Don’t rebuild America’s Persian Gulf bases



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OPINION



The collage of footage and images document Iran’s retaliatory missile and drone attacks against American and Israeli interests, air bases, and temporary shelters across the Middle East.
REUTERS

The war on Iran has been a wake-up call for US policymakers in many areas, from availability of US missile stocks to the plausibility of regime change in Iran. Perhaps the most shocking revelation has been the destruction wrought on America’s Persian Gulf bases, where Iranian attacks have pierced the notion of American military invulnerability. From Kuwait to Qatar and the United Arab Emirates, once-bustling bases are now ghost towns, with overhead imagery showing empty runways and buildings, their personnel and equipment evacuated in the face of Iranian missile and drone attacks.

We do not yet have a full picture of the costs of this war, which is ongoing, though Moody’s estimates it may have cost the average American household as much as $2,000. But quite aside from the costs of munitions or operations, in the aftermath of the conflict, the Trump administration and Congress will be faced with a decision: whether to fund base reconstruction or attempt to pass such costs on to host nations in the Persian Gulf. They should do neither.

Instead, policymakers should take this opportunity to rethink America’s force posture and basing infrastructure in the Persian Gulf. At the most basic level, what America needs is military access to the region in a crisis. This is not necessarily the same as a large, permanent presence, and the latter carries significant costs that mere contingency access does not. As Kelly Grieco and Max Bremer put it in Foreign Policy, we should “think of access as buying options on the stock market: For a relatively small premium, Washington can preserve choices for a crisis without paying the political, economic, and military costs of maintaining forces at every deployed location in peacetime.”

As policymakers consider how best to adapt after the end of this war, they should prioritize access over presence, and bear in mind the evidence of the last nine months, which suggests that bases are not needed even to effectively wage war in the region. Because they are so close to Iran, personnel stationed at these bases run a significant risk of death and injury from missile and drone strikes. And US interests in the region remain relatively narrow; US defense requirements in the region could easily be met by a small selection of bases outside the Persian Gulf.

A basing posture built for another era

The United States has had a major military presence in the Persian Gulf since the 1980s, though the nature of that presence has fluctuated with changing requirements, from the naval convoys of the 1980s to dual containment in the 1990s and the War on Terror in the 2000s. For much of the last decade, this presence has looked similar: around 30-50,000 US troops, including a naval presence primarily located in Bahrain, air bases in the United Arab Emirates and Qatar, and an Army presence predominantly in Kuwait. These bases have been used for everything from reconnaissance to air strikes against militant groups such as Daesh (ISIS), partner training and security assistance, and most recently, the war against Iran.

There has also been an active debate in recent years about the extent to which any of this US military presence in the Persian Gulf is strategically necessary. The need for troops in the region has declined substantially with the end of the War on Terror campaigns. Even mainstream analysts now tend to acknowledge that America’s Middle Eastern wars have often produced poor results, and American political opinion has turned decidedly against wars of regime change, humanitarian intervention, and democracy promotion. Yet a combination of inertia and repeated military flare-ups has kept the US presence in the Persian Gulf similar for much of the last decade.

The Trump administration’s choice to engage in war with Iran beginning in February 2026 has exposed how unsustainable America’s existing base structure in the Persian Gulf has become. The war has revealed four primary problems with that posture, each of which suggests that Washington should not return to the status quo in the aftermath of the Iran war. In ascending order of importance, these problems are: 1) the destruction wrought on bases and infrastructure by the war will be expensive and challenging to repair; 2) existing bases are increasingly vulnerable to new technologies that enable long-range and precision strikes; 3) attacks on these bases during the war have altered their benefits and costs for local partners, whose willingness to host them may decrease over time; and 4) the war itself has demonstrated that these bases are not necessary, even to wage war within the region itself.

Bill for rebuilding

Since the start of the American and Israeli war against Iran in February 2026, American bases in the Persian Gulf have suffered widespread destruction; Iran has hit at least 20 US military sites across the Middle East. These range from the US air base in Qatar (Al Udeid) — which suffered damage to its runways and communications infrastructure, and which found its Combined Air Operations Center unusable during the early days of the war — to a significant CIA installation in Saudi Arabia destroyed by drone attack.

As of May, Iran had damaged or destroyed an estimated 217 structures at US facilities across the region. And while imagery has been limited, meaning that open-source analysis is challenging, it is now well-documented that these strikes were not random. Instead, Iranian projectiles specifically targeted infrastructure and systems critical to sustaining US operations, including air defense and communications. These attacks also targeted equipment at these bases, with the Pentagon reporting $3.7 billion in equipment losses, including over 80 damaged or destroyed aircraft. In order to prevent further significant damage to equipment, many aircraft were removed from their host bases and sent to American bases in the Mediterranean or the Indian Ocean.

Personnel at these bases were forced to repeatedly take shelter against incoming missile and drone barrages, while the threat of air attacks rendered many bases too dangerous to staff at normal levels. As with equipment, during the early months of the war, personnel often had to be relocated: Many were moved from bases to other sites in their host countries, including hotels, where they had to “work remotely”. The costs have been high: At least 21 service members have died during the conflict so far, and over 865 have been wounded in these attacks.

Damage to America’s main regional naval base, Naval Support Activity Bahrain, demonstrates the problem. This base was repeatedly targeted from the outset of the war; located less than 140 miles from Iranian territory, it was within easy range of both missiles and drones. News analysis suggests that strikes caused extensive damage to at least a dozen buildings, including the command headquarters, and to critical satellite communications terminals, forcing the relocation of nearly all personnel. Seven months later, servicemembers and their families relocated due to the danger have still not been permitted to return, with Chief of Naval Operations Adm. Daryl Caudle saying in September that the Navy will not be “getting back in there anytime soon”.

> Iran’s attacks on US bases across the Persian Gulf have left Washington with a costly choice about what comes next. Congress and the Pentagon could spend billions rebuilding and hardening a regional basing network that proved dangerously vulnerable. Or they could take seriously one of the war’s clearest lessons: Even as many Persian Gulf bases suffered severe disruptions, the United States remained capable of conducting major military operations. Rather than rebuilding the old posture, or simply moving it elsewhere in the Middle East, the United States should adopt a smaller footprint built around access rather than permanent presence.



The photo shows damage done to the Prince Sultan Air Base, Saudi Arabia, from an Iranian retaliatory attack during the US-Israeli war of aggression in 2026.
ABC NEWS

Thus far, we do not have a good understanding of the full costs of base damage across the region. The Pentagon has pressured satellite firms to delay the release of high-resolution imagery and refused to make its damage estimates public or include them in its accounting of the war’s costs. After learning of the Pentagon’s reconstruction estimates in a classified briefing in October, five members of the Senate Armed Services Committee called on the department to make them public, writing that “disclosing these costs represents the bare minimum transparency DoD owes the public”. But with US officials reportedly estimating that rebuilding damaged bases could cost as much as $30 billion — with repairs to NSA Bahrain alone costing upwards of $400 million — the overall regional bill for damage will be significant.

Ongoing vulnerabilities

The extensive damage to US bases throughout this conflict is a reflection partly of their close proximity to Iran, but also of a shifting military balance in the region, and the growing salience of technology that allows for longer-range and precision strikes, even by weaker powers. In short: America’s basing architecture in the Persian Gulf was built for a substantially different military environment. During prior decades, the United States enjoyed almost overwhelming regional military superiority, particularly in the air, while Iran’s capabilities were far more limited and easier to defend against.

This balance has been changed by modern technology. In recent years, Iran has fielded increasingly capable missiles and innovative drones capable of striking targets accurately across the Persian Gulf. The United States may retain air superiority in its classic sense — that is to say, the Air Force has been able to operate effectively across Iran since the early days of the conflict. Despite this, both missiles and drones are still able to target US bases. Drones are particularly easy for Iranian forces to disperse, hide, and launch within their territory.

This is not to say that US air defenses are ineffective. American and allied defense systems intercepted more than 7,500 projectiles through the end of June. But the large number of low-cost projectiles produced by Iran almost inevitably means that some will get through. One estimate — that US and partner air defenses have missed up to 10% of incoming projectiles — shows how even a relatively small number of interception failures can produce significant damage.

One way to characterize this problem is cost disparity. Defending America’s regional bases is expensive; attacking is comparatively cheap. Missiles and drones can be intercepted by fighters, or by costly, scarce air defense interceptors. For instance, during an Iranian attack on Jordan in early September, the United States used up to 70 Patriot interceptors — each costing around $4 million — to defend against 20 Iranian ballistic missiles. The cost disparity is made worse by Iran’s large stockpile of cheap Shahed drones, which it uses in high-volume attacks meant to overwhelm air defenses.

Indeed, scale is perhaps the most significant problem. By August, the US military had reportedly expended around 80% of its THAAD inventory and around half of its Patriot interceptors, a number that will take around three years to backfill at pre-war production levels. With stockpiles running low, forces in the region have sometimes been forced to choose whether to use an interceptor or to absorb the damage on a case-by-case basis. Though the United States could undoubtedly mitigate some of this effect in the future through expensive base hardening, this cost asymmetry and the growing sophistication of Iran’s drone and missile systems make this an unpalatable option.

Allied risk-reward calculus

The war has highlighted another notable problem: the risks of hosting a US base for partner countries in the region. This is, in many ways, the opposite of what had long been assumed: that a US base would act as a deterrent to Iran and a defense for the host country. This impression has been bolstered by the fact that Iran has traditionally refrained from direct, large-scale attacks on its neighbors in the Persian Gulf, perceiving that the risks from doing so are higher than the benefits. Even when regional bases were used for more limited US strikes, Iran had largely avoided striking America’s regional partners.

Given the high stakes of this war, however, Tehran appears to have decided that restraint was no longer sufficient. During the first active phase of the war, Tehran struck at least eight countries in the region hosting US forces — the Persian Gulf Cooperation Council states, as well as Jordan and Iraq. Though the primary targets were the bases themselves, the Persian Gulf states also suffered attacks more broadly, including civilian infrastructure and energy production facilities.

These attacks have generated significant discussion within the region about the benefits and risks of hosting US bases. For instance, Emirati commentator Abdulkhaleq Abdulla, who is close to the UAE leadership, wrote: “It is time