

### Military mystery: How many bases does the US have, anyway?

By

*Gloria Shur Bilchik*

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When it comes to accountability, you'd probably hope that the US military would be rather exacting, right? Sorry. The answer to the seemingly simple question, "How many military bases does America have outside of our own country?" is not at all simple.

In a recent article in [Asia Times](#), investigative reporter Nick Turse calls the answer to that question, "...the one number no American knows. Not the president. Not the Pentagon. Not the experts. No one."

You can't get a consistent answer from news stories, that's for sure. Recent articles, media reports and op-eds peg the number variously at 460, 507, 560, 662 and more than 1,000. Depending on whom you ask or what source you consult, writes Turse:

"there are more than 1,000 US military bases dotting the globe. To be specific, the most accurate count is 1,077. Unless it's 1,088. Or, if you count differently, 1,169. Or even 1,180. Actually, the number might even be higher. Nobody knows for sure."

Going straight to the source [of course, of course] doesn't help, either. According to the Department of Defense's [2010 Base Structure Report](#), as of 2009, the US military maintained 662 foreign sites in 38 countries around the world. But that number represents a reduction from numbers reported by DOD just a few years ago.

Military spokespersons regularly add to the confusion. Turse notes that:

Speaking before the senate appropriations committee's sub-committee on military construction, [veterans](#) and related agencies early last year, Deputy Under Secretary of Defense Dorothy Robyn referenced the Pentagon's "507 permanent installations". The Pentagon's 2010 Base Structure Report, on the other hand, lists 4,999 total sites in the US, its territories, and overseas.

Turse has done his homework, consulting official sources and interviewing military officials who are supposedly responsible for keeping track of these things. His account of his journey through the world of military recordkeeping reads like something straight out of Franz Kafka. Numbers vary from office to office and report to report. They go up, and they go down. They're based on varying criteria, depending on who's doing the counting. He ends up feeling confused and dismayed.

Along the way to [the] "final" tally, I was offered a number of explanations – from different methods of accounting to the failure of units in the field to provide accurate information – for the conflicting numbers I had been given. After months of exchanging e-mails and seeing the numbers swing wildly, ending up with roughly the same count in November as I began with in

January suggests that the US command isn't keeping careful track of the number of bases in Afghanistan. Apparently, the military simply does not know how many bases it has in its primary theater of operations.

Worse yet are the apparently deliberate omissions from the tally. "Scan the Department of Defense's 2010 Base Structure Report for sites in Afghanistan," writes Turse. "Go ahead, read through all 206 pages. You won't find a mention of them, not a citation, not a single reference, not an inkling that the United States has even one base in Afghanistan, let alone more than 400."

Incredibly, the same blackout applies to Iraq, where published reports in mainstream media outlets put the number of bases in the 80s. So, even the official US military tally underreports our presence by nearly 500 bases. And that's before you add in other blacked-out sites in places like Saudi Arabia and Kuwait.

Also conveniently "forgotten" in the base count are facilities run by other countries on behalf of the US, sites operated covertly by the CIA, and de facto "bases" that float on America's fleet of aircraft carriers, says Turse.

So, what's the real number? We don't know, and it seems clear that nobody is in a big hurry to tell us. Turse concludes that,

In the grand scheme of things, the actual numbers aren't all that important. Whether the most accurate total is 900 bases, 1,000 bases or 1,100 posts in foreign lands, what's undeniable is that the US military maintains...an empire of bases so large and shadowy that no one – not even at the Pentagon – really knows its full size and scope...An honest count of US bases abroad – a true, full and comprehensive list – would be a tiny first step in the necessary process of downsizing the global mission.

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### **About Gloria Shur Bilchik**

Gloria Shur Bilchik is a freelance writer and community volunteer in St. Louis, Missouri. She is the editor of Occasional Planet. She views the preservation of progressive values as vital to making the US a humane, livable place for her children and grandchildren.