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U.S. Amasses Stealth-Jet Armada near Iran

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The U.S. Air Force is quietly assembling the world's most powerful air-to-air fighting team at bases near Iran. Stealthy F-22 Raptors on their first front-line deployment have joined a potent mix of active-duty and Air National Guard F-15 Eagles, including some fitted with the latest advanced radars. The Raptor-Eagle team has been honing special tactics for clearing the air of Iranian fighters [in the event of war](#).

The fighters join a growing naval armada that includes Navy carriers, submarines, cruisers and destroyers plus patrol boats and minesweepers [enhanced with the latest close-in weaponry](#).

It's been years since the Air Force has maintained a significant dogfighting presence in the Middle East. During the 2003 invasion of Iraq Boeing-made F-15Cs flew air patrols from Saudi Arabia, but the Iraqi air force put up no resistance and the Eagle squadrons soon departed. For the next nine years Air Force deployments to the Middle East were handled by ground-attack planes such as A-10s, F-16s and twin-seat F-15E Strike Eagles.

[The 1980s-vintage F-15Cs](#), plagued by structural problems, stayed home in the U.S. and Japan. The brand-new F-22s, built by Lockheed Martin, suffered [their own mechanical and safety problems](#). When they ventured from their home bases in Virginia, Alaska and New Mexico, it was only for short training exercises over the Pacific. The F-15Cs and F-22s sat out last year's Libya war.

The Air Force fixed the F-15s and partially patched up the F-22s just in time for the escalating stand-off over Iran's suspected nuclear weapons program. In March the Air Force deployed the Massachusetts Air National Guard's 104th Fighter Wing, flying 20 standard F-15Cs, to an "undisclosed" air base in Southwest Asia — probably either Al Dhafra in the United Arab Emirates or Al Udeid in Qatar. The highly-experienced Massachusetts Guardsmen, who typically have several years more experience than their active-duty counterparts, would be ready "[should Iran test the 104th](#)," said wing commander Col. Robert Brooks.

[Upgraded F-15Cs from the 18th Wing in Japan](#) joined the Guard Eagles. The Japan-based fighters have the latest APG-63(V)2 and (V)3 radars, manufactured by Raytheon. They're electronically-scanned radars that radiate many individual beams from fixed antenna clusters and track more targets, faster, than old-model mechanical radars that must physically swivel back and forth. The 18th Wing is working up a fleet of 54 updated Eagles spread across two squadrons. The video above, shot by an F-15 pilot, depicts some of the wing's training.

F-22s followed this month. "[Multiple](#)" Raptors deployed to Al Dhafra, according to Amy Butler at *Aviation Week*. Air Force spokesman Capt. Phil Ventura confirmed the deployment. It's not clear where the Raptors came from. If they're from the Alaska-based 3rd Wing, they're the [latest Increment 3.1 model](#) with boosted bombing capabilities in addition to the standard air-to-air weaponry. In any event, the Middle East mission represents the first time F-22s are anywhere near a possible combat zone.

The mix of old and upgraded F-15s and ultra-modern F-22s is no accident. When the Pentagon stopped producing the [nearly \\$400-million-a-copy Raptor](#) after 187 units — half as many as the Air Force said it needed — the flying branch committed to [keeping 250 F-15Cs in service](#) until 2025 at the earliest. [Pilots began developing team tactics](#) for the two fighter types.

"[We have a woefully tiny F-22 fleet](#)," said Gen. Mike Hostage, the Air Force's main fighter commander. So the flying branch worked out a system whereby large numbers of F-15s cover for small numbers of Raptors that sneak in around an enemy's flank in full stealth mode. "Our objective is to fly in front with the F-22s, and have the persistence to stay there while the [F-22s] are conducting their [low-observable] attack," Maj. Todd Giggy, an Eagle pilot, told *Aviation Week*.

One thing to look for is the presence in the Middle East of one of the Air Force's handful of bizjets and Global Hawk drones fitted with the Northrop Grumman [Battlefield Airborne Communications Node](#), or Bacon. The F-22, once envisioned as a solitary hunter, was designed without the radio data-links that are standard on F-15s and many other jets. Instead, the Raptor has its own unique link that is incompatible with the Eagle. Bacon helps translate the radio signals so the two jet types can swap information. With a Bacon plane nearby, F-22s and F-15s can silently exchange data — for example, stealthy Raptors spotting targets for the Eagles.

It's the methods above that the U.S. dogfighting armada would likely use to wipe out the antiquated but determined Iranian air force if the unthinkable occurred and fighting broke out. The warplanes are in place. The pilots are ready. Hopefully they won't be needed.