IRAN PROVED ITS POINT

An Analytical Commentary by **Dr. Haider Alkhateeb** | Political Committee, **Enki Foundation for Research and Studies**

Enki Foundation for Studies and Research

Like many of us following the Middle East 'situation', we are introduced to so many facts that sometimes you have to stop and think. The number 750, for example, caught my eye.

So what is the matter with this number? According to the Quincy Institute, it represents roughly how many military bases the United States maintains across 80 countries. More than Britain, China, and Russia combined.

To understand the rationale behind such a policy you need to go back to the 1940s. This is where Nicholas Spykman laid the intellectual foundation, arguing that American security depended on controlling the coastal rimlands surrounding Eurasia, keeping rivals contained, keeping allies close, keeping shipping lanes open. Every base built after 1945 was, in some sense, an application of that logic. It was a strategic national security doctrine. And for a long time, it delivered what it promised.

In the years that followed, those bases came to represent proof of something: power, reach, and dominance. The ability to be everywhere at once. Then on 28 February, the Middle East 'situation' turned that logic on its head. Washington was now forced to bring this policy to the table and ask a question it had long

avoided. Are 750 bases dispersed across the globe a strategic advantage, or 750 liabilities?

Naturally you may question this: did they not see this coming? The evidence says they did, and chose to proceed anyway. Gulf states had explicitly warned Washington before the operation began. A senior Saudi official told AFP that the Gulf trio conveyed the message directly: an attack on Iran would open the way for a series of grave blowbacks in the region. Washington went ahead regardless. What happened next surprised nobody who had been paying attention, except, apparently, the President himself. Speaking after Iranian missiles struck Qatar, Saudi Arabia, the UAE, Bahrain and Kuwait, Trump admitted: "They weren't supposed to go after all these other countries in the Middle East. Nobody expected that." Maybe arrogance. Because logic would contradict this.

It is not as though the strategic warning signs were absent either. Yes, this strategy served Washington well through the Cold War and beyond, and it remains the foundation of US defence policy today. But the warnings were there. David Vine, Professor of Political Anthropology at American University, flagged precisely these concerns in his book Base Nation. His conclusion made uncomfortable reading for Washington strategists: far from making America safer, the extensive network of overseas bases raises geopolitical tensions, provokes hostility in the countries that host them, and imposes political and financial costs the Pentagon has never been fully prepared to acknowledge. The bases, he argued, do not project strength so much as they project exposure. **Washington largely ignored him. On February 28th, Iran reminded them.**

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I consider myself to have some insight into the legal architecture of decisions to go to war, the key variables and conditions that justify force, what sustains it, and what eventually hollows it out. When it came

to Operation Epic Fury, I was not surprised it ran into trouble. I was surprised by where the trouble came from. Not from Iran's air force, its land troops, or its navy. The trouble came from something Washington had neglected: what happens when an adversary has spent decades building a military system specifically designed to absorb the worst you can do and keep going, and this is not something new. The Iran-Iraq war is not a distant reminder of Iran's capacity to withstand and absorb sustained military aggression over many years.

Iran's "mosaic defence", a network of semi-autonomous IRGC units, each with its own weapons, its own intelligence, its own command chain, was built precisely for this. It is a system designed to keep functioning when the people at the top are gone. Khamenei was killed before the week was out. The missiles kept coming. That was the point. You do not break this kind of structure by decapitating it. It was built so that you cannot.

The economics tell their own story. A Shahed drone costs between $20,000 and $50,000 to produce. A single Patriot interceptor costs roughly $4 million to fire. Iran did not need to win the exchange. It just needed to keep forcing it. In asymmetric warfare, that is often enough.

And it has proved enough to force a reconsideration.

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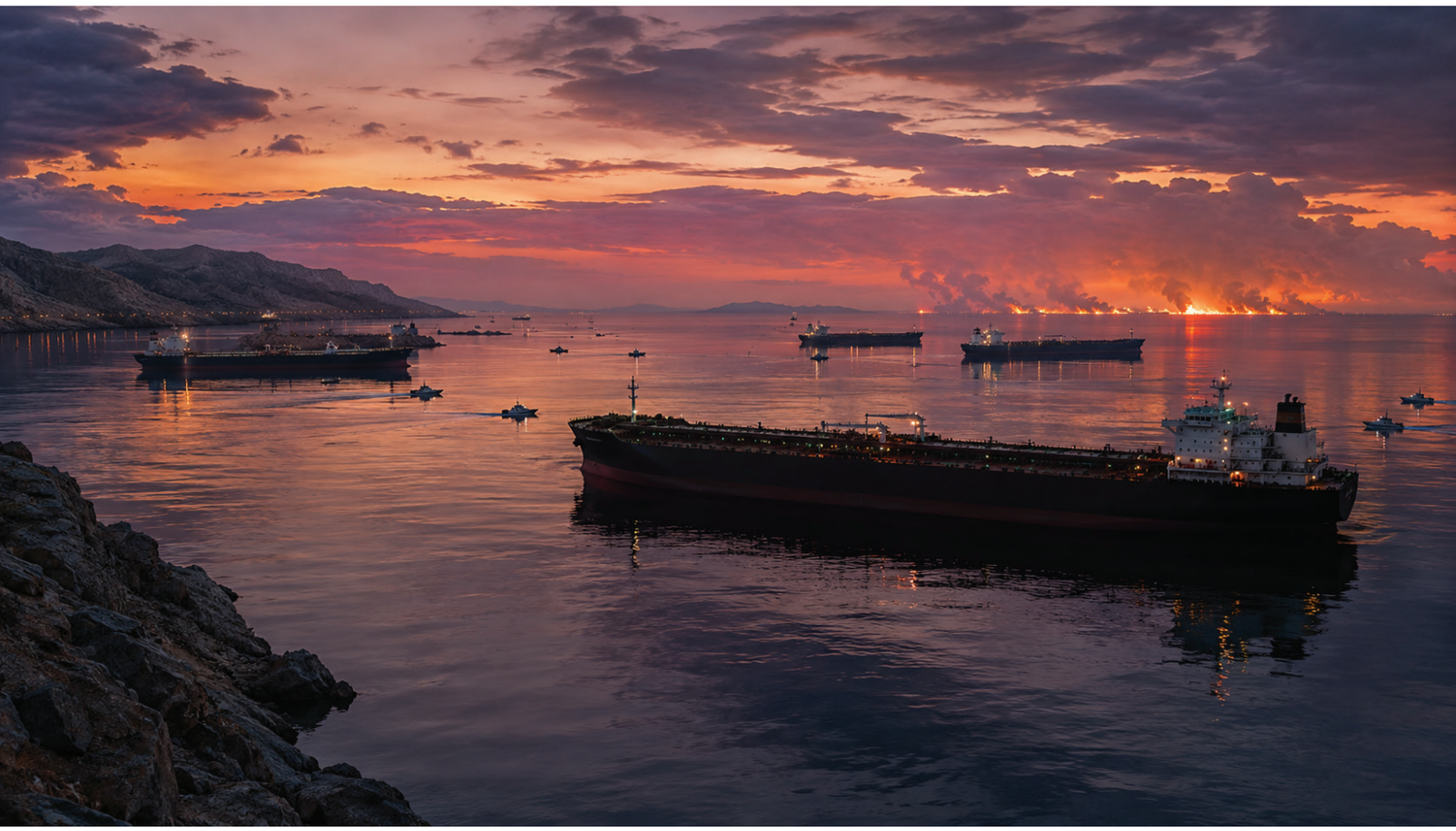
Look at the numbers. Sixteen US military sites were damaged across eight countries. Bahrain's Fifth Fleet headquarters alone carries a repair estimate of $200 million. A runway at Al Udeid in Qatar was put out of action. In Kuwait, Camp Buehring was struck by an Iranian F-5 fighter jet, the first time an enemy fixed-wing aircraft had hit a US base in years, NBC reported. AWACS planes were caught on the ground at various locations, each worth around $500 million, part of a fleet already run down from over 30 aircraft to around 16 before this conflict began. The production line shut in 1992. The earliest replacements arrive in the 2030s. You cannot order another one. US personnel were

quietly moved to nearby hotels. The bases themselves had become unsafe.

Jules Hurst III, the Pentagon's acting Chief Financial Officer, told the House Armed Services Committee on 29 April that the war had cost roughly $25 billion so far. Most of it munitions, he said. What he did not include, because he could not yet, was the cost of rebuilding what was destroyed. Sources familiar with the damage assessments put the actual figure closer to $40 – 50 billion. The Pentagon's $1.5 trillion budget request for next year does not account for any of it. Hegseth declined to say whether the $25 billion even included base repairs. It did not.

Jennifer Kavanagh, who directs military analysis at Defense Priorities and previously worked at RAND and Carnegie, has been the most rigorous Western analyst on what this reveals. Her piece in Responsible Statecraft made the case directly: the US has spent decades assuming forward bases are defensible, that carriers and bombers



and fighter jets allow it to project power even against adversaries on their home terrain. After this conflict, she writes, those assumptions do not hold. If they ever did.

I think Kavanagh is right. But her argument, valuable as it is, stays largely inside a Washington frame, focused on what this means for a future war with China, for Taiwan contingency planning, for the Pacific posture. That is an important conversation. It is not the only one.

The Gulf states that host these bases did not choose this war. Kuwait did not. Bahrain did not. Qatar did not. As Hind Al Ansari wrote in Middle East Eye, Gulf states were reduced to collateral damage in a war they hoped their alliances would keep at bay. They were not treated as allies worthy of protection. They became expendable spaces within a theatre of war. Saudi Arabia's Foreign Ministry, in a statement that was diplomatically worded but unmistakably pointed, confirmed the Kingdom had been targeted despite having told Iran explicitly it would not allow its airspace to be used for strikes. The subtext was clear: we said no to this conflict, and we were bombed anyway.

Professor Vali Nasr, at Johns Hopkins and one of the sharpest analysts of Iranian strategy, put it plainly at a CSIS panel: "The US ultimately was not only unable or unwilling to defend the Gulf countries, it couldn't actually defend itself." The bases, he said, were damaged beyond what anyone expected. The model was simple: surround Iran with installations, defend them at will. It was exposed.

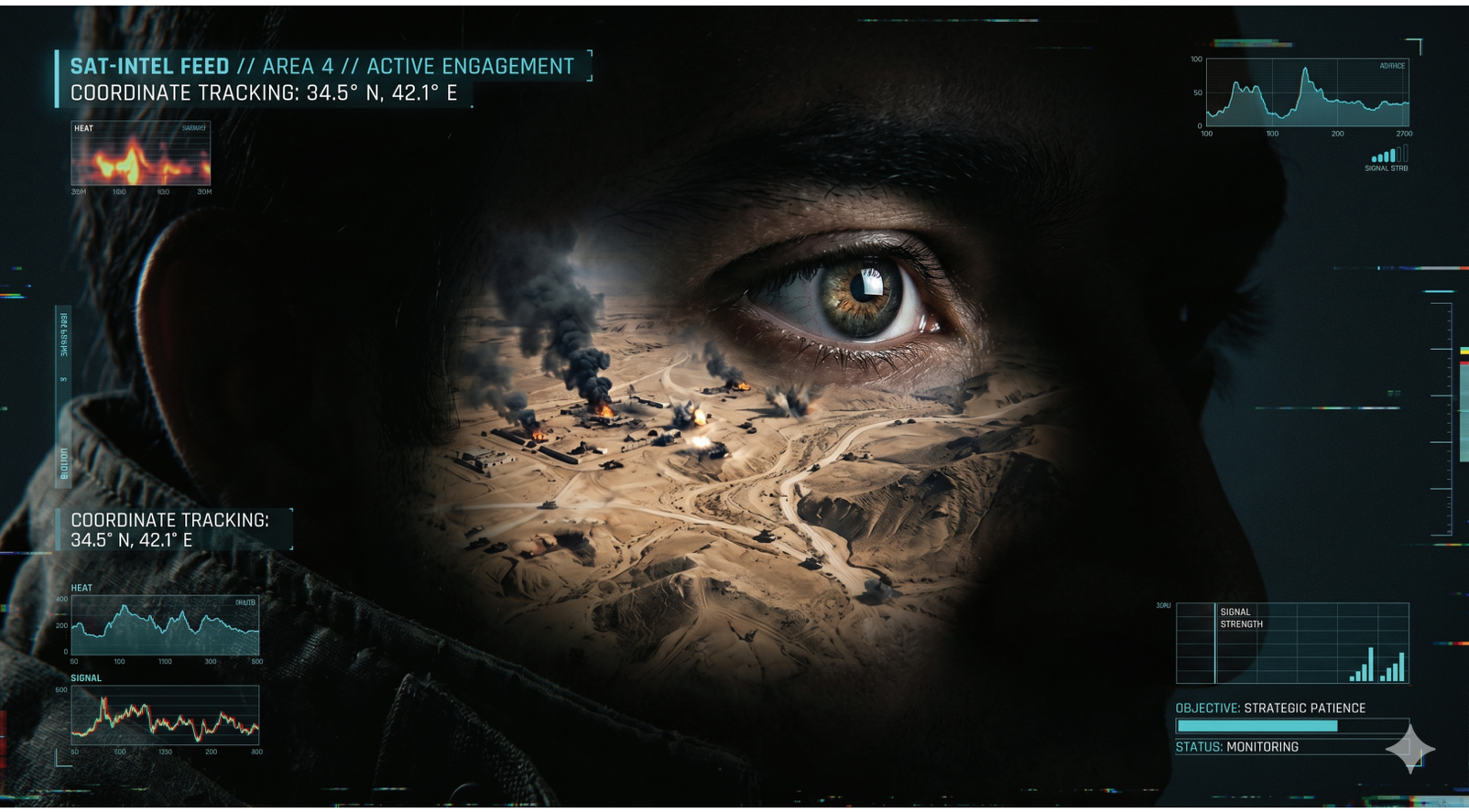
The bases did not deter the attack. The technology did not prevent the damage. The countries that paid were not the countries that decided.

Abdulkhaleq Abdulla, the Emirati commentator with close ties to Abu Dhabi's leadership, said what many in the region were beginning to think: it is time to close the American bases. They have become, he wrote, a burden rather than a strategic asset. That is an Emirati voice, not a Qatari dissident or an Iranian state broadcaster. The shift in elite Gulf thinking is real.

And it goes further than the question of whether to close the bases. Chatham House has noted that Saudi Arabia and the UAE are already among the largest purchasers of Chinese defence technology, and that both may be calculating that deepening that relationship is a prudent post-war strategy. The question being asked quietly in Gulf capitals is not simply whether to close the American bases. It is what to build in their place, and with whom.

Omar Rahman captured the structural problem in Foreign Policy: when Washington makes choices that pull the Gulf into conflicts it did not ask for, the logic of hosting US forces becomes much harder to defend. **The bases were supposed to deter. Instead, they drew fire.**

Meanwhile, Iran negotiates. Before the conflict, around 3,000 vessels transited the Strait of Hormuz each month. In March, it was 154. The Strait is still contested as I write this. Oil is still above $100. The leverage Iran purchased with cheap drones and a doctrine of organised resilience has proved, so far, more durable than Washington anticipated.



Professor Nasr's read on it: the longer the war continues, the more Iran's leverage grows, and the more Washington's strategic calculations look like they missed something fundamental.

On the security front, the chink in the armour has appeared. Those waiting on the sidelines saw it clearly. Chinese spy satellites were tracking US base locations. Russian intelligence was monitoring the movement of American forces. Neither country entered the conflict. Neither needed to. In the calculus of great power competition, the most valuable commodity is sometimes not intervention but patience. Watch long enough, help just enough, and let events do the rest. They did exactly that. And things transpired accordingly. Chatham House put it more precisely than most: Washington's maximum pressure campaign against Iran may be inadvertently helping China win the long game it has been playing in the region for decades. That word, inadvertently, is the one Washington has not yet fully confronted.

This raises the vacuum question, and it is more complicated than it first appears. The assumption in Washington has always been that any reduction in US presence triggers a scramble: China moves in, Russia moves in, someone fills the space. The Quincy Institute's analysts challenge this directly. Russia lacks the capacity to serve as a regional security guarantor. China has the capacity but not the inclination. It has no interest in repeating America's mistakes, and those mistakes are now documented in satellite imagery and congressional testimony alike. What Beijing is doing is considerably more patient. Benefiting strategically from the diversion of US military assets, it does not need bases. It is watching. And while it watches, it is building something Washington is not. Zakaria, writing in the Washington Post, captured the contrast governments around the world are beginning to draw: the United States brings volatility. China brings equipment, credit and continuity. That distinction is not lost on the Gulf states currently absorbing the cost of this war.

Russia's calculation is the simplest of all. It just needs oil above $100. Iran was charging vessels $2

million a passage through the Strait in March. The US naval blockade, imposed on 13 April, has since cost Tehran an estimated $4.8 billion in lost revenue. Two powers blocking each other, a waterway that handles a fifth of the world's seaborne oil trade sitting paralysed, and Moscow making billions extra each month without having dispatched a single ship. Some strategies take years to build. This one required only patience.

So what does the reconfiguration of US presence actually look like in practice? Not China and Russia rushing to plant flags in Bahrain. Something quieter and more corrosive. A region in which American presence is damaged, expensive, and politically contested by its own hosts, while rivals accumulate advantages they did not have to fight for.

America has enormous technological advantages. That is not the argument. The argument is that technological superiority does not automatically produce political outcomes. Not when the adversary has built its entire doctrine around absorbing what your technology can do and continuing to function. Iran understood that and has been building for it over thirty years.

Seven hundred and fifty bases. And a country with no carrier group, a currency in freefall, and its leadership killed on the opening night made the entire model bleed.

Islamabad will determine the terms. Whether the Strait reopens, whether Iranian missiles stand down, whether oil finds its way back below $100. Those are not small questions. But they are the short-term questions. The longer one is being asked quietly in Riyadh, in Manama, in Doha, and here in Baghdad. It is not about which great power fills the gap. It is about whether the arrangement that has governed this region's security for decades still makes sense after an event that so publicly exposed what it cannot do. **The bases did not deter the attack. The technology did not prevent the damage. The countries that paid were not the countries that decided.**

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