

Iran preparing for confrontation with US?



US Marine observes Iran fast attack craft in Strait of Hormuz - Reuters

As tensions remain high between Iran and the US, the Islamic Republic appears to have constructed a new mock-up of an aircraft carrier off its southern coast for potential live-fire drills, *The Associated Press* reported on Tuesday.

The faux foe, seen in satellite photographs obtained by *AP*, resembles the Nimitz-class carriers that the US Navy routinely sails into the Persian Gulf from the Strait of Hormuz, the passageway where 20% of all the world's oil passes through.

While not yet acknowledged by Iranian officials, the replica's appearance in the port city of Bandar Abbas suggests Iran's paramilitary Revolutionary Guard is preparing an encore of a similar mock-sinking it conducted in 2015.

It also comes as Iran announced Tuesday it will execute a man it accused of sharing details on the movements of the Guard's Gen. Qassem Soleimani, whom

the US eliminated in a January drone strike in Baghdad.

The move follows continued tensions between the US and Iran. The US Navy recently issued a warning to mariners in the Gulf to stay 100 meters away from US warships or risk being “interpreted as a threat and subject to lawful defensive measures”.

While no mention was made of Iran in the notice, it follows US President Donald Trump’s threat last month to fire on any Iranian ships that harass Navy vessels.

Trump’s warning followed a tense encounter between US and Iranian ships in the Persian Gulf.

The US military said at the time that 11 Revolutionary Guards naval vessels from the Guards navy came close to US Navy and coast guard ships in the Gulf, calling the moves “dangerous and provocative”.

Iran’s Revolutionary Guard acknowledged that the incident had taken place, but also claimed that it was American forces who sparked the incident.

The replica built by Iran carries 16 mock-ups of fighter jets on its deck, according to satellite photos taken by Maxar Technologies. The vessel appears to be some 200 meters (650 feet) long and 50 meters (160 feet) wide. A real Nimitz is over 300 meters (980 feet) long and 75 meters (245 feet) wide.

The fake carrier sits just a short distance away from the parking lot in which the Guard unveiled over 100 new speedboats in May, the kind it routinely employs in tense encounters between Iranian sailors and the US Navy. Those boats carry both mounted machine guns and missiles.

The US Navy’s Bahrain-based 5th Fleet, which patrols Mideast waters, did not immediately respond to a request for comment.

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