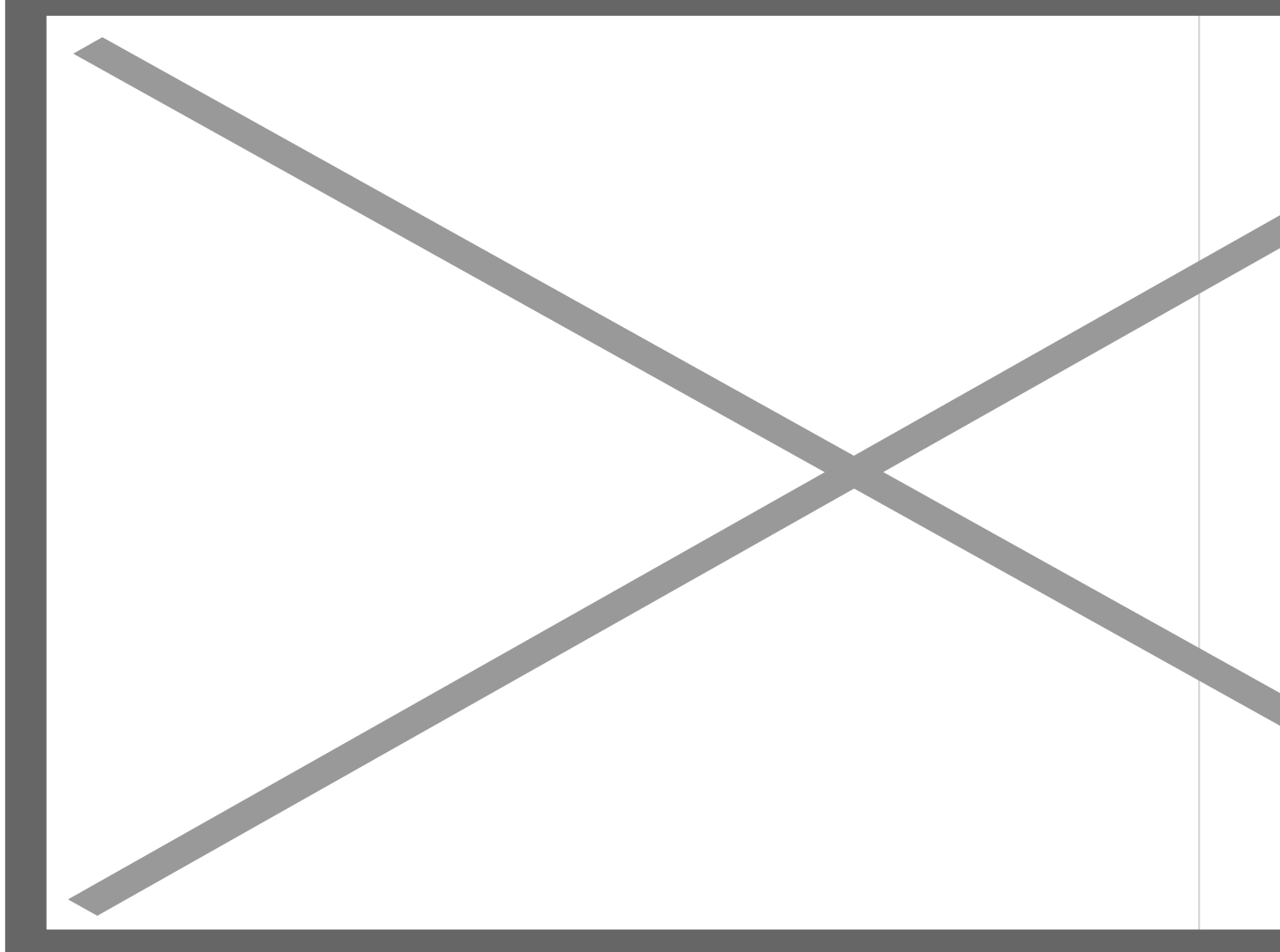


Israeli fighter jets escort U.S. B-52 bombers in new inroad in Mideast

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Israeli F-15 fighter jets escorting an American B-52 bomber as it passes over the occupied Palestinian territories on March 7, 2021.

Ramallah, March 8 (RHC)-- Israeli F-15 fighter jets have accompanied two U.S. B-52 bombers as they passed over the occupied Palestinian territories in the latest flexing of military muscle in the Middle East.

The Times of Israel reported that each American bomber was escorted by four Israeli F-15 jets on Sunday. "This flight is another testament to the strategic cooperation with American forces, which is a cornerstone in the preservation of the security of the airspace of ... Israel and the Middle East," the Israeli military said in a statement.

The B-52 bombers were also accompanied by military aircraft from Saudi Arabia and Qatar as they flew through their respective airspaces. The U.S. military claimed that the flight was meant to "deter aggression and reassure partners and allies of the US military's commitment to security in the region."

Sunday's flyby was at least the seventh in the past six months. However, it marked the first time that Israeli aircraft were photographed accompanying the U.S. bombers.

Israel is apparently trying to stake out a military footprint in the Persian Gulf after signing normalization agreements with some regional Arab states. The occupying regime recently claimed there had been an explosion on its ship in the Sea of Oman, pointing the finger at Iran, which has roundly rejected it.

Iranian officials and international observers believe the incident is the latest in a litany of false flag operations by Israel to implement its new schemes in the region.

Lebanon's al-Mayadeen news network on Sunday released a video that belied the Israeli allegations, showing that there had actually been no attack on the ship from the outside. On February 26, an Israeli-owned cargo ship said it had been crippled by a suspected blast while it was in the Sea of Oman, claiming that it had suffered holes in both sides of its hull.

Israeli premier Benjamin Netanyahu hastily accused Iran of attacking the ship. "This was indeed an operation by Iran. That is clear," he said, without providing any evidence. Netanyahu also said Iran "is Israel's biggest enemy and we are striking them across the region."

Iranian Foreign Ministry spokesman Saeed Khatibzadeh flatly rejected the Israeli allegation. He said Netanyahu "suffers from Iranophobia" and that Iran will not allow the Israeli regime to spread panic in the region.

In a letter addressed to UN Secretary General Antonio Guterres on Friday, Iran's ambassador to the UN also warned of the ramifications of any possible miscalculated measure by Israel over the incident.

Iran's defense minister said Sunday Tehran will level Tel Aviv and Haifa to the ground if Israel commits any mistake after the Israeli minister of military affairs said the regime was updating plans for a possible attack on Iranian nuclear sites.

"Sometimes, the Zionist regime bites off more than it can chew and makes threats that are clearly out of desperation," Brigadier General Amir Hatami said.

The B-52 flyovers intensified in the final two months of former president Donald Trump in office, which also saw the US dispatch a nuclear-powered submarine to the Persian Gulf for the first time in eight years.

According to the New York Times, "such quick demonstration missions to the Middle East and Asia" aimed to "showcase American air power to allies and adversaries".

Last month, head of the Chiefs of Staff of the Iranian Armed Forces Major General Mohammad Baqeri said Iran had conducted 10 military drills in the Persian Gulf and the Sea of Oman as the US flexed its muscles.

The new B-52 flyover - a grueling 36-hour round-trip mission from Minot Air Force Base in North Dakota to the Middle East - is the first under the new US administration which has claimed to be seeking a de-escalation in tensions with Iran.

Iranian officials say they have seen no meaningful change in the US policy which President Joe Biden characterized as a total failure during his campaign trail.

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