



## The Expanding Strategic Significance of Souda Bay

*Harry Dinella*

The security of the western world and America's ability to provide the lion's share of that security is increasingly dependent on access to bases that America and its allies can rely on during peace and war. The Hellenic naval base at Souda Bay, Crete and the nearby Hellenic Air Force (HAF) base at Chania remain vital components of the Greek, U.S. and NATO defense structure. Significantly, a U.S. Naval Support activity is co-located with the HAF base at Chania. Together these "Souda Bay" installations provide NATO forces with access to basing near a volatile region of the world that is crucial to Western security for the foreseeable future.

We have learned in the post-Cold War era that for deterrence to have a chance to be effective it is at a minimum necessary for potential adversaries to believe that military action can be taken against them. The ability of the West to deter potential adversaries in Europe and the Middle East has markedly receded in recent decades with the drawdown of U.S. and NATO forces that continues to this day.

Real and potential enemies of the West understand that NATO military forces, and particularly ground forces that could once be rapidly employed against them, are drastically reduced. With this much meat already off the "Western defense bone" potential foes can, and in some cases, such as Russia, are left with the perception that the U.S. and its allies are no longer as prepared for or committed to bold action as they were in past decades. The facilities at Souda Bay and the access they provide for the projection of air and naval power into or over the Middle East remains an essential element of Western security. Simply stated, the availability of Souda Bay is strategic to Western interests. The facilities there provide the West with access and extended operational reach in the eastern Mediterranean and Middle East. U.S. and NATO access to Souda Bay compels potential trouble-makers to adjust the calculus involved in their decision making in a region where trouble-makers increasingly seem to abound.

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Given today's military budgets, the forces of most NATO nations are significantly reduced. Indeed, rather than take the decision to compensate for the reduction of U.S. forces in Europe, the majority of NATO allies have reduced rather than expanded their military spending. Greece remains an interesting exception where defense spending remains high despite the enormous economic difficulties faced by Athens in the last several years. However, Greek defense spending can be largely attributed to the perceived, and as far as Athens is concerned, very genuine threat to Greek security interests posed by an increasingly unpredictable and militarily strong Turkey.

Recently, the actions of Russian President Vladimir Putin in the Ukraine may be the most telling case-in-point of how an adversary might take advantage of what it perceives to be a weakening of NATO forces and resolve on the part of the U.S. and its NATO allies to defend their interests. As unsettling as the bold actions of Moscow in Eastern Europe may be, the existing threats to Western economic and security interests that originate in North Africa and Middle East are potentially more threatening than the actions of the increasingly assertive *Realpolitik* of Russia.

Egypt, the indispensable lynchpin for security in the Middle East, could quickly become undone by civil war instigated by a Moslem Brotherhood that is anything but defeated. This summer's fighting in Gaza between Israel and HAMAS while suddenly abating can just as suddenly reignite with little provocation by either side. West Bank tensions between Israel and the Palestinian Authority are increasing with the almost total breakdown of talks between the two sides now compounded by the Israeli government's announcement to further expand its West Bank settlements and the recent particularly gruesome attack by Palestinian extremists against the synagogue in East Jerusalem. Although the emergence of a "third" Intifada has not materialized, circumstances are such that it would not surprise anyone if it suddenly did.

The civil war in Syria is in its third year with no end in sight with the U.S. and its regional allies at serious odds with each other as how to proceed. Vacillation over Syria on the part of the U.S. and its allies has promoted the potentially even more dangerous threat of the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL). As bad for Western and regional interests as the regime of Bashar al-Assad may be, Assad's Russian-Iranian backed government sometimes looks preferable to alternatives that might include a takeover of Syria by the radical ISIL. Conditions in the region, including an enormous number of people seeking refuge from the fighting in Syria have placed a visibly shaken Jordan under immense pressure to maintain itself as a viable state.

ISIL forces have for all intents and purposes dismembered Iraq and are in control of a third of the country. Encouraged and strengthened by its rapid victories last

summer, ISIL continues to threaten the areas still controlled by the Iraqi government, including Baghdad itself. In the north, ISIL threatens the regional Kurdish government and by its actions has effectively become the catalyst that essentially completed what promises to become the final separation of Iraq's Kurdish region from the Iraqi state. Indeed, ISIL's efforts towards destroying Iraq have only been recently checked by the reluctant intervention of U.S. air power, an intervention that would have been much more difficult to effect absent the vital though tenuous base support provided by various non-NATO allies in the Middle East.

Today the U.S. Navy's ("Mediterranean") 6<sup>th</sup> Fleet is a shadow of its former self and no longer boasts the deterring presence of a permanently deployed aircraft carrier. Indeed, the U.S. naval force in this strategic inland sea sometimes consists of little more than the fleet's command ship, the USS *Mount Whitney*, the vessel that serves as the nucleus around which a fleet can be built.

For its part, the U.S. Navy demonstrated its ability to push forces into the Mediterranean against the regime of Muammar Qaddafi during Operation Odyssey Dawn in 2011. Later, in 2013 the U.S. Navy again augmented 6<sup>th</sup> Fleet units in preparation for the subsequently aborted strike against the Assad regime in Syria for its purported use of chemical weapons against its own people. In this instance a case can be made that the further use of chemical munitions by Syrian forces was deterred by the U.S. threat to attack and degrade the military forces Assad relies on to maintain power. It must be remembered that it was only after the U.S. deployed cruise-missile-carrying warships into the eastern Mediterranean that Syria agreed to a Russian-brokered deal to surrender its stockpile of chemical weapons for destruction. This solution to the now neutralized threat posed by Syrian chemical weapons might not have come about absent a credible U.S. threat to attack. And while it is debatable whether the U.S. "won" or "lost" by not attacking Assad and instead accepting the Russian-brokered deal that helped keep him in the fight to save his regime, America's ability to concentrate potent naval forces in the region is not.

An important component of being able to deploy forces into the eastern Mediterranean is the availability of bases like Souda Bay to support them over an extended period of time should their long-term presence be essential to Western interests. While it is a fact that America can deploy robust forces into the Mediterranean on relatively short notice, it is also a fact that available forces, including attack carriers, are less available for quick deployment than they used to be. The buildup of U.S. naval power in the eastern Mediterranean in 2013 is a case-in-point. No carrier accompanied the deployed missile-carrying surface units for either protection of the fleet or for the secondary punch that might have been required if a cruise missile strike proved insufficient to dissuade Assad. This shortfall in resources reinforces the importance of

regionally accessible bases that are so essential for the strategic and operational reach they ensure.

Today, U.S. and NATO forces rely on Mediterranean bases beginning with Gibraltar and Spain in the western Mediterranean that extend to Italy and finally stretch east to the British Sovereign Base Areas (SBA) in Cyprus. Gibraltar and the SBAs on Cyprus are “British” rather than “NATO” bases and in an emergency can probably be counted on for support of Western interests. Souda Bay is a “Greek” base with a NATO docking facility and a co-located U.S. Navy Support Activity, essentially a U.S. Navy mini-base, with access to the adjacent HAF airfield at Chania. Greece, like Great Britain, and oftentimes unlike Turkey, is a reliable U.S. and NATO partner that has contributed to and supported U.S. and NATO operations in Europe and the Middle East for decades. The facilities at Souda Bay not only provide an airfield but shelter for an entire fleet, including an aircraft carrier, where it can be anchored, provisioned, and protected.

An important lesson the U.S. and NATO have learned in the post-Cold War era is that it is one thing having access to a base in a volatile region and quite another thing getting “permission” to use it. The more-often-than-not sad record of Turkey regarding the restrictions it has placed on the use its bases only reinforces the importance of Souda Bay, an important alternative to the Turkish Air Force (TUAF) base at Incirlik, a base America cannot rely on during an emergency.

As important as naval facilities in the eastern Mediterranean are, it is apparent that the West must increasingly rely on land bases and particularly air bases for the rapid build-up of military power in the region. For instance, during Odyssey Dawn no U.S. attack carrier was deployed for the operation. The nearest U.S. attack carrier was with the 5th Fleet in the Gulf and its aircraft were not used in operations over Libya. Indeed, the limited U.S. Navy sea-based air punch for Odyssey Dawn was provided by as few as four and certainly not more than six U.S. Marine Corps AV-8B Harrier jump jets embarked on the *U.S.S. Kearsage*, an amphibious assault ship.

Land-based power rather than sea-based air power was the principle means used by coalition forces during Odyssey Dawn and much of the air power employed originated from coalition aircraft operating out of Italy and Greece. In Greece, NATO aircraft operated from the Hellenic Air Force (HAF) base at Araxos in the western Peloponnesus and from the HAF base at Chania, near Souda Bay. In terms of North Africa and the Middle East, the facilities at Souda Bay provide the West with a permanently deployed “aircraft carrier” that “cannot be sunk.”

Greece is a reliable NATO country whose orientation has always been Western. This cannot be said of some of America's other friends and allies in the region, including our NATO ally, Turkey. Under the long-term rule of Tayyip Erdogan, first as

prime minister and now president, the Turkish government has drifted, if not altogether pivoted away from its modern secular orientation. Indeed, since 2003 when Erdogan became prime minister, Turkey has gradually if not inexorably moved towards a more conservative brand of Islam and away from its Cold War status as a reliable ally and partner of the West.

The beginning of Turkey's shift from the United States became dramatically evident in 2003 when just prior to the American-led invasion of Iraq it refused to permit the U.S. Army's powerful 4th Infantry Division to deploy against northern Iraq through Turkey despite U.S. incentives that amounted to tens of billions of dollars for the then hard-pressed Turkish economy. Instead, the 4<sup>th</sup> Division was left floating harmlessly in the Mediterranean leaving the U.S. and its coalition partners little choice but to launch the invasion of Iraq absent the participation of one of the U.S. Army's most powerful and lethal divisions. Prior to that, U.S. operations over Iraq from the air base at Incirlik in 2003, when they were permitted at all, were much restricted. Going back further, flight operations from Incirlik were similarly initially restricted at the beginning of Operation Desert Shield/Storm in 1991. The bottom line is that recent history confirms that the U.S. cannot count on the use of Incirlik Air Base – when it counts.

Turkey's pivot away from the West is further confirmed by its continuing poor relations with America's key regional ally, Israel. The Turkish split from Israel reached its zenith in May, 2010 when a "Peace Flotilla" of nine ships purportedly carrying humanitarian aid for the HAMAS-controlled Gaza Strip departed Turkish ports on a mission to break the Israeli blockade of that enclave. Turkish authorities, cognizant of Israel's determination to enforce its blockade, nevertheless let the ships depart on a mission that everyone involved understood was guaranteed to provoke an Israeli response that could as it did, turn deadly. The incident soured Israeli-Turkish relations and has yet to be fully resolved in talks between Ankara and Jerusalem. In its best light, the incident played into the hands of an Erdogan government already bent on distancing itself from Israel and the formerly warm relationship the two countries enjoyed throughout the 1990s and prior to Erdogan's Justice and Development Party (AKP coming to power in 2002. In its worst light, The Erdogan government permitted the "Peace Flotilla" to depart for Gaza with the full expectation of an incident with a view towards using such an incident as a reason to further estrange itself from Israel.

With the all too apparent loss of Turkish support, U.S. and NATO access to the eastern Mediterranean and greater Middle East is much less assured today than at any time prior to the end of the Cold War. Today it is fair to say that while America can, as it is currently doing against the forces of ISIL, count on a number of its Middle East friends for base support, it is also fair to say that, as in the case of Turkey, the day may come when access to such bases becomes limited or even nonexistent given some future

scenario that conflicts with the interests of those states, none of which, like Greece, are members of NATO. The TUAf base at Incirlik has been used over the years in operations like Desert Shield/Storm and during Operation Iraqi Freedom in 2003. However, use in these cases was restricted and often precluded the use of U.S. attack aircraft. No U.S. attack aircraft have flown from TUAf bases against ISIL to date.

Turkey's pivot from the secular West and towards conservative Islam does not bode well for American and western policies that may require the use of force in the Middle East. Turkey, as recent events have demonstrated, is a NATO member that cannot always be relied upon to permit U.S. or NATO forces to operate from its territory even when the threat to Turkish territory, like the intense fighting in the Syrian border town of Kobani, is very real. In the case of Kobani, where ISIL is locked in a life-and-death struggle with Syrian Kurds, Turkey partially relented only after the threat of civil unrest by its large Kurdish minority became an active consideration. Currently, Kurdish fighters from Iraqi Kurdistan (and probably elsewhere) are being permitted to transit Turkish territory en route to Kobani to provide the reinforcements that may make the difference in whether or not ISIL gains control of that city.

The availability of bases represent the key enablers that facilitate the rapid build-up of U.S. and western forces in the Middle East and allow the West and its allies to project enormous military power into the region. Unlike Russia, America and NATO are blessed with access to linked bases throughout Europe and the Mediterranean basin. Souda Bay and its adjacent facilities clearly represent one of the most strategic assets in the West's linked base structure and permit an increasingly cash-strapped and "anti-boots-on-the-ground" NATO to operate effectively without aircraft carriers. Moreover, Souda Bay unlike other regional bases that the U.S. and its allies are using today or have used in the past will more likely than not be there for the support of U.S. and NATO operations when other bases are not. At a time when western civilization as we know it may be more threatened than ever, the strategic significance of the facilities at Souda Bay are increasing with each passing day.

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