

There Are Now Over 50,000 American Troops in the Mideast

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The U.S.S. Tripoli entering the Singapore Strait earlier this month. The 2,500 Marines who have been dispatched to the Middle East are part of the U.S.S. Tripoli amphibious ready group. Credit...Edgar Su/Reuters
-Helene Cooper, March 29, 2026

The arrival of 2,500 Marines and another 2,500 sailors is keeping the number of American troops in the Mideast region at over 50,000 — roughly 10,000 more than usual — as President Trump decides on his next step in his month-old war in Iran.

While it is still unclear just what the Marines, from the 31st Marine Expeditionary Unit, will be charged with, U.S. officials say the president is weighing whether to try a larger attack, like venturing to seize an island or other ground as part of Mr. Trump's effort to open the Strait of Hormuz.

The narrow waterway, through which around 20 percent of the world's oil usually traverses, has been largely closed because of attacks by Iranian forces who are retaliating against the U.S. and Israeli war on their country.

Usually there are around 40,000 American troops scattered around at bases and on ships at any time around the region, including in Saudi Arabia, Bahrain, Iraq, Syria, Jordan, Qatar, the United Arab Emirates and Kuwait. But as Mr. Trump has escalated the war in Iran, that number has reached more than 50,000, according to a U.S. military official.

The number of troops no longer includes the 4,500 aboard the aircraft carrier U.S.S. Gerald Ford, however. That ship has been hobbled by constant mishaps, including a fire that broke out in the laundry. The Ford withdrew from the region on March 23 and sailed to Crete. On Friday it arrived in Croatia. It remains unclear where it is headed next.

Last week, the Pentagon also ordered about 2,000 soldiers from the Army's 82nd Airborne Division to the Middle East to give Mr. Trump additional military options.

The location of the Army paratroopers is not public, the military official said. But they will be within striking distance of Iran. The paratroopers could be used to seize Kharg Island, Iran's main oil export hub in the northern Persian Gulf, where U.S. warplanes bombed more than 90 military targets earlier this month. Or they could be deployed for other ground operations in conjunction with the Marines.

But military experts caution that even 50,000 troops, many of them at sea, is a small number for any kind of major land operation. Israel used more than 300,000 troops for its operations in the Gaza Strip that began in October 2023. The U.S.-led coalition that invaded Iraq in 2003 was close to 250,000 at the beginning.

At almost a third of the size of the continental United States, Iran has around 93 million people. Taking, let alone holding, a country of its size and complexity and weaponry with 50,000 troops is not doable, military experts say.