US deploys F-22 fighter jets in threat to Iran

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The Pentagon has dispatched F-22 Raptors, the most advanced American warplanes, to the United Arab Emirates in a provocative escalation of US war threats against Iran.

The deployment of the stealth fighter-bombers to the UAE's Al-Dhafra air base was first reported by the journal *Aviation Week.* The Pentagon's official announcement mentioned only that the "United States Air Force has deployed F-22s to Southwest Asia" and that the action was intended to "strengthen military-to-military relationships, promote sovereign and regional security, improve combined tactical air operations, and enhance interoperability of forces …."

On Monday, however, US military officials, speaking on condition of anonymity, confirmed to the French news agency AFP that the deployment was to the air base in the UAE.

The dispatch of these advanced weapons systems to the UAE marks a further buildup toward war against Iran under conditions in which Washington has already dispatched two aircraft carrier battle groups to the region.

It takes place in the midst of a ratcheting up of tensions between the UAE and Iran, egged on by Washington, over three small islands located at the mouth of the Strait of Hormuz—Abu Musa and the Greater and Lesser Tunb. The islands, often described in the Iranian press as "Iran's aircraft carriers" are of strategic importance in the preparations for war with Iran. One of the major concerns in Washington is that Iran would respond to attack by blocking the Strait of Hormuz, through which some 40 percent of world's sea-borne oil passes, with devastating effects on the global economy.

The deployment of the stealth fighter jets to the UAE drew an angry response from Iranian officials. Iran's defense minister, Gen. Ahmad Vahidi, called it "a harmful action that damages regional security." Vahidi described the US action as a form of "psychological warfare" that "will bear no fruit except insecurity and complications."

The arrival of the US warplanes coincides with joint military maneuvers conducted by the Gulf Cooperation Council's Peninsula Shield Force, the military arm of the Saudi-led alliance of monarchical dictatorships that line the opposite shore of the Persian Gulf from Iran. The GCC dubbed the war games "Islands of Loyalty", referring to the three Iranian islands that the emirs of the UAE are claiming as their own.

The Peninsula Shield Force has been called into action only three times in its existence. The first instance was in 1990, when it took part in the first US war against Iraq; the second was in 2003, when it was deployed in Kuwait in support of the second US war on Iraq; and the third was in March 2011, when Saudi Arabia and the UAE sent some 2,000 troops and tanks into Bahrain to help the ruling Sunni monarchy suppress a mass protest movement of the Shia majority for equality and democratic rights.

Washington has overseen a major military buildup of the reactionary monarchical dictatorships in the Gulf, pouring in some $100 billion worth of weapons purchases. Just last December, Washington announced a $3.4 billion sale to the UAE of missile defense batteries and radar. The US and NATO have provided Saudi Arabia and the UAE with a sizable force of advanced US, British and French warplanes.

Iran's historic claims to the three islands are firmly founded. Seized from Iran by Britain 1903, when British imperialism sought to assert its control over the Persian Gulf, they were retaken by Iran after London was forced by imperial decline and economic crisis to withdraw all of its forces east of the Suez.

At the time, Washington was perfectly content with the reassertion of control over the islands by Iran, which was then ruled by the CIA-backed torture regime

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of the Shah, who functioned as US imperialism's gendarme in the Gulf region. In the six years after Iran's repossession of Abu Musa and the two other islets, Washington funneled some $16.2 billion in military hardware to the Shah's regime, at the time an unprecedented amount of arms sales between two countries.

Iran has dismissed the claims to the island made by the UAE—over 80 percent of whose population, virtually its entire workforce, is made up of foreign workers and their families—as "baseless".

The sudden resurrection of the dispute over the islands after 41 years of Iranian control is clearly a provocation that appears to have been concocted jointly with Washington.

"The emirates are not acting independently in this matter," Sadollah Zarei, a columnist for the pro-government Iranian newspaper *Kayhan* told the *New York Times.* "Bigger powers are behind this." He said that the timing was no accident, coming in advance of a second round of talks between Iran and the P5+1 (the five permanent members of the United Nations Security Council—Britain, China, France, Russia and the United States—plus Germany) to be held in Baghdad later this month.

"By driving up tensions in the Persian Gulf, the US and their allies are trying to send a message to Iran: back down, or face pressure on other fronts."

While the round of talks held last month in Istanbul was followed by optimistic press reports that the danger of war with Iran was receding, the latest provocative and reckless US military deployment in the region suggests quite the opposite.

The fundamental issue driving Washington's aggression is not concern over an Iranian nuclear weapons program—which US intelligence agencies have repeatedly affirmed does not exist—but rather US imperialism's determination to exert uncontested hegemony over the oil-rich and strategically vital regions of the Persian Gulf and Central Asia. Having failed to secure this aim in the course of the last decade of war in Afghanistan and Iraq, Washington is preparing to conduct a third war against the major regional power that lies between these two countries, Iran.

To the extent there is a "threat" that tensions will decrease over the Iranian nuclear program, new pretexts must be found for sustaining the military buildup against Iran. Thus, the 41-year-old dispute over three tiny islands becomes a major flashpoint.

With ever greater US military forces being deployed in the Persian Gulf, the possibility grows of a clash that could lead to—or be used as a pretext for—a US war against Iran. As in the case of the Gulf of Tonkin incident that set the stage for full-scale US war in Vietnam, should such a clash fail to take place, it can always be manufactured.

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