closer political and military relationship that comes with them. In turn, the US sells these weapons to earn money and support high-paying jobs, but also to promote interoperability between US and regional armed forces, and to sustain close relations with Middle East governments that support US military access.

### Informal US–Middle East security cooperation programmes

The revolving door between military service and the defence industry has become well-established in recent years.<sup>96</sup> In 2004–08, 80 per cent of retired three and four-star generals took jobs with defence contractors or consultancies.<sup>97</sup> Over the next three years, some 70 per cent of retired general officers

<sup>95</sup> Blanchard, C. M. (2017), 'Saudi Arabia: Background and U.S. Relations', Congressional Research Service, 22 November 2017, pp. 21–22, <https://fas.org/sgp/crs/mideast/RL33533.pdf> (accessed 23 Aug. 2018).

<sup>96</sup> Adams, G. (1982), *The Politics of Defense Contracting: The Iron Triangle*, Piscataway, New Jersey: Transaction Books.

<sup>97</sup> Bender, B. (2010), 'From the Pentagon to the Private Sector', *Boston Globe*, 26 December 2010, [http://archive.boston.com/news/nation/washington/articles/2010/12/26/defense\\_firms\\_lure\\_retired\\_generals/](http://archive.boston.com/news/nation/washington/articles/2010/12/26/defense_firms_lure_retired_generals/) (accessed 23 Aug. 2018).

took such jobs.<sup>98</sup> Many of these positions are with military contracting firms that provide training and advice for Middle East military and security services, or directly for those services. Most of these retired generals were deployed to the region during their active-duty careers, developed relations through shared professional military education (PME) courses or military-to-military engagements, and commanded US forces in the region. The applicable federal laws and Pentagon directives are remarkably permissive in the freedom allowed to retired officers to serve regional militaries as advisers or even as officers.

In an interview with the author, a chief executive officer of a northern Virginia-based contracting firm that places retired officers into advisory and formal officer roles with Persian Gulf militaries noted, '[Gulf military] officers pass through the PME schools in the United States, and they've all worked alongside our guys at some point in the past 15 years. There is already a shared doctrine, vernacular, and relationships, so naturally they're looking for trusted and familiar faces. We broker that connection, making certain we obey all applicable American and Gulf state laws.' This executive also freely admitted that if the retired officers did not agree with the status quo policy or advance the Gulf government's interests with their active-duty peers, they would not be hired in the first place.<sup>99</sup>

One prominent exemplar of this phenomenon is former Marine General James Mattis, who retired as the commander of CENTCOM in 2013. Six months after stepping down, he joined the board of directors of General Dynamics (a prominent manufacturer of command and control and intelligence networks, land-attack missiles and land warfare support systems), where he served until January 2017. While at General Dynamics, from 4 June 2015 until 6 August 2016, he was also an unpaid military adviser to the UAE.<sup>100</sup> According to one UAE official, Mattis visited the country from time to time to provide advice, adding, 'He was and still is a trusted friend and he would come over to maintain the relationship.'<sup>101</sup> At present, James Mattis is the US secretary of defense and his relations in the region are considered an asset for performing this role.

Other notable cases of retired general officers serving in such roles include retired General James Jones, former commandant of the Marine Corps and later Obama's national security adviser. In 2015, he was paid to speak on behalf of Mujahideen-e Khalq (MEK), which is an anti-Iranian regime dissident group that the US previously designated as a foreign terrorist organization. At the same time, he also worked at Ironhand Security LLC with the Saudi Ministry of Defence.<sup>102</sup> Former CENTCOM General commander Anthony Zinni has similarly been paid to speak on behalf of the MEK, while also serving in executive positions with DynCorp and BAE Systems.<sup>103</sup> In addition, retired Major General Thomas Moore, Jr was the chief of staff and deputy commander of CENTCOM in 2008, and later a senior consultant for Stark Aerospace Business Development based in Israel.<sup>104</sup>

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<sup>98</sup> Citizens for Responsibility and Ethics in Washington (2012), 'The Revolving Door from the Pentagon to the Private Sector', November 2012, [http://goodtimesweb.org/documentation/2012/CREW\\_Strategic\\_Maneuvers\\_Pentagon\\_Generals\\_Revolving\\_Door\\_11\\_15\\_12.pdf](http://goodtimesweb.org/documentation/2012/CREW_Strategic_Maneuvers_Pentagon_Generals_Revolving_Door_11_15_12.pdf) (accessed 23 Aug. 2018). This revolving door also features civilians: more than half of Obama's top Pentagon nominees came straight from the defence industry, and after his second term more than half of them returned to the defence industry. President Trump's initial top civilian Pentagon appointees were even more immersed in the defence industry: 82 per cent of them came directly from defence contractor positions. See, Skolnik, S. (2018), 'Revolving Door Between Trump Pentagon, Contractors Spins Faster', Bloomberg Exclusives, 1 February 2018, <https://about.bgov.com/blog/revolving-door-trump-pentagon-contractors-spins-faster/> (accessed 23 Aug. 2018).

<sup>99</sup> Author interview with CEO of military advisory contracting firm, 22 May 2018.

<sup>100</sup> Smithberger, M. (2017), 'Seven Top U.S. Marines Took Jobs with Foreign Governments and Firms', *War is Boring*, 3 August 2017, <https://warisboring.com/seven-top-u-s-marines-took-jobs-with-foreign-governments-and-firms/> (accessed 23 Aug. 2018).

<sup>101</sup> Herb, J. (2017), 'Mattis Advised UAE Military Before Joining Trump Administration', CNN.com, 2 August 2017, <https://edition.cnn.com/2017/08/02/politics/mattis-advised-uae-military/index.html> (accessed 23 Aug. 2018).

<sup>102</sup> Smithberger, M. (2017), 'Seven Top U.S. Marines Took Jobs with Foreign Governments and Firms'.

<sup>103</sup> Wilkie, C. (2011), 'Mujahideen-e Khalq: Former U.S. Officials Make Millions Advocating For Terrorist Organization', *Huffington Post*, 8 August 2011, [https://www.huffingtonpost.co.uk/entry/mek-lobbying\\_n\\_913233](https://www.huffingtonpost.co.uk/entry/mek-lobbying_n_913233) (accessed 23 Aug. 2018).

<sup>104</sup> Smithberger, M. (2017), 'Seven Top U.S. Marines Took Jobs with Foreign Governments and Firms'.

Beyond prominent former generals and admirals, an unknown number of retired officers work directly for regional militaries and security agencies. Moreover, many military education and research institutions developed by Gulf and Middle East countries are led, staffed and/or run by retired US military officers. Stephen Toumajan, who retired from the US Army as a lieutenant colonel in 2007, is a relevant example of this phenomenon. Soon after leaving the Army, Toumajan began advising the UAE, and was appointed to the rank of a two-star general within the UAE military itself.<sup>105</sup> As an Emirati government website proclaims, ‘H. E. Major General Staff Pilot Stephen Toumajan is the Commander and Senior Aviation Advisor for the Joint Aviation Command (JAC)’, which is ‘responsible for the combat readiness and execution of all aviation missions and training for UAE forces and numerous Foreign Military Sales.’<sup>106</sup> Highlighting the continued close relations with the US that these retired officers engender, an October 2017 DOD video shows Toumajan commanding UAE forces that have been deployed to the Fort Irwin National Training Center in California, which is the US Army’s premier training facility.<sup>107</sup> Similarly, the King Abdullah II Special Operations Training Center detailed above was led for over two years, from 2012 to 2014, by Frank Toney, a retired US Army brigadier general.

It is difficult to definitively assess the impact that these retired officers have on the development and implementation of US military policy in the Middle East and on regional security services. According to the CEO cited above, retired American officers serve as a backchannel to their active-duty peers through whom they relay the concerns of regional political leaders and defence ministries.<sup>108</sup> The retired officers also help to sustain the relationships forged between the US military and regional militaries by being candid and honest with their regional partners in a way that active-duty officers cannot be. But, perhaps most importantly, these retired officers, now with economic incentives, further intensify the widely-accepted norm within the Pentagon – as well as on Capitol Hill – that US military personnel *must* remain deployed in large numbers in the Middle East.<sup>109</sup> Furthermore, US military presence in the Middle East can only continue with predictable access to the region, which is enhanced by maintaining personal and professional relationships with host-nation governments and government officials. This revolving door is both an enabler and manifestation of US military policy in the region.

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<sup>105</sup> Roston, A. (2018), ‘This American is a General for a Foreign Army Accused of War Crimes in Yemen’, *Buzzfeed News*, 7 May 2018, <https://www.buzzfeednews.com/article/aramroston/stephen-toumajan-general-us-uae-yemen-contractor> (accessed 23 Aug. 2018).

<sup>106</sup> United Arab Emirates: The Supreme Council for National Security, National Search and Rescue Center (undated), ‘Director General’s Message’, <https://www.nsrc.gov.ae/en/about-us/director-generals-message.aspx> (accessed 3 Jun. 2018).

<sup>107</sup> US Department of Defense (2017), ‘UAE at NTC’, Defense Visual Information Distribution System, 2 October 2017, <https://www.dvidshub.net/video/558974/uae-ntc> (accessed 23 Aug. 2018).

<sup>108</sup> Author interview with CEO of military advisory contracting firm, 22 May 2018.

<sup>109</sup> After 20 years of close professional relationships with countless active-duty and retired military officers, the author cannot recall speaking with any that recommended, much less even considered, reducing the US military footprint in the Middle East.

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## 5. Military Policy Objectives in the Middle East

To determine the success of US policy in the region requires identifying specific US objectives. Those considered in this section are based primarily upon Pentagon strategy documents, the CENTCOM annual posture statement (released around March every year), and speeches and congressional testimony given by Pentagon officials. This analytical approach assumes that when government officials claim they are attempting to achieve something, they are being sincere and that those statements reflect America's actual policy objectives. The US employs other elements of national power in the Middle East, for example through diplomatic or economic policy, but these efforts are overwhelmingly marshalled in support of the overall military operation, or supplanted by the actions of military forces themselves. Thus, this section focuses on military policy in the region, because non-military approaches – for better or worse – inevitably take a back seat.

The following four strategic objectives have been consistently expressed by civilian and military officials as the reason and purpose for the US military's various postures in the Middle East, over the past two decades. There are several other underlying and attendant goals, but these four objectives best summarize the motives of the US.

First, the presence of the US military enhances regional security overall and reduces political instability within Middle East governments. This strategic objective has not been achieved, in large part because the 2003 US-led invasion and subsequent military occupation of Iraq engendered a massive Sunni-dominated insurgency, remnants of which became the primary fighting force of ISIS. By 2017, nearly one-third (31 per cent) of the 49 ongoing conflicts in the world – defined as those with at least 25 battlefield deaths – involved ISIS.<sup>110</sup> In total, the ill-fated decision to invade Iraq has led – directly and indirectly – to more than one million deaths, with another 7.6 million people displaced by the war.<sup>111</sup> In addition, close to 4,500 US active-duty, National Guard and reserve members died fighting in Iraq, while more than 1,500 Pentagon contractors were killed supporting the war effort – approximately one-third of whom were American citizens.<sup>112</sup> The direct financial cost to the US for the invasion, occupation and reconstruction of Iraq is in excess of \$825 billion.<sup>113</sup>

Most recently, enhancing Middle East security has focused on restraining what Pentagon officials refer to as Iran's 'malign influence' in the region – meaning Tehran's promotion and support for proxy forces and sectarian-aligned political movements in Syria, Iraq, Bahrain and elsewhere. According

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<sup>110</sup> Petterson, T. and Eck, K. (2018), 'Organized Violence, 1989–2017', *Journal of Peace Research*, June 2018, vol. 55, no. 4, p. 536, <http://journals.sagepub.com/doi/abs/10.1177/0022343318784101?journalCode=jpra> (accessed 23 Aug. 2018).

<sup>111</sup> Brown University (undated), 'Costs of War: Summary of Findings', Watson Institute for International and Public Affairs, <https://watson.brown.edu/costsofwar/papers/summary> (accessed 7 May 2018); Physicians for Social Responsibility (2015), 'Body Count: Casualty Figures After 10 Years of the "War on Terror"', <https://www.psr.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/05/body-count.pdf> (accessed 23 Aug. 2018).

<sup>112</sup> DeBruyne, N. F. (2017), 'American War and Military Operations Casualties: Lists and Statistics (CRS Report No. RL32492)', Congressional Research Service, 26 April 2017, <https://fas.org/sgp/crs/natsec/RL32492.pdf> (accessed 7 May 2018); US Department of Labor (2018), 'About the Defense Base Act Case Summary Reports', [www.dol.gov/owcp/dlhwc/aboutdbareports.htm](http://www.dol.gov/owcp/dlhwc/aboutdbareports.htm) (accessed 7 May 2018). This is only an estimate, because the Department of Labor does not provide comprehensive data for US citizens killed while working as contractors in warzones; Zenko, M. (2016), 'Mercenaries Are the Silent Majority of Obama's Military', *Foreign Policy*, 18 May 2016, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2016/05/18/private-contractors-are-the-silent-majority-of-obamas-military-mercenaries-iraq-afghanistan/> (accessed 7 May 2018).

<sup>113</sup> Belasco, A. (2014), 'The Cost of Iraq, Afghanistan, and Other Global War on Terror Operations Since 9/11 (CRS Report No. RL33110)', Congressional Research Service, 8 December 2014, <https://fas.org/sgp/crs/natsec/RL33110.pdf> (accessed 23 Aug. 2018).

to CENTCOM, the US military has failed to restrain Iran, with the military command's most recent posture statement declaring flatly, 'We have not seen any improvement in Iran's behavior' since the Iran nuclear deal was signed in July 2015.<sup>114</sup> This is a core mission of CENTCOM, which the command itself acknowledges has not been successful. Certainly, Iran has taken advantage of the chaos and instability caused by US-led wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, the US-backed air campaign against Houthi forces in Yemen since 2015, and close support of the US for the Sunni minority monarchy that represses and rules a majority Shia population in Bahrain. The pursuit of America's interests in the region, combined with the US military's infrastructure needs, has allowed Iran to expand its reach and influence outside of its borders; in effect, enabling rather than restraining Iranian power.

The US military's ability to reduce political instability in the region has been decidedly mixed. A 2017 study of US military training programmes conducted from 1970 to 2009 found that countries receiving such training were twice as likely to experience a military-backed coup attempt as countries with no comparable training.<sup>115</sup> Indeed, the region has recently experienced prominent successful or attempted military coups in Egypt (2013) and Turkey (2016). But, the more consequential impact on political stability stems from the presence of US troops. A 2018 RAND study found that there is no association between US forward deployed troop presence and increased state repression, within the countries where those troops are deployed.<sup>116</sup> However, US forces become associated and implicated by local populations with their governments' repression. Of the 15 countries covered in this study where troops are stationed, only Israel is considered 'free', and Kuwait, Jordan and Lebanon are 'partly free'.<sup>117</sup> Meanwhile, all the countries – to varying degrees – rely heavily upon internal security and military forces to consolidate and maintain political control.

**Most US fatalities from terrorism since 9/11 are the result of attacks perpetrated by non-networked terrorists resident in the United States, or acts that have directly targeted Americans living and working in the very countries where the US has intervened to prevent or destroy so-called safe havens.**

Second, US military presence prevents the emergence of safe havens from which transnational terrorist organizations can operate and plan attacks. This objective is based upon an unquestioned assumption repeated by national security officials since 9/11: terrorists need a safe haven from which to plan and conduct terrorist attacks. In reality, this is not the case as can be determined by assessing the source of attacks against Americans.<sup>118</sup> Between 9/11 and the end of 2016 (the last year for which there are data), 440 US citizens were killed in terrorist attacks, 184 of whom were killed inside the United States by self-motivated 'lone wolves' – 104 by Islamic jihadists, 72 by far right extremists and eight by black separatists. In addition, more than 200 Americans died in acts of terrorism while

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<sup>114</sup> US Central Command (2018), 'State of General Joseph L. Votel on the Posture of U.S. Central Command', 27 February 2018, <https://docs.house.gov/meetings/AS/AS00/20180227/106870/HHRG-115-AS00-Wstate-VotelJ-20180227.pdf> (accessed 23 Aug. 2018).

<sup>115</sup> Savage, J. D. and Caverly, J. (2017), 'When Human Capital Threatens the Capitol: Foreign Aid in the Form of Military Training and Coups', *Journal of Peace Research*, 13 July 2017, <http://journals.sagepub.com/doi/abs/10.1177/0022343317713557> (accessed 23 Aug. 2018).

<sup>116</sup> O'Mahony, A. et al. (2018), *U.S. Presence and the Incidence of Conflict*, Santa Monica, CA: Rand Corporation, p. 74.

<sup>117</sup> Freedom House (2018), *Freedom in the World 2018: Democracy in Crisis*, <https://freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-world/freedom-world-2018> (accessed 23 Aug. 2018).

<sup>118</sup> Zenko, M. and Wolf, A. M. (2015), 'The Myth of the Terrorist Safe Haven', *ForeignPolicy.com*, 26 January 2015, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2015/01/26/al-qaeda-islamic-state-myth-of-the-terrorist-safe-haven/> (accessed 23 Aug. 2018).

in Iraq or Afghanistan.<sup>119</sup> In other words, most US fatalities from terrorism since 9/11 are the result of attacks perpetrated by non-networked terrorists resident in the United States, or acts that have directly targeted Americans living and working in the very countries where the US has intervened to prevent or destroy so-called safe havens.

Moreover, keeping US ground troops in the region increases the likelihood of anti-American terrorism. As international relations scholar Alexander Braithwaite determined in his study on recent overseas stationing of foreign military: ‘the deployment of troops overseas increases the likelihood of transnational terrorist attacks against the global interests of the deploying state.’<sup>120</sup> In short, troops maintained in foreign countries to prevent terrorism actually increase the probability that those troops’ home countries and global interests will experience terrorism.

Another predominant US military tactic is the use of airstrikes, which have had mixed results in reducing terrorist safe havens and threats in the Middle East. On the one hand, the four-year extensive bombing campaign – in coordination with ground forces – against ISIS succeeded in reducing the amount of territory it controls in Iraq and Syria by more than 80 per cent.<sup>121</sup> The campaign has seen the estimated number of ISIS fighters in both countries shrink from as many as 31,500 in 2014 to 15,000 in 2016, the last year for which there are data.<sup>122</sup> On the other hand, between 2010 and 2016, despite more than 300 US airstrikes in Yemen that have killed approximately 1,000 people, AQAP membership has grown from ‘several hundred’ to ‘up to four thousand’, according to the State Department’s annual terrorism report.<sup>123</sup> Of those 300-plus strikes, more than 120 occurred in 2016; in December 2017, CENTCOM acknowledged that ISIS in Yemen, ‘doubled in size over the past year’.<sup>124</sup> It is clear that without being partnered with forces on the ground with the capacity to capture and control territory, airstrikes alone cannot reduce the scope of terrorist threats and may, in fact, exacerbate them.

The third objective of the US military presence in the Middle East is to assure the free flow of oil and natural gas to and from the region. Since Jimmy Carter first dubbed this a ‘vital national interest’, the US military has generally been successful in contributing to the achievement of this strategic objective. The outcome of the 1987–88 Tanker Wars demonstrates that the US military has the naval capabilities and flexibility to diminish the impact of Iran’s unconventional tactics in halting oil shipments. In the past decade, and as recently as in July 2018, Iranian officials have intermittently threatened – either directly or indirectly – to close the Strait of Hormuz to shipping.<sup>125</sup> These threats are credible as Iran has the capacity to stop oil shipments transiting through the strait for several months with its current

<sup>119</sup> Data from the State Department’s country reports on terrorism. For 2002, 2004 and 2008, when the State Department did not publish these data, this figure relies on RAND’s *Database of Worldwide Terrorism Incidents* (2002), the Bureau of Consular Affairs (2004), and the National Counterterrorism Center’s *2008 Report on Terrorism*; New America Foundation (2017), ‘Part VI: What is the Threat To the United States Today?’, <https://www.newamerica.org/in-depth/terrorism-in-america/what-threat-united-states-today/> (accessed 8 Jul. 2017).

<sup>120</sup> Braithwaite, A. (2015), ‘Transnational Terrorism as an Unintended Consequence of a Military Footprint’, *Security Studies*, vol. 24, no. 2, 2015, pp. 349–375, <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/09636412.2015.1038192> (accessed 23 Aug. 2018); Dimant, E., Krieger, T. and Meierrieks, D. (2017), ‘Negative Returns: U.S. Military Policy and Anti-American Terrorism’, CESIFO Working Papers No. 6693, September 2017, <https://www.hoover.org/sites/default/files/research/docs/17106-diman-krieger-meierrieks.pdf> (accessed 23 Aug. 2018).

<sup>121</sup> Jamieson, A. (2017), ‘ISIS Revenue Falls 80 Percent as Militants Lose Ground in Iraq, Syria’, NBC News, 29 June 2017, <https://www.nbcnews.com/storyline/isis-terror/isis-revenue-falls-80-percent-militants-lose-ground-iraq-syria-n778071> (accessed 10 Sep. 2018).

<sup>122</sup> US State Department (2014), *Country Reports on Terrorism*, ‘Chapter 6. Foreign Terrorist Organizations’, <https://www.state.gov/j/ct/rls/crt/2014/239413.htm> (accessed 10 Sep. 2018); US State Department (2016), *Country Reports on Terrorism*, ‘Chapter 6. Foreign Terrorist Organizations’, <https://www.state.gov/j/ct/rls/crt/2016/272238.htm> (accessed 10 Sep. 2018).

<sup>123</sup> US State Department (2010), *Country Reports on Terrorism*, ‘Chapter 6. Foreign Terrorist Organizations’, <https://www.state.gov/j/ct/rls/crt/2010/170264.htm> (accessed 10 Sep. 2018); US State Department (2016), *Country Reports on Terrorism*, ‘Chapter 6. Foreign Terrorist Organizations’.

<sup>124</sup> US Central Command (2017), ‘Update on Recent Counterterrorism Strikes in Yemen’, release no: 17–446, 20 December 2017, <http://www.centcom.mil/MEDIA/PRESS-RELEASES/Press-Release-View/Article/1401383/update-on-recent-counterterrorism-strikes-in-yemen/> (accessed 23 Aug. 2018).

<sup>125</sup> Dehghan, S. K. (2018), ‘Iran Threatens to Block Strait of Hormuz Over U.S. Oil Sanctions’, *The Guardian*, 5 July 2018, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2018/jul/05/iran-retaliate-us-oil-threats-eu-visit-hassan-rouhani-trump>, (accessed 23 Aug. 2018).

arsenal of anti-ship cruise missiles and naval mines.<sup>126</sup> The fact that Iran's threats to block the Strait of Hormuz has never caused a sustained increase in the price of oil is due to the energy market's belief that US military forces could rapidly clear naval mines and fully defend tankers shipping oil and natural gas.<sup>127</sup>

Fourth, the US military presence will build the capacity of regional militaries so they can defend and secure their own sovereign territory. Since Dwight D. Eisenhower complained to two US generals in 1959 that European governments were 'making a sucker out of Uncle Sam', every US president has sought to induce or compel regional governments to take more responsibility for their own security.<sup>128</sup> This includes maintaining a professional officer corps, fielding combat-ready forces, buying advanced weaponry and deterring or defeating threats to each country's sovereignty and national interests. This form of security cooperation is highly consequential, as a 2014 RAND study found that US security cooperation correlates with a reduction in the political fragility of host nations.<sup>129</sup> Another RAND study has found that building effective capacity depends primarily on the recipient military having the absorptive capacity to plan and manage cooperative activities, and assuring the support is aligned with host nation needs.<sup>130</sup>

While the US military has assisted in building the capacity of local militaries to defeat internal threats, the region has continued to see numerous cross-border strikes, limited interventions and outright invasions. Unsolicited violations of state sovereignty of countries that have benefitted from US security cooperation in just the past 15 years include: Iran into Iraq; Iraq into Kuwait; Turkey into northern Iraq; Israel into Egypt, Jordan and Lebanon; Lebanon into Israel; Saudi Arabia into Bahrain; Yemen into Saudi Arabia; and Syria into Lebanon, to name but a few examples. Border security and territorial integrity are the only places military training and equipping efforts can be realistically evaluated in practice. Based upon the consistent cross-border attacks and invasions, the capacity of regional militaries remains wholly insufficient and underdeveloped.

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<sup>126</sup> Talmadge, C. (2008), 'Closing Time: Assessing the Iranian Threat to the Strait of Hormuz', *International Security*, Summer 2008, pp. 82–117, <https://www.belfercenter.org/publication/closing-time-assessing-iranian-threat-strait-hormuz> (accessed 23 Aug. 2018).

<sup>127</sup> Scholars have noted that assuring the oil and natural gas shipments in the region does not require such a sizable US military footprint in the region. See, Rovner, J. and Talmadge, C. (2014), 'Hegemony, Force Posture, and the Provision of Public Goods: The Once and Future Role of Outside Powers in Securing Persian Gulf Oil', *Security Studies*, vol. 23, no. 3, 2014, pp. 548–581, <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/15325024.2014.935224> (accessed 23 Aug. 2018).

<sup>128</sup> Office of the Historian (ND), '226. Memorandum of Conference With President Eisenhower' in *Foreign Relations of the United States, 1958–1960, Western European Integration and Security, Canada, Volume VII, Part 1*, <https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1958-60v07p1/d226> (accessed 10 Sep. 2018).

<sup>129</sup> McNearney, M. J. et al. (2014), *Assessing Security Cooperation as a Preventive Tool*, Santa Monica, CA: Rand Corporation.

<sup>130</sup> Paul, C. et al. (2013), *What Works Best When Building Partner Capacity and Under What Circumstances?*, Santa Monica, CA: Rand Corporation.

## Conclusion

The combined population of the 15 Middle East countries covered by this paper (414.3 million) represents slightly more than 5 per cent of the world's total population (7.6 billion).<sup>131</sup> Yet, in American political and media circles, the region is the subject of vastly more than just 5 per cent of US foreign policy discussions. Indeed, outside of North Korea, China and country-specific trade issues, an American watching the national evening news, or reading a major media outlet, might imagine that the Middle East is the entirety of US foreign policy.<sup>132</sup> The Middle East has been a proclaimed 'vital national interest' since the Carter administration, and it remains a focal point of US defence planning to this day. In order to protect such vital national interests defence planners need predictable access to bases, ports and airspace in the region. The stability of military access drives every other element of US foreign policy in the region – diplomatic, economic and informational.

US military policy in the region is not simply based on an objective evaluation of the pros and cons, it is strongly influenced by the lobbying efforts of partner governments themselves.<sup>133</sup> Indeed, governments in the region have long worked to shape and influence perceptions among policy elites and everyday Americans through firms that specialize in public relations and lobbying. These firms arrange meetings with members of Congress, key administration officials, research fellows at think-tanks, editorial boards, journalists, corporate executives and many other influencers. Under the Foreign Agents Registration Act (FARA) – created in 1938 by Congress to clearly identify German propaganda efforts – all of these firms must register with the Department of Justice. According to the FARA list of lobbyists by country, as of June 2018, Saudi Arabia was being represented within the US by 28 PR firms; Qatar, 24; United Arab Emirates, 16; Iraq, 15 firms and individuals; Israel, seven; and Egypt, three.<sup>134</sup> In addition, regional governments attempt to shape research agendas and elite opinions regarding the role and responsibilities of the US in the region by funding think-tanks in Washington, DC.<sup>135</sup>

In 2011, the Obama administration first declared a US 'pivot' from the Middle East to the Asia-Pacific region, but by the summer of 2015, a White House official acknowledged that 'about eighty percent of our main meetings at the National Security Council have focused on the Middle East.'<sup>136</sup> The sudden rise of ISIS, the growth of AQAP, and coercive diplomacy efforts targeted at Iran over its suspected nuclear weapons programme, prevented a mental shift away from the Middle East, or a significant adjustment in assets from the region towards Asia-Pacific. In February 2018, the

<sup>131</sup> The populations for all of the countries are based on the CIA World Factbook data as of June 2018, <https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/> (accessed 23 Aug. 2018).

<sup>132</sup> For example, the Tyndall Report documents the minute-by-minute content of the three national broadcast evening news shows. Tyndall Report, 2017 Year in Review, <http://tyndallreport.com/> (accessed 23 Aug. 2018).

<sup>133</sup> To see the amount of money foreign governments spend to shape opinions, see Opensecrets.org (undated), 'Foreign Lobby Watch', Center for Responsive Politics, <https://www.opensecrets.org/fara/> (accessed 18 Aug. 2018).

<sup>134</sup> US Department of Justice (undated), 'FARA Active Registrants by Country or Location as of 06/09/2018', [https://efile.fara.gov/pls/apex/f?p=185:11:0::NO:RP,11:P11\\_DATERANGE,P11\\_FROMDATE,P11\\_TODATE:Y,06%2F09%2F2018,06%2F09%2F2018](https://efile.fara.gov/pls/apex/f?p=185:11:0::NO:RP,11:P11_DATERANGE,P11_FROMDATE,P11_TODATE:Y,06%2F09%2F2018,06%2F09%2F2018) (accessed 23 Aug. 2018).

<sup>135</sup> Lipton, E., Williams, B. and Confessore, N. (2014), 'Foreign Powers Buy Influence at Think Tanks', *New York Times*, 6 September 2014, <https://www.nytimes.com/2014/09/07/us/politics/foreign-powers-buy-influence-at-think-tanks.html> (accessed 23 Aug. 2018); Grim, R. (2017), 'Gulf Government Gave Secret \$20 Million Gift to D.C. Think Tank', *The Intercept*, 9 August 2017, <https://theintercept.com/2017/08/09/gulf-government-gave-secret-20-million-gift-to-d-c-think-tank/> (accessed 23 Aug. 2018); Tibon, A. (2017), 'Hacks, Money, and Qatari Crisis: How Gulf States Entangled D.C. Think Tanks in Their Fight For Influence', *Haaretz*, 5 June 2017, <https://www.haaretz.com/us-news/.premium-how-gulf-states-entangled-d-c-think-tanks-in-their-fight-for-influence-1.5480528> (accessed 23 Aug. 2018).

<sup>136</sup> *The Economist* (2015), 'A Dangerous Modesty', 6 June 2015, <https://www.economist.com/briefing/2015/06/06/a-dangerous-modesty> (accessed 23 Aug. 2018).



Trump administration declared that while the Pentagon would continue to prioritize Asia-Pacific, the rebalancing of troops and capabilities to that region was no longer US policy.<sup>137</sup> Under the Trump administration, the Pentagon's long-term strategic organizing principle is making shows of strength, specifically to Russia and China.<sup>138</sup>

Nevertheless, as detailed above, the US military remains a robust permanent presence in the Middle East with greater numbers of troops now deployed there than under the previous administration. Those military assets and the regional relationships cultivated and sustained through formal and informal security cooperation programmes are crucial for achieving US objectives in the region. The US military is indeed 'stuck' in the region, with all of the associated human and financial costs, unintended consequences, and opportunities to shape and influence political and security outcomes. A fundamental shift in this military policy remains unimaginable at present.

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<sup>137</sup> US Government Accountability Office (2018), *Warfighter Support: An Assessment of DOD Documents Used in Previous Efforts to Rebalance to the Pacific*, Washington, D.C.: Government Accountability Office, 24 May 2018, <https://www.gao.gov/products/GAO-18-192> (accessed 23 Aug. 2018).

<sup>138</sup> US Department of Defense (2018), *Summary of the 2018 National Defense Strategy of the United States of America: Sharpening the American Military's Competitive Edge*.

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