

## Operation Epic Fury and the US military presence in Europe

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Operation Epic Fury, launched against Iran on 28 February, has to a considerable extent been conducted on the basis of US assets permanently stationed in Europe. Europe has also played a logistical role in the United States' military activities in the Middle East, despite the United Kingdom and Spain withholding consent to use their bases for conducting attacks on Iran during the initial days of the operation. Following Iranian strikes on a British air base in Cyprus, London reversed its decision, and US aircraft operating from bases belonging to the United Kingdom are now carrying out direct attacks on Iran.

In the air domain, the United States has primarily redeployed tactical aviation stationed in the territories of its European allies to the Middle East. Twelve F-16CJ fighter aircraft (half of those stationed there), specialising in suppression of enemy air defences (SEAD) missions, were transferred from Italy to Jordan, while approximately 30 F-35A aircraft and 36 F-15E aircraft were moved from the United Kingdom to Israel and Jordan – most likely all the operational aircraft of these types. In addition, around 135 aerial refuelling tankers were redeployed from the United States to Europe and the Middle East. In the maritime domain, there has likewise been a redirection of US military assets from Europe to the Middle East. Three of the five Arleigh Burke-class destroyers homeported in Rota, Spain, have been deployed near Israel to support the country's missile defence. In the land domain, the United States has most likely not introduced any changes to its permanent or rotational presence in Europe, including with regard to the Patriot air defence systems (four batteries) deployed in Germany.

The United States has temporarily reduced its military presence in Europe, primarily in the air domain, as part of preparations for the war with Iran and the conduct of the operation itself. This reduction will most likely persist for several additional months beyond the end of Epic Fury, and will be required to carry out maintenance on the equipment used and to restore its combat readiness. In the event of a prolonged war, the heavy consumption of US precision munitions (JASSM, Tomahawk missiles), as well as PAC-3 MSE interceptors for the Patriot air defence system, may contribute to delays of several years in deliveries of them to European countries.

### Commentary

- **US forces permanently stationed in Europe also support US military operations outside the continent which, in the case of Operation Epic Fury, significantly reduced US military potential in Europe.** The United States maintains only a rotational presence of relatively small forces in the Middle East. Consequently, a substantial portion of the troops

required to conduct the attack on Iran and to ensure the defence of Israel and the Gulf states had to be redeployed from other regions of the world. Assets transferred from Europe accounted for approximately one-fifth of the total US forces in the Middle East. The vast majority of the resources involved were deployed directly from the United States.

- **Europe played a key role as a reservoir of the first US fighter aircraft and munitions, and also as a logistical hub and staging area for additional forces designated for the attack on Iran.** The deployment of aerial refuelling tankers in Europe was of particular importance, as it enabled transport aviation to efficiently deliver spare parts and ammunition to the forces being concentrated in the Middle East. Around 50 tankers were deployed to the Portuguese Azores and in Western Europe (the United Kingdom and Germany), approximately a further 35 in the Mediterranean region (Spain, Italy and Greece) and in Bulgaria, and about 65 directly in the Middle East. It is highly likely that part of the precision air-delivered munitions used in Operation Epic Fury originated from US stockpiles at the Ramstein base in Germany.
- **Although the United Kingdom and Spain did not officially grant their consent for US aircraft to take off from bases on their territory to directly participate in the attack on Iran, this involvement did nevertheless occur indirectly – particularly in the case of the United Kingdom.** US air bases in Europe (Ramstein in Germany; Lakenheath, Fairford and Welford in the United Kingdom) serve as a support base for potential reinforcements. Since 6 March, following a change in the UK's policy, US B-1B Lancer bombers have been stationed at Fairford and have been conducting direct strikes against Iran; on 9 March they were joined by B-52H bombers. Anticipating the operational needs of the Central Command (CENTCOM), the Pentagon also deployed additional fighter aircraft there, which can be redeployed within a short time to Jordan or Israel, where combat flights are conducted from.
- **The war with Iran may result in significant delays in the fulfillment of contracts between the US and European countries for the delivery of munitions (primarily PAC-3 MSE missiles for Patriot systems, but also the JASSM family and Tomahawk cruise missiles). This is because current production will most likely be used to replenish US stockpiles.** During the first week of the bombing campaign alone, the United States and Israel used more than 10,000 bombs, cruise missiles, ballistic and guided missiles, as well as strike drones of different kinds. In addition, more than 1,000 surface-to-air missiles were most likely used to repel Iranian attacks on the Gulf states and Israel, including hundreds for Patriot systems. Particularly in the case of precision strike systems (PrSM, Tomahawk and JASSM) and air defence (PAC-3 MSE), the consumption of munitions has already exceeded their current annual production. The US Department of War (previously the Department of Defense) has reached agreements with the main defence armaments (BAE Systems, Boeing, Lockheed Martin, Northrop Grumman and Raytheon) to increase the production of various types of munitions up to four-fold (for example, PAC-3 MSE missiles from 620 to 2,000 annually), however, the process of achieving this production capacity will take several years.