

Order on Bahrain Assignments, Families Won't Affect Crews of Navy Ships



Boatswain's Mate 2nd Class Devin Ingle looks through binoculars aboard the coastal patrol ship USS Monsoon in Manama, Bahrain, in March 27. U.S. Army/Spc. Cody Rich ARLINGTON, Va. — Defense Secretary Mark Esper has directed that U.S. military personnel assignments in some Middle East countries be unaccompanied, with families now in place ordered gradually withdrawn by 2022. The Pentagon policy, however, does not affect U.S. Navy crews forward-deployed to the U.S. 5th Fleet in Bahrain, a Navy official said.

In a June 2 announcement, Esper directed that tours under control of combatant commanders in the Arabian Peninsula and Iraq be unaccompanied and set at 12 months — except for Navy personnel in Bahrain, whose tour lengths will be 18 months. Families in Bahrain will be withdrawn as tours end, with withdrawal completed by August 2022.

“This step is a byproduct of the department’s continuous reassessment of personnel policies worldwide, not just in the Middle East,” the announcement’s fact sheet said. “It is intended to ensure the operational readiness and deployment flexibility of U.S. forces’ mission support to operations in the region. A gradual drawdown of personnel will ensure mission-critical elements of the force continue to execute training and operations in the region with little disruption.”

“Over the next two years, DoD military personnel who fall under Title 10 authority will transition to one-year unaccompanied tours, with some exceptions,” the fact sheet

said. "This will be a gradual drawdown of dependents over two years as people regularly rotate in and attrite out of duty assignment in the Arabian Peninsula."

In a June 3 e-mail response to *Seapower*, Cmdr. Rebecca Rebarich, a spokeswoman for commander, U.S. Naval Forces Central Command, and commander, U.S. 5th Fleet, said that the policy change would affect Navy personnel on shore duty in Bahrain but not the crews of the ships forward-deployed there.

The crew members of the 10 coastal patrol ships and four mine-countermeasures ships operating from Bahrain already serve 18-month unaccompanied tours. The civilian mariners assigned to the expeditionary base ship USS Lewis B. Puller and other ships of the Military Sealift Command already serve unaccompanied tours and are not entitled to dependents in Bahrain.

U.S. Coast Guard patrol boat crews of the Patrol Force Southwest Asia based in Bahrain also are rotational.

Rebarich said that the "policy does not impact DoD civilians" and that sponsored U.S. military dependents currently in the region will be able to remain through the end of [their] sponsors' tour and the Bahrain school will remain open."

"The change will not hinder deployed U.S. forces and capabilities to support missions, trainings and operations in the region, especially for U.S. 5th Fleet," she said. "The Kingdom of Bahrain has been a gracious host to U.S. 5th Fleet for three decades. The U.S. Navy appreciates the support of our friendship and partnership with Bahrain."