

# NEW U.S. MILITARY BASES : SIDE EFFECTS OR CAUSES OF WAR?

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## US and UK forces establish 'enduring bases' in Iraq

Despite talk of withdrawal 'when the job is done', there are signs that coalition troops will be there for the long term

by Andrew Buncombe, *The Independent* (London), 2 April 2006

[http://news.independent.co.uk/world/middle\\_east/article355178.ece](http://news.independent.co.uk/world/middle_east/article355178.ece)

The Pentagon has revealed that coalition forces are spending millions of dollars establishing at least six "enduring" bases in Iraq - raising the prospect that US and UK forces could be involved in a long-term deployment in the country. It said it assumed British troops would operate one of the bases. Almost ever since President Bush claimed an end to "major combat operations" in Iraq on 1 May 2003, debate has focused on how quickly troops could be withdrawn. The US and British governments say troops will remain in Iraq "until the job is done". Yet while the withdrawal of a substantial number of troops remains an aim, it has become increasingly clear that the Pentagon and the Ministry of Defence (MoD) are preparing to retain some forces in Iraq for the longer term. The US currently has around 130,000 troops in Iraq; Britain has 8,000.

Major Joseph Bresseale, a senior spokesman for the coalition forces' headquarters in Iraq, told *The Independent* on Sunday: "The current plan is to reduce the coalition footprint into six consolidation bases - four of which are US. As we move in that direction, some other bases will have to grow to facilitate the closure [or] transfer of smaller bases." He added: "Right now, I don't have any information that tells me which nationality will comprise the remaining two bases, though my assumption is that at least one will be run by the Brits." An MoD spokesperson said British forces were currently operating out of eight bases in southern Iraq, with a small contingent based in Baghdad, and that "discussions with coalition forces relating to future basing are still at a very early stage. Nothing has been agreed." The official added: "We have no intention of remaining, or indeed retaining bases in Iraq long-term. We will leave Iraq as soon as the democratically elected Iraqi government is confident that its security forces have the capability and capacity to counter terrorism and to preserve the security of democracy there."

A senior military source recently told the IoS that some British troops could be expected to stay in Iraq in a training role for years to come. There would be no British presence in the urban areas, however. The American and British governments say they remain in Iraq at the invitation of the interim Iraqi government, and would leave if asked to do so. The Pentagon says it has already reduced the number of US bases from 110 a year ago to a current total of around 75. But at the same time it is expanding a number of vast, highly defended bases, some in the desert away from large population areas. More than \$280m (£160m) has already been spent on building up Al Asad air base, Balad air base, Camp Taji and Tallil air base, and the Bush administration has this year requested another \$175m to enlarge them. These bases, which currently house more than 55,000 troops, have their own bus routes, pizza restaurants and supermarkets.

Adam Price, Plaid Cymru MP for Carmarthen East and a persistent critic of the Iraq war, said it would be "very, very worrying" if British troops were to be involved in a long-term deployment. "Certainly the mood music has all been about the withdrawal of troops," he said. "Now we are just starting to see the glimmers of what may be the real policy." Some analysts believe the desire to establish a long-term US military presence in Iraq was always one of the reasons behind the 2003 invasion. Joseph Gerson, a historian of American military bases, said: "The Bush administration's intention is to have a long-term military presence in the region ... For a number of years the US has sought to use a number of means to make sure it dominates in the Middle East ... The Bush administration sees Iraq as an unsinkable aircraft carrier for its troops and bases for years to come."

Zoltan Grossman, a geographer at Evergreen State College in Washington, said: "After every US military intervention since 1990 the Pentagon has left behind clusters of new bases in areas where it never before had a foothold. The new string of bases stretch from Kosovo and adjacent Balkan states, to Iraq and other Persian Gulf states, into Afghanistan and other central Asian states ... The only two obstacles to a geographically contiguous US sphere of influence are Iran and Syria."

The US and UK repeatedly say the timetable is dependent upon success in training Iraqi forces. Progress in this area has been slow; in February the Pentagon admitted the only Iraqi battalion judged capable of fighting without US support had been downgraded, requiring it to fight with American troops.

## US bases in Iraq: a costly legacy

by David R. Francis, *Christian Science Monitor*,

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United States taxpayers have spent an inflation-adjusted \$1 trillion to keep military bases in South Korea since the war ended there in 1953. Those bases remain in place, though they are shrinking. Some military analysts wonder if 20 or so years from now the US will still have costly "enduring" bases in Iraq. ("Permanent" is a term the Pentagon generally avoids in referring to the hundreds of bases it has around the globe.)

Alternatively, should the US decide to leave Iraq - perhaps because a full-fledged civil war puts American armed forces in a too-perilous position - the personnel and their equipment could be flown out quickly. "They could come home in a month," calculates John Pike, director of Globalsecurity.com, a website specializing in military affairs.

Maybe three months, figures Gordon Adams, head of Security Policy Studies at George Washington University in Washington, D.C. Hiring Ukraine's huge Antonov cargo planes might speed the process. So far, though, it seems clear that the Pentagon would prefer to keep its bases in Iraq. It has already spent \$1 billion or more on them, outfitting some with underground bunkers and other characteristics of long-term bases. The \$67.6 billion emergency bill to cover Iraq and Afghanistan military costs includes \$348 million for further base construction.

That supplemental appropriation was passed last month by the House and will soon come before the Senate. With the midterm congressional elections eight months away, there is a widespread assumption the Pentagon will withdraw goodly numbers of US troops from Iraq before then. But no top American or British authority has ruled out keeping permanent bases in Iraq.

"At the moment, there are no plans for long-term bases in the country," Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld told a marine during a question-and-answer session last December. But he also said the US might discuss basing American troops in Iraq with a new Iraqi government. When President Bush told the press March 21 that it will be decided by "future presidents and future governments of Iraq" when there will be no American forces in Iraq, his words intensified speculation that several of the approximately 75 bases in Iraq will remain occupied by US forces for an extended period.

Maybe not, though. The Iraq war has become so unpopular in this country that a resolution declaring the US has "no plan to establish a permanent ... military presence in Iraq" passed the House last month without a single Republican "nay." The resolution was inserted into the \$67.6 billion bill by Rep. Thomas Allen (D) of Maine. Mr. Allen expects that when the Senate considers a similar bill this month, his resolution - though it has no power to force action by Mr. Bush - is likely to be removed by the Republican leadership. But, he says, many Iraqis believe the real goal of the US invasion was to assure access to Iraq's huge oil reserves. The fact of permanent bases would tend to confirm that fear and thus fuel the insurgency.

That concern may be why military officials dodge the issue of permanent American bases in Iraq. In any case, some US bases are huge. Camp Anaconda, near Balad (north of Baghdad), occupies 15 square miles, boasts two swimming pools, a gym, a miniature-golf course, and a first-run movie theater, says Mr. Jamail. Of the airbase's 20,000 occupants, fewer than 1,000 ever leave it and thereby take extra risk of attack.

Experts and academics offer various strategic reasons for the bases. Zoltan Grossman, a geographer at Evergreen State College in Olympia, Wash., notes that since the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989 the US has established a string of 35 new bases between Poland and Pakistan, not including the Iraqi bases. He maintains the US is establishing a "sphere of influence" in that region. "It's very dangerous," he argues. It invites attacks on the bases and risks pulling the US into the ethnic and religious conflicts of the area. It also could result in "blow back" to the US, just as American bases in Saudi Arabia motivated in part the Sept. 11, 2001, attacks.

Another theory, put forward by Joseph Gerson, author of a book on US bases worldwide and director of an American Friends Service Committee program on peace, is that the war and bases aim at maintaining US control over the Middle East with its massive oil resources. The US has placed 400,000 personnel in bases around the world, he says. Stationing military forces abroad can be more expensive than keeping them at home. The cost to keep bases in Iraq open would be "a few billions" a year, suggests Mr. Pike. The extra costs could include rotating forces home, combat pay, and separation allowances for military families, as well as fuel for planes, tanks, etc. So far, the Iraq war has cost the US \$280 billion.

Pike suspects the US will find "all kinds of reasons" for not leaving Iraq. For instance, the US has been training Iraqi combat units, but not support units. The Iraqis rely on being resupplied by the US and its allies. The Iraqi military has no combat planes and only a couple of dozen tanks. Iraq, says Pike, is a US "protectorate." It hasn't yet built "a real army."

Or the US could argue that, as an occupying power, it has an obligation to see it leaves behind a stable government. That could take years. Or the US could say that its troops must stay to prevent a bloody civil war. Besides, today's US peace movement is "completely pathetic," Pike says, and thus unlikely to compel a quick exodus.