

Epilogue to “Operation Measured Imperative” after Mission 7

10:00 AM Local, April 10, 2012

ABU DHABI — Yesterday the UAE began an invasion of the disputed Abu Musa and Tunb islands held by Iranian, located between the two countries in the Persian Gulf. Both countries claim the islands, which have been under Iranian control since 1971. The Pentagon said in a statement that during the UAE attack, Iranian aircraft struck facilities in the UAE mainland used both by the UAE and US militaries. US Navy fighters near the area shot down several Iranian aircraft involved, losing one US aircraft whose pilot was recovered, the statement said.

The strikes in the UAE, which hit Al Minhad Air Base and the Jebel Ali port, killed seven US personnel and 34 Emiratis, wounding at least 100 more. Unconfirmed reports indicated damage to UAE fighters and helicopters at the air bases, but an Emirati government spokesman declined to comment on the equipment damage.

The UAE claims that Iranian submarines, who launched last week’s deadly cruise missile attack on Al Dhafra, were supplied for the attack at Abu Musa, the largest of the disputed islands. “We will do whatever is needed to stop those using our own soil to attack our own soil,” said Mohammed bin Zayed, Crown Prince of Abu Dhabi. Pentagon officials said UAE fighters attempted to intercept two Iranian cargo aircraft en route to reinforce Abu Musa, but the cargo aircraft diverted unharmed to Iran’s mainland. Iranian Mig-29s fought the UAE aircraft, with each side losing at least two fighters according to footage from Abu Musa. The Iranians claim to have captured one UAE pilot who ejected, but otherwise their status is currently unclear.

Later that night, the UAE began bombing and deploying troops to Abu Musa. The latest reports this morning indicate heavy fighting throughout the night between Emirati and Iranian forces on the island and the surrounding waters. Iranian media reported large movements of Iranian aircraft and ships toward the disputed islands.

The US said it was not involved in the UAE’s invasion and is trying to contain the conflict, but that it would use force only to directly defend Americans in the UAE. Asked about the US response, White House press secretary Jay Carney said, “What Iran saw yesterday is that the US will defend its people and interests when under attack, with our military if necessary. But we do not have military objectives beyond that. Like the UAE, we suffered tragic losses in both this attack and last week’s attack on Al Dhafra. The fighting between Iran and the UAE is a really dangerous situation that threatens to spiral into a bigger conflict, where the loss of life could be much larger, especially in the UAE. Our goal all along was to make sure that Iran’s nuclear program, the truly major danger to that region and the whole world, is no longer a threat. With that dark cloud lifted, we think it’s in the interest of all sides to de-escalate.”

At a press conference, a UAE government spokesman said, “The UAE and US militaries have a close relationship and are in close contact about the developing situation.” But two UAE senior military officers said privately there is Emirati anger about the American calls for de-escalation. One of the officers said, “The Americans started this conflict, and we provided them with the military facilities and support they

needed to do it. Now that they've kicked the hornet's nest, are we supposed to sit back and take it when the counterattack comes, from islands that should be ours?"

Iranian government officials led a large rally in Tehran denouncing the US and UAE, condemning the invasion of Abu Musa as part of a continuing unprovoked attack on Iran. In a speech at the rally, President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad said, "Who is it that invaded our land and brutally bombed us, killing hundreds of Iranians, most of them at civilian facilities, who did nothing to them? Iran did not attack the United States. It's completely clear who the aggressor is, so who can tell us to turn the other cheek? We had to defend ourselves. That was not enough for our enemies, and now the UAE is coming to take our land. Everytime we are attacked, we will defend ourselves, until they realize they cannot destroy the Islamic Republic of Iran."

Some US officials have started raising the concern that the US air strikes on Iran's nuclear facilities did not degrade Iran's capabilities as much as previously thought. A senior Department of Defense official, familiar with damage assessments from US strikes on the Darab reprocessing facility and the Fordow enrichment facility, said evidence indicated Iran "managed to avoid destruction of some significant supplies at those facilities." Without giving more detail, she said the strikes may have "set back their nuclear program by only one year, instead of 4 years as we'd hoped."

Another worry for the US is other countries in the region being drawn into the conflict. UAE diplomats are in Riyadh discussing Saudi options to support the UAE invasion of the disputed islands, including Saudi air strikes on the Iranian mainland, according to an American intelligence official familiar with the matter. The same US official also said that Israeli intelligence officials are secretly meeting with UAE counterparts to assist the invasion, declining to specify the assistance discussed. "Other countries viewing Iran as a threat see this as a time-limited opportunity to permanently reduce Iran's ability to hold the Strait of Hormuz at risk," she said.

Multiple American officials said that despite the US efforts to de-escalate, they do not see an easy path back to peace. One senior State Department official said, "We went into this believing Iran would retaliate, and that stopping this from getting out of control would require absorbing a retaliation without responding in kind. The Emiratis are understandably upset. The US has more than a hundred dead at this point, the majority of the casualties, so it's not like we haven't paid dearly for this. Keeping this going could turn it into something much worse, and it's just not worth it when we've already achieved the most important goal with destroying the nuclear facilities. But the Emiratis see that as showing weakness when they got punched."