

U.S. Quietly Expands Secret Military Base in Israel

Government documents pointing to construction at a classified U.S. base offer rare hints about a little noted U.S. military presence near Gaza.

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Two months before Hamas attacked Israel, the Pentagon awarded a multimillion-dollar contract to build U.S. troop facilities for a secret base it maintains deep within Israel's Negev desert, just 20 miles from Gaza. Code-named "Site 512," the longstanding U.S. base is a radar facility that monitors the skies for missile attacks on Israel.

On October 7, however, when thousands of Hamas rockets were launched, Site 512 saw nothing — because it is focused on Iran, more than 700 miles away.

The U.S. Army is quietly moving ahead with construction at Site 512, a classified base perched atop Mt. Har Qeren in the Negev, to include what government records describe as a "life support facility": military speak for barracks-like structures for personnel.

Though President Joe Biden and the White House [insist](#) that there are no plans to send U.S. troops to Israel amid its war on Hamas, a secret U.S. military presence in Israel already exists. And the government contracts and budget documents show it is evidently growing.

The \$35.8 million U.S. troop facility, not publicly announced or previously reported, was obliquely referenced in an August 2 [contract announcement](#) by the Pentagon. Though the Defense Department has taken pains to obscure the site's true nature — describing it in other records merely as a "classified worldwide" project — budget documents reviewed by The Intercept reveal that it is part of Site 512. (The Pentagon did not immediately respond to a request for comment.)

"Sometimes something is treated as an official secret not in the hope that an adversary

would never find out about it but rather [because] the U.S. government, for diplomatic or political reasons, does not want to officially acknowledge it,” Paul Pillar, a former chief analyst at the CIA’s counterterrorism center who said he had no specific knowledge of the base, told The Intercept. “In this case, perhaps the base will be used to support operations elsewhere in the Middle East in which any acknowledgment that they were staged from Israel, or involved any cooperation with Israel, would be inconvenient and likely to elicit more negative reactions than the operations otherwise would elicit.”

Rare acknowledgment of the U.S. military presence in Israel came in 2017, when the two countries inaugurated a military site that the U.S. government-funded Voice of America [deemed](#) “the first American military base on Israeli soil.” Israeli Air Force’s Brig. Gen. Tzvi Haimovitch [called it](#) “historic.” He said, “We established an American base in the State of Israel, in the Israel Defense Forces, for the first time.”

A day later, the U.S. military denied that it was an American base, [insisting](#) that it was merely a “living facility” for U.S. service members working at an Israeli base.

The U.S. military employs similar euphemistic language to characterize the new facility in Israel, which its procurement records describe as a “life support area.” Such obfuscation is typical of U.S. military sites the Pentagon wants to conceal. Site 512 has previously been referred to as a “cooperative security location”: a designation that is intended to confer a low-cost, light footprint presence but has been applied to bases that, as The Intercept has [previously reported](#), can house as many as 1,000 troops.

Site 512, however, wasn’t established to contend with a threat to Israel from Palestinian militants but the danger posed by Iranian mid-range missiles.

The overwhelming focus on Iran continues to play out in the U.S. government’s response to the Hamas attack. In an attempt to counter Iran — which aids both Hamas and Israel’s rival to the north, [Hezbollah](#), a Lebanese political group with a robust military wing, both of which are considered terror groups by the U.S. — the Pentagon has [vastly expanded](#) its presence in the Middle East. Following the attack, the U.S. doubled the number of fighter jets in the region and deployed two aircraft carriers off the coast of Israel.

Top Republicans like Senate Minority Leader Mitch McConnell have nonetheless [castigated](#) Biden for his purported “weakness on Iran.” While some media accounts have said Iran played a role in planning the Hamas attack, there [have](#) been [indications](#) from the [U.S. intelligence community](#) that Iranian officials were surprised by the attack.

The history of the U.S.-Israel relationship may be behind the failure to acknowledge the base, said an expert on overseas U.S. military bases.

“My speculation is that the secrecy is a holdover from when U.S. presidential administrations tried to offer a pretense of not siding with Israel in the Israeli-Palestinian and Israeli-Arab conflicts,” David Vine, a professor of anthropology at American University, told The Intercept. “The announcement of U.S. military bases in Israel in recent years likely reflects the dropping of that pretense and a desire to more publicly proclaim support for Israel.”

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Featured image: U.S. Air Force airmen hand off cargo to the Israeli military at Nevatim Air Base, Israel, on Oct. 15, 2023. Photo: Edgar Grimaldo/U.S. Air Force

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