



By: *Nawaf Obaid*

# American planes leave, American pressure remains



The **US air operation** in the Middle East is entering a new phase. Some of the tactical aircraft deployed during the war in Central Command's area of responsibility are returning to European bases, supported by tanker aircraft and organised into several separate waves.

This return indicates that the wartime tempo is easing and that the Pentagon is shifting from a mode of immediate combat employment to one focused on deterrence, force recovery, and the maintenance of long-term pressure.

**CENTCOM** oversees the most sensitive area of US military deployment outside Europe and the Indo-Pacific: the Gulf, Iraq, Syria, Iran, the Red Sea and the broader Middle East.

When a crisis in that region approaches the point of war, the US military increases the number of fighter jets, tankers, reconnaissance platforms, command systems, transport aircraft, technical teams and logistical support. During this latest escalation, that additional deployment was directed to the region.

Now part of the same structure is returning. This change carries military and political weight, because the phase of the war is measured not only by the number of strikes, but also by the direction in which the assets that enable strikes to be planned, executed and repeated are moving.

The return is organised through **Coronet East**, the US system for moving tactical aviation over long distances with aerial refuelling, relying on European reception bases.

Such deployment requires precise planning of routes, tankers, reserve airfields, maintenance, crews and communications. For this reason, the current pattern carries more weight than a regular rotation, as it shows that part of the force assembled for the war is now being moved into a recovery phase.

**Washington** retains the ability to strike again and rapidly build up its presence if Iran or a regional crisis once more raises the level of risk. The **US military** remains in the region

through bases, naval forces, missile defence systems, surveillance, specialised units and command structures that can support a new operation.

However, the current pattern of aircraft movements indicates that the Pentagon is no longer maintaining the previous level of wartime presence in the CENTCOM area. The deployment that supported the main combat phase is beginning to break down.

## Why tankers are key

In this type of movement, the most important indicator is not the fighter aircraft themselves, but the **tanker aircraft** that accompany them. Fighter aircraft may be moved for rotation, maintenance, reassignment or regrouping. When several **tankers** support return flights from the Middle East to Europe, the organised nature of the operation becomes evident.

During the escalation, the tankers increased their range, sustained the tempo and extended the time fighter jets could remain in the air. Now the same support is being used to withdraw some of the forces from wartime deployment.

The KC-135 and other refuelling platforms are fundamental to America's ability to conduct **air operations** far from its own territory. They allow fighter jets to be deployed rapidly over long distances, maintain pressure on adversaries and compensate for the limitations of regional bases.

**The return of some forces means that, after the strike phase, the question of long-term sustainability has been reopened**

During the build-up phase, tankers expand **strike options**. During the return phase, they signal that the tempo is slowing and that part of the combat deployment is returning to a regular cycle of maintenance and readiness.

This is particularly important after an intense campaign. Tactical aviation cannot sustain a high wartime tempo for long without consequences for aircraft, crews and technical units.

Every hour of sorties wears down an aircraft; every day of combat duty strains crews; and every extended deployment demands spare parts, ammunition, accommodation, protection and a complex supply chain.

The Pentagon is now apparently calculating the cost of maintaining this tempo. The return of some forces means that, after the strike phase, the question of long-term sustainability has been reopened.

## Exiting combat mode

A large military formation does not withdraw all at once. Fighter jets may be the first to leave the area of operations, but the systems that enable their deployment remain in place.

Command and control elements, intelligence platforms, electronic warfare units, transport aviation, maintenance teams, base protection forces, warehouses, communication nodes and logistics personnel all have their own timelines for **return**. Some stay longer to protect the final waves of personnel, while others remain because of the United States' enduring interest in the region.

The process therefore takes place in stages. One wave may return fighter jets, another tankers, and a third technical and logistical elements, while intelligence and command capabilities may remain until the risk of a new escalation is judged to have been sufficiently reduced.

**The current deployment corresponds more closely to a deterrence model than to a model of immediate preparation for a major air operation**

This approach is consistent with how the US military manages major operations. Entry into a wartime deployment is built up gradually through reinforcements, overflight routes, bases, warehouses and protective measures. Exiting such a deployment follows the same logic in reverse.

The current pattern therefore supports the assessment that the large-scale kinetic phase is over. This does not eliminate the risk of a new crisis.

The Middle East remains an area where a single attack on a base, an incident in the Gulf, a strike against an energy facility, or a miscalculation by Iran can quickly alter US decisions.

The difference between maintaining readiness for a possible return and sustaining an active war footing is substantial. The current deployment corresponds more closely to a deterrence model than to a model of immediate preparation for a major air operation.

## Return via Europe

The European dimension of this operation is particularly important. The return of aircraft to bases and locations in Greece, Italy, Germany, the United Kingdom and other parts of Europe demonstrates how heavily American military power in the Middle East depends on European infrastructure.

Europe is not only a political ally in crises far from the continent; it is also the logistical backbone of the US Air Force, the hub for receiving aircraft, carrying out maintenance, providing crew rest, relocating units and restoring readiness.

This also has consequences for European security policy. European governments often speak of greater strategic autonomy, but real crises show how closely the US system remains tied to European bases, air corridors and supporting infrastructure.

## Forces do not have to be returned directly to the United States to be employed elsewhere

As the United States enters a crisis deployment in the Middle East, Europe becomes the backdrop to that deployment. When it exits, Europe again assumes the role of the space where forces are received, serviced and prepared for the next task.

For US planners, this is an advantage. Forces do not have to be returned directly to the United States to be employed elsewhere. Part of the aviation contingent can remain in Europe, restore readiness, and be available for NATO, the eastern flank, the Mediterranean, or a new incident in the Middle East.

Such an arrangement gives Washington the ability to reduce wartime pressure on CENTCOM while preserving operational flexibility.

## Washington's political calculation

For the administration in Washington, scaling back the wartime deployment comes at a time when military power must be deployed across multiple theatres. The Indo-Pacific, Europe, Ukraine, the Red Sea and the Middle East simultaneously demand attention, resources and ready units.

Maintaining tactical aviation at maximum tempo in one area for an extended period weakens the ability to react quickly elsewhere. Redeploying part of the forces is therefore both a military and a political decision.

It reduces the cost of the crisis, restores units, and preserves the possibility of renewed pressure without keeping the entire structure on a war footing.

**Regional allies** will watch this change closely. Israel, the United Arab Emirates, Qatar and other Gulf states are not only listening to

American statements; they are watching what remains at the bases, how many tankers are returning, which missile defence capabilities remain active, how quickly the air force can return, and what capacity US command has to punish another attack.

## The US command will seek to maintain sufficient visible capabilities in the region

For them, the most important thing is that the reduction in wartime deployment does not create a security gap.

Iran will follow the same process from the opposite direction. Tehran may try to portray the US return as a sign of exhaustion, or as evidence that the crisis has ended on more favourable terms for Iran.

The **US command** will therefore seek to maintain sufficient visible capabilities in the region, particularly in surveillance, missile defence, naval presence and rapid re-strike capabilities. This is precisely where the balance of the new phase lies: reducing the cost of war without creating scope for misjudgement by the adversary.

## A new phase for CENTCOM

The current pattern of American aviation deployment marks a new phase in CENTCOM operations. During the **escalation**, the main task was to generate combat mass, maintain tempo, and sustain strike capability.

After the large kinetic phase is completed, the task shifts to maintaining pressure at a lower operating cost. It is a transition from war to the long-term management of its consequences.



*The Pentagon is reducing some of the capacity assembled for the major combat phase and returning it to the cycle of recovery, maintenance and broader global deployment - Pete Hegseth*

Such a transition does not, in itself, bring stability. The region remains vulnerable to new incidents, and the ability of the US to return quickly remains a key element of deterrence.

However, the difference in deployment is clear. The Pentagon is reducing some of the capacity assembled for the major combat phase and returning it to the cycle of recovery, maintenance and broader global deployment.

The US military remains in the Middle East, but its wartime deployment has changed. Some tactical aviation assets have been withdrawn from the theatre of operations, tankers are supporting waves of returning aircraft, European bases are again assuming the role of receiving depth, and CENTCOM has switched to a mode that combines deterrence, surveillance, and readiness to reapply pressure quickly.

The most important consequence of this transition is a change in the political threshold for the next United States decision.

Any new major strike would now require a fresh build-up of forces, new logistics and a new presidential decision, rather than simply prolonging an already elevated wartime tempo.

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