to think about closing the American bases … they are a burden and not a strategic asset." Hundreds of public figures in Jordan signed an open letter in late July calling for the withdrawal of US forces from their country. Thus far, there has been no overt indication that governments in the region seek to remove US forces from their countries or would be willing to abandon their security ties with the United States, but these debates pose several problems for the future of US basing in the region.

The first is related to access. Host countries may in the future demand greater say over the activities that are conducted from bases on their territory; they may reconsider whether they are willing to accept the risks posed by US military action. Many Persian Gulf states were opposed to this war, yet had to bear its risks nonetheless. Access and overflight restrictions are one way in which these states can make their voices heard in the future. Indeed, during the conflict itself, the Saudi government refused to grant airspace access rights to US forces to engage in the abortive Project Freedom, an effort to escort ships through the Strait of Hormuz under US military protection.

A second problem is financial. Host governments in the Persian Gulf have long paid a significant share of the cost of building military infrastructure, along with maintenance and upkeep. Al Udeid Air Base in Qatar, for example, is a joint air base shared between American and Qatari forces and paid for in large part by the Qatari government. There have been open discussions in regional media about whether governments should be willing to pay the high costs of rebuilding bases after this conflict is done — or whether these costs should be passed on to the United States. One easy way for such states to get around the political difficulty of offending the United States by limiting base access would simply be to demur when asked to pay for repairs. Pentagon officials have said that decisions about which installations to rebuild will be determined by host governments' willingness to help pay.

Shifting strategic needs

Thus far, we have largely discussed the vulnerabilities revealed by the war. Yet the conflict has also revealed other strategic shifts. One such shift is that unlike other recent Middle East campaigns, much of this war was conducted without the use of Persian Gulf bases. Assets were often moved out of the region or elsewhere within it, and with long-range bombing and precision strikes remarkably effective on a tactical level even from a longer distance.

As one New York Times story described this dynamic: "Much of the land-based military is, in essence, fighting the war while working remotely, with the exception of fighter pilots and crews operating and maintaining warplanes and conducting strikes." Even air assets have typically been deployed from longer distances, meaning that the United States was able to continue major operations in the region even after personnel and equipment were dispersed in the early days of the war.

The case of Al Udeid in Qatar is again instructive here. The base hosts the US Air Force's Combined Air Operations Center, which was rendered inoperable by Iranian strikes early in the conflict. Yet the Air Force had anticipated this, moving management operations for the war to Shaw Air Force Base in South Carolina, where many of the formerly deployed personnel had been shifted before the war began. Likewise, with America's naval base in Bahrain seriously damaged, the bulk of the Navy's logistics and supply functions were moved out of the Persian Gulf to Diego Garcia in the Indian Ocean.

Certainly, each of these shifts created some logistical and practical problems, such as the reported issues with supplying US aircraft carriers and other surface ships, some of which arose from the shift to Diego Garcia. These issues, however, were mostly created by the sudden shift of facilities during wartime, rather than any inherent problem with using these more distant facilities, and can likely be mitigated with proper planning. Whether these challenges are long-term problems for military effectiveness must be weighed against the significant vulnerabilities of Persian Gulf bases. The war, in short, offered a real-world test of the argument that large permanent US bases in the region are indispensable if the US needs to engage in conflict there.

Rebuilding in the Persian Gulf?

This lesson matters because Congress and the Pentagon are approaching an expensive, consequential decision about what happens next. Estimates of physical damage to US bases already run into the billions. CSIS puts the cost of repairing damaged bases and fixed infrastructure at up to $9.4 billion. Since that figure was published in June and is based only on publicly identifiable damage, it likely understates the real total.

These costs are on top of an already expensive war. In late October, the Pentagon estimated that the cost of the war was already over $47 billion, a number that will likely only grow as the war rumbles on. The war has also hit the US consumer economy hard, increasing inflation and energy prices, costing the average household several thousand dollars in extra expenses.

The Pentagon itself has not decided what it intends to rebuild. According to a recent Inspector General report, the Pentagon "did not include the cost of military construction for damaged infrastructure in its estimate because the DoW has not determined what its future posture will be in the region [and] how it will construct its bases." That uncertainty is therefore an opportunity.

In August, the Pentagon launched a review of the US presence in the Middle East, with a particular focus on whether to scale back the US footprint in the Persian Gulf. As a Washington Post report put it, the war has created a "once-in-a-generation" chance to rethink a basing structure that has otherwise persisted mostly out of inertia.



Smoke rises after Iran launched a missile attack targeting the headquarters of the US Navy's Fifth Fleet in Manama, Bahrain, on February 28, 2026.
AA

> If Congress were to decline to rebuild Persian Gulf bases, one option would be moving US forces westward within the region to Israel and Jordan. But simply relocating the Persian Gulf basing network a few hundred miles farther west or hardening existing facilities in place misses the larger lessons of the war and would do nothing to address the underlying problem of large, fixed installations sitting in Iran's backyard.
> For one thing, Iranian missile and drone capabilities continue to improve, just as they have over the last decade.

Washington should take full advantage of this opportunity. For its part, Congress should require a broader, formal reassessment of the regional posture before appropriating billions to rebuild a basing architecture whose risks and downsides the war has already made plain.

In-region relocation

If Congress were to decline to rebuild Persian Gulf bases, one option would be moving US forces westward within the region to Israel and Jordan, which are both farther from Iran and perceived as more supportive of US operations during the war. The Pentagon appears receptive to this idea, and on its face, the notion has some appeal. But simply relocating the Persian Gulf basing network a few hundred miles farther west or hardening existing facilities in place misses the larger lessons of the war and would do nothing to address the underlying problem of large, fixed installations sitting in Iran's backyard.

For one thing, there is little reason to assume that facilities that are comparatively safer today will remain so indefinitely. Iranian missile and drone capabilities continue to improve, just as they have over the last decade, and while the longer distance between these bases and Iran makes it easier to intercept incoming missiles and drones, it is not a guarantee. Even during this conflict, as the United States shifted more aircraft and personnel to Jordan, Iran increasingly targeted facilities within the country; three US servicemembers were killed there in July.

Basing in Israel also carries political problems. It would tie US force posture to a partner whose decisions Washington does not control, and whose conduct in the region has been increasingly destabilizing. Israel's declining popularity in the United States has become a hot button issue, particularly among younger voters incensed about the Israeli war in Gaza. Increasing the US footprint in that country would further entangle US forces with Israeli forces as they continue to pursue military action in Gaza — and would likely become a point of political contention in future elections, making it fundamentally unstable as a long-term option for US presence.

Rather than simply relocating bases within the region, Congress and the administration should instead interrogate the idea that the United States needs a large permanent footprint in the Middle East. The war with Iran has only strengthened existing arguments that large bases and forward presence are unnecessary for America's limited interests in the region. Washington's core regional interests are relatively narrow and do not require permanently stationing tens of thousands of troops across the Middle East.

For one thing, a large base network is not required to maintain a favorable regional balance of power. The Middle East is politically fragmented, and regional states have repeatedly shown that they will balance against one another. No state, inside the region or out, is positioned to dominate it. The same is true for the protection of energy flows. If a large permanent presence were the key to protecting energy flows, Washington's sprawling collection of bases should have prevented the most severe disruption to global energy markets in recent history. Ironically, US regional presence intended to protect the flow of oil lowered the barriers to a war that ended up disrupting it.

Counterterrorism is another weak justification for America's existing regional posture. The War on Terror should have put to rest the idea that large conventional deployments are an efficient way to deal with terrorist organizations. Where large deployments were used, such as in Afghanistan, they proved costly, politically corrosive, and, in some cases, counterproductive. Meanwhile, the threat posed by terror groups to the American homeland has fallen sharply. What threat remains can be managed through "over the horizon" strikes, cooperation with local partners, and smaller special operations raids when necessary.

A final point is worth emphasizing: A lighter US presence in the region would be less a departure from tradition than a return to it. During much of the Cold War — when preventing Soviet domination of the Middle East was arguably a more important US interest than anything at stake there today — the United States kept a comparatively light footprint. Washington relied heavily on regional states to balance one another and retained the ability to intervene when the balance broke down. Washington is well positioned to return to this kind of regional strategy.

Access, not garrisons

The key question for policymakers is thus what structure or system should replace the US bases damaged during the war with Iran. The United States may well need military access to the Middle East in the future (i.e., the ability to operate there when it chooses). Policymakers should thus focus on access, and not on presence — the maintenance of permanent bases in the region — when making decisions about the future of the US in the Persian Gulf. A focus on access over presence would suggest not rebuilding existing facilities and instead relocating necessary functions and units to logical alternative locations. Command and support functions should be a priority as they are both the easiest to move and among the most exposed. During the war, these functions quickly shifted to Shaw Air Force Base in South Carolina and to Diego Garcia in the Indian Ocean, respectively. Such moves should be permanent. Functions that can be performed from South Carolina or the Indian Ocean do not require US forces to be concentrated mere miles from Iranian territory.

Extra-regional facilities can also absorb most of the necessary remaining military functions. Diego Garcia, Djibouti, and existing bases in Europe can provide effective locations for intelligence, sustainment, and long-range strike capabilities, all while sitting outside the reach of most Iranian systems. Although the war in Iran has been a strategic failure, the military campaign was tactically successful, despite the need to use extra-regional bases to host forces involved in Operation Epic Fury. US forces flew 5,000 sorties from European bases in the war's first wave of fighting, with Europe serving as "the launch platform and sustainment backbone" of the war effort, according to the Pentagon's Inspector General. Even if US forces in Europe were to be dramatically downsized as part of the administration's NATO 3.0 push, some air facilities in Western Europe would likely remain to fulfill such needs. And the need for even extra-regional bases would be dramatically lessened if future administrations finally swear off America's addiction to Middle Eastern regime-change wars.

This then leaves the question of what should be done with existing Persian Gulf facilities. For the most part, this should be decided on a case-by-case basis, with an eye to damage suffered during the war. The naval facilities at NSA Bahrain could be replaced or significantly downsized rather than rebuilt in their previous form or "revamped," as the Pentagon is considering. If it is retained at all, Bahrain should serve as a modest port facility for sustaining naval forces, rather than the region's principal naval hub.

Similar logic applies to air bases. There is some merit to sustaining a transit hub in the Persian Gulf that can offer peacetime use, contingency access, and prepositioning, rather than permanent combat capability. If Washington wishes, a smaller facility in Qatar or the UAE could fulfill this role. For the Army, the most obvious candidates for closure are its facilities in Kuwait, largely holdovers from the Iraq wars, and among the sites Iran hit hardest. There is no real benefit to sustaining even a smaller base in this case.

For the United States, a posture built on access rather than presence would preserve military flexibility, allowing the United States to surge forces when needed without keeping them permanently exposed when they are not. It would be strategically sound, leaving Iran fewer American targets and reducing the risk of US forces becoming tripwires. And in a resource-constrained environment, it could free up billions in reconstruction spending for more pressing challenges.

It is cliché to note that crises often offer opportunities. Yet the damage done to America's bases during the war with Iran this year does offer an opportunity for policymakers to rethink US posture in the Middle East from first principles, rather than falling back on our existing network of bases due largely to inertia.

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