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Diego Garcia: ethnically cleansed for US forever wars

As Trump threatens war on Iran, Washington weaponizes Diego Garcia – a Chagos island in the Indian Ocean built on ethnic cleansing, British colonialism, and military adventurism.



Photo Credit: The Cradle

US President Donald Trump's [recent threat](#) to strike Iran unless it halts its nuclear program has revived interest in a long-standing American asset: Diego Garcia. [B-2 stealth bombers](#) have been deployed to the island – British territory in name but an American garrison in practice – suggesting that Washington is either preparing for war or raising the stakes with an aggressive bluff.

Located in the heart of the Indian Ocean, the Diego Garcia island gives the United States unmatched reach across West Asia, Eastern Africa, and South Asia. It has been a launchpad for [every major US war in the region](#) – from Iraq to Afghanistan. Now, it may be key to a possible assault on the Islamic Republic of Iran.

But this island, remote and seemingly uncontroversial, is steeped in colonial injustice. Its original inhabitants, the Chagossians, were forcibly expelled to make way for the base. The

UK, under pressure from Washington, detached the archipelago from Mauritius and [ethnically cleansed](#) it.

In 2024, Britain finally agreed to [hand back](#) the islands to Mauritius, but the US lease remains. For now, Diego Garcia is securely in American hands – and poised once again to serve as a launchpad for imperial warfare.

From paradise to genocide

Once colonized by France and later Britain, the Chagos Islands were home to a unique Creole population descended from African slaves and Indian laborers. For generations, the Chagossians lived [peacefully](#) on the islands, building a [distinct identity](#) with their own language and customs.

As anti-colonial movements swept across Africa and Asia in the 1950s and 1960s, the US sought new bases to maintain its influence around the Indian Ocean. Camp Badaber in Pakistan ultimately [closed](#) in 1970 as the country became closer with China. The Eritrean War of Independence [threatened](#) Kagnew Station in Ethiopia. The loss of both bases would be a major blow to US intelligence gathering of Soviet activities.

Diego Garcia could plug this gap, but there were two problems: the islands were part of Mauritius and had inhabitants.

In violation of international legal norms, Britain pressured Mauritius into [giving up](#) the Chagos Archipelago.

Then began the ethnic cleansing. To intimidate the islanders, their beloved pet dogs were [killed](#) en masse through shooting and gassing. The largest plantation was [closed](#), depriving people of employment.

Food and medical supplies were [restricted](#) to kill the population or force them to leave. By 1971, those who remained were told they needed a legal [permit](#), which no one received. With little notice, many were forced to leave their homes. Reminiscent of the slave boats their ancestors were brought in, Chagossians were [crammed](#) into the bottom of boats as they fled the islands.

A launchpad for endless war

With the island empty and the runway extended, Diego Garcia quickly became central to US war strategy. It played a key role in the 1980 [failed](#) hostage rescue mission in Iran, “Operation Eagle Claw,” and later [against](#) Iran during the Iran–Iraq War.

In 1987, the runway was improved for the stationing of US B-52 Bombers, which can deliver large payloads and precision-guided munitions. These bombers were [vital](#) during the Gulf

War for attacking Iraq's command and control centers, and again during the beginning of the invasions and occupations of Afghanistan and Iraq.

As the US expanded its footprint in the [Persian Gulf](#), bases in Qatar and Bahrain took on greater significance – hosting long-range bombers, the US Central Command's (CENTCOM) headquarters, and the US Navy's Fifth Fleet. These two bases were vital: bombers from Qatar and vessels from Bahrain [helped](#) strike Taliban strongholds during the invasion of Afghanistan and [hit](#) Baghdad in the Shock and Awe [campaign](#).

But proximity to the battlefield has become a double-edged sword. Iran's significant missile arsenal, including hypersonic ones – demonstrated during its October 2024 retaliation against Israel – makes those Persian Gulf bases vulnerable.

Close proximity is also a challenge for B-2 stealth bombers, which can be [detected](#) at ground level and during takeoff. With only 20 B-2s, [costing](#) \$2 billion each, this is a price the US cannot afford. If war breaks out, Tehran is unlikely to spare the economic infrastructure of its neighbors.

It is unlikely that either Bahrain or Qatar would be willing to bear the cost of an Iranian attack. Iran could not only attack US military bases, but also oil and gas infrastructure, which would destroy their economies. The two nations have also been edging closer to Iran: Tehran was one of the few capitals that supported Qatar during its [diplomatic crisis](#) with Saudi Arabia and other Persian Gulf emirates; in the past year, Bahrain and Iran have also been working on [restoring](#) ties.

Diego Garcia, by contrast, sits well beyond the range of most Iranian missiles – at least that is the assessment for now. It allows stealth bombers to launch undetected, and Iran's limited ability to punish the island's British overlords makes it an ideal staging ground for Washington's war plans.

According to available data, Iran's longest-range missile is the Khorramshahr-4, with a reach of approximately [2,000 kilometers](#). Yet, the US military base in Diego Garcia – located deep in the Indian Ocean – is nearly 4,000 kilometers from Iran's southern coast. While there is no confirmed evidence that Iran currently has the means to strike such a distant target, the existence of capabilities – undisclosed by the Islamic Republic – that could reach the US base cannot be entirely ruled out.

Moreover, the Khorramshahr-4 missile's proven ability to [evade](#) Israeli air defenses raises concerns about the US's ability to defend Diego Garcia in a major conflict – particularly if Iran possesses long-range missiles capable of striking the remote base.

Any attack on Iran could trigger a wider regional war, with blowback against American assets and allies across West Asia – from Tel Aviv to Riyadh. Killing a few Iranian leaders might offer symbolic victories, but Tehran’s command structure is built for resilience. The risks far outweigh the tactical gains.



A map showing the location of the US base in Diego Garcia.

A homeland turned fortress

Despite a 2019 International Court of Justice (ICJ) [ruling](#) demanding Britain end “its administration of the Chagos Islands as rapidly as possible,” real justice for the Chagossians remains elusive. Although London [agreed](#) in October 2024 to begin the process of returning the archipelago to Mauritius, the US base is staying put. Mauritius offered a 99-year lease, without securing the right of return for the expelled Chagossians.

That could soon become permanent. If war erupts, Diego Garcia may once again be expanded, militarized further, and rendered uninhabitable. A concrete fortress will be all that remains of what was once a peaceful homeland.

In the end, whether through military strike or imperial inertia, the Chagossians risk losing their islands forever – not to history, but to America's wars.

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