

The 700 Military Bases of Afghanistan

Black Sites in the Empire of Bases

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In the nineteenth century, it was a fort used by British forces. In the twentieth century, Soviet troops moved into the crumbling facilities. In December 2009, at this site in the Shinwar district of Afghanistan's Nangarhar Province, U.S. troops joined members of the Afghan National Army in preparing the way for the next round of foreign occupation. On its grounds, a new military base is expected to rise, one of hundreds of camps and outposts scattered across the country.

Nearly a decade after the Bush administration launched its invasion of Afghanistan, TomDispatch offers the first actual count of American, NATO, and other coalition bases there, as well as facilities used by the Afghan security forces. Such bases range from relatively small sites like Shinwar to mega-bases that resemble small American towns. Today, according to official sources, approximately 700 bases of every size dot the Afghan countryside, and more, like the one in Shinwar, are under construction or soon will be as part of a [base-building boom](#) that began last year.

Existing in the shadows, rarely reported on and little talked about, this base-building program is nonetheless staggering in size and scope, and heavily dependent on supplies imported from abroad, which means that it is also extraordinarily expensive. It has added significantly to the already long secret list of Pentagon property overseas and raises questions about just how long, after the planned beginning of a drawdown of American forces in 2011, the U.S. will still be garrisoning Afghanistan.

400 Foreign Bases in Afghanistan

A spokesman for the U.S.-led International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) tells TomDispatch that there are, at present, nearly 400 U.S. and coalition bases in Afghanistan, including camps, forward operating bases, and combat outposts. In addition, there are at least 300 Afghan National Army (ANA) and Afghan National Police (ANP) bases, most of them built, maintained, or supported by the U.S. A small number of the coalition sites are mega-bases like Kandahar Airfield, which boasts one of the busiest runways in the world, and Bagram Air Base, a former Soviet facility that received a makeover, complete with Burger King and Popeyes outlets, and now serves more than 20,000 U.S. troops, in addition to thousands of coalition forces and civilian contractors.

In fact, Kandahar, which housed 9,000 coalition troops as recently as 2007, is expected to have a population of as many as 35,000 troops by the time President Obama's surge is complete, according to Colonel Kevin Wilson who oversees building efforts in the southern half of Afghanistan for the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers. On the other hand, the Shinwar site, [according to](#) Sgt. Tracy J. Smith of the U.S. 48th Infantry Brigade Combat Team, will be a small forward operating base (FOB) that will host both Afghan troops and foreign forces.

Last fall, it was reported that more than \$200 million in construction projects — from barracks to cargo storage facilities — were planned for or in-progress at Bagram. Substantial [construction funds](#) have also been set aside by the U.S. Air Force to upgrade its air power capacity at Kandahar. For example, \$65 million has been allocated to build additional apron space (where aircraft can be parked, serviced, and loaded or unloaded) to accommodate more close-air support for soldiers in the field and a greater intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance capability. Another \$61 million has also been earmarked for the construction of a cargo helicopter apron and a tactical airlift apron there.

Kandahar is just one of many sites currently being upgraded. Exact figures on the number of facilities being enlarged, improved, or hardened are unavailable but, according a spokesman for ISAF, the military plans to expand several more bases to accommodate the increase of troops as part of Afghan War commander Stanley McChrystal's surge strategy. In addition, at least 12 more bases are slated to be built to help handle the 30,000 extra American troops and thousands of NATO forces beginning to arrive in the country.

"Currently we have over \$3 billion worth of work going on in Afghanistan," says Colonel Wilson, "and probably by the summer, when the dust settles from all the uplift, we'll have about \$1.3 billion to \$1.4 billion worth of that [in the South]." By comparison, between 2002 and 2008, the Army Corps of Engineers spent more than \$4.5 billion on construction projects, most of it base-building, in Afghanistan.

At the site of the future FOB in Shinwar, more than 135 private construction contractors attended what was termed an "Afghan-Coalition contractors rodeo." According to Lieutenant Fernando Roach, a contracting officer with the U.S. Army's Task Force Mountain Warrior, the event was designed "to give potential contractors a walkthrough of the area so they'll have a solid overview of the scope of work." The construction firms then bid on three separate projects: the renovation of the more than 30-year old Soviet facilities, the building of new living quarters for Afghan and coalition forces, and the construction of a two-kilometer wall for the base.

In the weeks since the "rodeo," the U.S. Army has announced additional plans to upgrade facilities at other forward operating bases. At FOB Airborne, located near Kane-Ezzat in Wardak Province, for instance, the Army intends to put in reinforced concrete bunkers and blast protection barriers as well as lay concrete foundations for Re-Locatable Buildings (prefabricated, trailer-like structures used for living and working quarters). Similar work is also scheduled for FOB Altimur, an Army camp in Logar Province.

The Afghan Base Boom

Recently, the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, Afghanistan District-Kabul, announced that it would be seeking bids on "site assessments" for Afghan National Security Forces District Headquarters Facilities nationwide. The precise number of Afghan bases scattered

throughout the country is unclear.

When asked by TomDispatch, Colonel Radmanish of the Afghan Ministry of Defense would state only that major bases were located in Kabul, Pakteya, Kandahar, Herat, and Mazar-e-Sharif, and that ANA units operate all across Afghanistan. Recent U.S. Army contracts for maintenance services provided to Afghan army and police bases, however, suggest that there are no fewer than 300 such facilities that are, according to an ISAF spokesman, not counted among the coalition base inventory.

As opposed to America's fast-food-franchise-filled bases, Afghan ones are often decidedly more rustic affairs. The police headquarters in Khost Farang District, Baghlan Province, is a good example. According to a detailed site assessment conducted by a local contractor for the Army Corps of Engineers and the Afghan government, the district headquarters consists of mud and stone buildings surrounded by a mud wall. The site even lacks a deep well for water. A trench fed by a nearby spring is the only convenient water source.

The U.S. bases that most resemble austere Afghan facilities are combat outposts, also known as COPs. Environmental Specialist Michael Bell of the Army Corps of Engineers, Afghanistan Engineer District-South's Real Estate Division, [recently described](#) the facilities and life on such a base as he and his co-worker, Realty Specialist Damian Salazar, saw it in late 2009:

"COP Sangar... is a compound surrounded by mud and straw walls. Tents with cots supplied the sleeping quarters... A medical, pharmacy and command post tent occupied the center of the COP, complete with a few computers with internet access and three primitive operating tables. Showers had just been installed with hot [water]... only available from 8 a.m. to 10 a.m. and 2 p.m. to 4 p.m..."

"An MWR [Morale, Welfare and Recreation] tent was erected on Thanksgiving Day with an operating television; however, the tent was rarely used due to the cold. Most of the troops used a tent with gym equipment for recreation... A cook trailer provided a hot simple breakfast and supper. Lunch was MREs [meals ready to eat]. Nights were pitch black with no outside lighting from the base or the city."

What Makes a Base?

According to an official site assessment, future construction at the Khost Farang District police headquarters will make use of sand, gravel, and stone, all available on the spot. Additionally, cement, steel, bricks, lime, and gypsum have been located for purchase in Pol-e Khomri City, about 85 miles away.

Constructing a base for American troops, however, is another matter. For the far less modest American needs of American troops, builders rely heavily on goods imported over extremely long, difficult to traverse, and sometimes embattled supply lines, all of which adds up to an extraordinarily costly affair. "Our business runs on materials," Lieutenant General Robert Van Antwerp, commander of the Army Corps of Engineers, [told](#) an audience at a town hall meeting in Afghanistan in December 2009. "You have to bring in the lumber, you have to bring in the steel, you have to bring in the containers and all that. Transport isn't easy in this country — number one, the roads themselves, number two, coming through other countries to get here — there are just huge challenges in getting the materials here."

To facilitate U.S. base construction projects, a new “virtual storefront” — an online shopping portal — has been launched by the Pentagon’s Defense Logistics Agency (DLA). The Maintenance, Repair and Operations Uzbekistan Virtual Storefront website and a defense contractor-owned and operated brick-and-mortar warehouse facility that supports it aim to provide regionally-produced construction materials to speed surge-accelerated building efforts.

From a facility located in Termez, Uzbekistan, cement, concrete, fencing, roofing, rope, sand, steel, gutters, pipe, and other construction material manufactured in countries like Armenia, Azerbaijan, Georgia, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, and Turkmenistan can be rushed to nearby Afghanistan to accelerate base-building efforts. “Having the products closer to the fight will make it easier for warfighters by reducing logistics response and delivery time,” [says](#) Chet Evanitsky, the DLA’s construction and equipment supply chain division chief.

America’s Shadowy Base World

The Pentagon’s most recent inventory of bases lists a total of 716 overseas sites. These include facilities owned and leased all across the Middle East as well as a significant presence in Europe and Asia, especially Japan and South Korea. Perhaps even more notable than the Pentagon’s impressive public [foreign property portfolio](#) are the many sites left off the official inventory. While bases in the [Persian Gulf countries](#) of Bahrain, Kuwait, Oman, and the United Arab Emirates are all listed, one conspicuously absent site is Al-Udeid Air Base, a billion-dollar facility in nearby Qatar, where the U.S. Air Force [secretly oversees](#) its on-going unmanned drone wars.

The count also does not include any sites in Iraq where, as of August 2009, there were still [nearly 300 American bases and outposts](#). Similarly, U.S. bases in Afghanistan — a significant percentage of the 400 foreign sites scattered across the country — are noticeably absent from the Pentagon inventory.

Counting the remaining bases in Iraq — as many as 50 are slated to be operating after President Barack Obama’s August 31, 2010, deadline to remove all U.S. “combat troops” from the country — and those in Afghanistan, as well as black sites like Al-Udeid, the total number of U.S. bases overseas now must significantly exceed 1,000. Just exactly how many U.S. military bases (and allied facilities used by U.S. forces) are scattered across the globe may never be publicly known. What we do know — from the experience of bases in Germany, Italy, Japan, and South Korea — is that, once built, they have a tendency toward permanency that a cessation of hostilities, or even outright peace, has a way of not altering.

After nearly a decade of war, close to 700 U.S., allied, and Afghan military bases dot Afghanistan. Until now, however, they have existed as black sites known to few Americans outside the Pentagon. It remains to be seen, a decade into the future, how many of these sites will still be occupied by U.S. and allied troops and whose flag will be planted on the ever-shifting British-Soviet-U.S./Afghan site at Shinwar.

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