

U.S. Deployments in the Mideast Cockpit

by Carl Osgood

Dec. 5 —When Lyndon LaRouche talks about the threat that thermonuclear war *could* happen, don't expect a massive mobilization such as that which preceded the 2003 invasion of Iraq, when ground, naval, and air forces were built up in the region for weeks before the assault was actually launched. There is no sign of such a mobilization, at least not yet, though the possibility is not to be excluded. But there are forces in the region, from the Mediterranean to the Arabian Sea, or otherwise within reach of that region, which can provide the trigger for such a conflict in an instant, and these forces are considerable.

Any picture of those forces drawn from public sources, however, is necessarily incomplete. U.S. Navy submarine deployments, for example, will not be known about unless the sub is caught on the surface; and the movements of U.S. Air Force aircraft occur with such frequency through the region that they are rarely reported. And when it comes to Special Forces, they're publicly unacknowledged, unless they do something that gets picked up in the news (such as killing a terrorist leader).

Yet sufficient information is available to back up LaRouche's assertion on the Alex Jones Internet radio show, that the forces deployed in the Middle East are appropriate not to a local conflict against Syria or Iran, but to a thermonuclear confrontation between superpowers.

How such a confrontation would unfold is not knowable, but the forces employed would not necessarily be limited to those in the Mediterranean/Middle East/Central Asia region. The U.S. B-52 and B-2 bombers have launched combat missions from bases in the United States, and can carry both nuclear-armed cruise missiles and gravity bombs (the B-1 bomber no longer has the nuclear mission). The B-2 is also being upgraded to carry the 30,000-pound Massive Ordnance Penetrator, a huge weapon said to be aimed at Iranian underground nuclear facilities.

U.S. naval ships also carry nuclear weapons, though,

with the exception of ballistic-missile submarines, the Navy is tight-lipped as to whether its ships are actually carrying nuclear weapons; but in the 1980s, when a number of countries declared themselves to be nuclear-free zones, the Navy refused to allow port calls for its ships in those places. The famous Tomahawk cruise missile, with a range in excess of 1,000 miles, exists in both conventional and nuclear-armed versions, and can be launched from both surface warships and attack submarines. Some 350 nuclear-armed versions were acquired in the 1990s, and carry a warhead with a yield of from 5 to 150 kilotons.

Then, there are the 14 Ohio-class ballistic-missile submarines armed with 24 Trident ballistic missiles, each of which carries 6 to 8 warheads. The navy does not talk about the patrol schedules of its ballistic-missile submarines, but there are probably about four of them on patrol at any one time, in the Atlantic and Pacific oceans. Their missiles can hit any point on the Eurasian landmass from either ocean. Supplementing the submarine-launched missiles are the 450 Minuteman III missiles in silos in Wyoming, Montana, and North Dakota, each carrying a 170 kiloton warhead.

We present below a picture of the U.S. force deployment in the Middle East/Central Asia region, as far as it can be assembled from publicly available sources.

The Persian Gulf

The Persian Gulf probably contains the highest concentration of U.S. naval and air forces outside of U.S. territory (see **Figure 1**). The aircraft carrier *USS John C. Stennis* is currently deployed under the control of U.S. Fifth Fleet headquarters in Bahrain. It is accompanied by three or four surface warships carrying a large number of cruise and air defense missiles, and is carrying about 50 F-18 Hornet strike aircraft.

Also in the region is the *USS Bataan* amphibious ready group carrying 2,200 Marines, with tanks, artil-

FIGURE 1
Persian Gulf Region



lery, helicopters, and Harrier jump jets.

The U.S. Air Force has the use of four major bases in the region. First, **al-Udeid, Qatar**, the largest air base in the region, which hosts six operational squadrons flying B-1 bombers, KC-10 and KC-135 air refueling aircraft, and C-130 and C-17 cargo aircraft. The Air Force's website says that there are about 100 aircraft stationed at al-Udeid at any one time.

Then, **al-Dhafra, U.A.E.**, which hosts four squadrons flying the U-2 reconnaissance aircraft, KC-10 air refueling aircraft, E-3 Sentry airborne radar aircraft, and F-15 fighters; **Ali al-Salem, Kuwait**, which has served as a logistics base in support of operations inside Iraq, and hosts C-130 cargo aircraft; and **Manas, Kyrgyzstan**, which serves as a transit center for C-17 cargo and KC-135 air refueling aircraft flying missions in support of operations in Afghanistan.

The other base of great importance is the British territory of **Diego Garcia** in the middle of the Indian Ocean. Diego Garcia has a long history of hosting B-1, B-2, and B-52 bombers and their supporting tanker aircraft, for operations in both Iraq and Afghanistan, but *EIR* has not yet determined whether there are any aircraft stationed there at the present time.

Another important base is the **Incirlik Air Base in Turkey**, which has a long history of hosting both U.S. fighter wings and their nuclear weapons. According to recent news reports, there are 60-70 tactical nuclear warheads stockpiled there at present, although there are no nuclear-qualified strike aircraft currently based there. They would have to be flown in from elsewhere, possibly from Lakenheath, England, where a squadron of F-15Es is based, or from the United States. There may also be tactical nuclear weapons stockpiled at U.S. bases in Germany, but the number is not thought to be large.

By all accounts, the withdrawal from Iraq is proceeding on schedule, and the last troops will be out of there by Dec. 31. There is talk, however, of beefing up the U.S. presence in Kuwait, and while the details have not yet been revealed, the increased presence could include an Army infantry brigade. The immediate effect of the Iraq withdrawal will be to free up naval and air transport resources that have been dedicated to supporting that mission; but it will take time for the Army brigades withdrawn from Iraq to reset and reconstitute before they are mission-ready again.

Afghanistan

Outside of the Persian Gulf, the next major force concentration is in Afghanistan. There are approximately 95,000 U.S. troops there, including about 20,000 Marines. These include 11 U.S. Army combat brigades, along with two aviation brigades equipped with helicopters, the 2nd Marine Division with two Marine regiments and a Marine Air Wing with four squadrons of helicopters and one of Harrier jump jets, and two Air Force wings at Bagram and Kandahar air fields. Bagram is home to a squadron of A-10 attack aircraft and a squadron of C-130s, while Kandahar hosts two fighter squadrons equipped with F-15s and F-16s, a C-130 squadron, and an electronic warfare detachment. There are also reconnaissance squadrons at both bases, flying both manned and unmanned aircraft.

Eastern Mediterranean

The Eastern Mediterranean Sea would be the other theater of operations, but it has been difficult to determine what naval assets are currently deployed there. The aircraft carrier *George H. W. Bush* entered the Mediterranean on Nov. 20, via the Suez Canal, but is reported to be heading home to Norfolk, Va., and appears to have entered the Atlantic Ocean after a port call, on Nov. 28-29, at Marseilles in France. The cruise missile submarine *USS Georgia* was caught on the surface in the Eastern Mediterranean when it had to transfer one of its sailors to a surface ship. The *USS Georgia* can carry up to 154 Tomahawk cruise missiles and a SEAL team on board.

In October, U.S. Secretary of Defense Leon Panetta announced that four Aegis guided-missile destroyers would be permanently stationed at Rota, Spain, for the European missile defense mission, and while the first of those ships will not arrive until 2014, it is not to be excluded that there are similar ships deployed in the Mediterranean, now, for that mission.

All of these forces can be quickly reinforced from Europe, where the U.S. Air Force still has eight fighter squadrons flying F-15s and F-16s, and bomber missions have been, and can be, flown directly from home bases in the United States to either return back to home bases or recover at bases in Europe. Also, the aircraft carrier *USS Carl Vinson* (where Obama hosted his so-called "Carrier Classic" NCAA basketball game) departed San Diego on Nov. 30, for deployment to the Western Pacific and the Middle East.