

Targeting Iran, Strengthening NATO: U.S., British, Israeli, Italian F-35s in Unprecedented Air Combat Exercise

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The twelve-day Falcon Strike 21 aerial war games commenced in earnest today out of the Amendola Air Base in Italy. The exercise is led by the Italian Air Force and is described by U.S. Air Forces in Europe and Air Forces Africa as designed for the integration of 4th and 5th generation fighter capabilities; all four participating countries – Britain, Israeli, Italy and the U.S. – have provided variants of the fifth-generation F-35 fighter jet for the drills.

Israel has deployed six F-35I Adir fighter jets in what the Israeli Air Force says is “[part of its \[the Adir F-35I Division’s\] first-ever overseas deployment.](#)”

The participants have supplied the following combat aircraft:

- U.S. – Air Force F-35A Lightning IIs, Marine Corps F-35B Lightning IIs and F-16C Fighting Falcons
- Britain – Royal Air Force F-35B Lightning IIs
- Israel: Air Force F-35I Adirs and Gulfstream G550 specialized surveillance aircraft
- Italy – Air Force F-35A and F-35B Lightning IIs, F-2000 Eurofighter Typhoons, Panavia Tornados, Alenia Aermacchi T-346s, AMX International ground attack aircraft, MQ-1 Predators and Gulfstream G550s

The newly-launched HMS Queen Elizabeth aircraft carrier, flagship of the British Royal Navy, and its strike group will also participate, [ahead of its deploying two guided-missile ships to the Black Sea to confront Russia.](#)

A *Times of Israel* report with the title *In first, Israeli F-35s train in Italy — with Iran in their sights*, described the participation of Israeli F-35s as the largest and farthest drill they have participated in to date. The newspaper further revealed that, “Though the explicit goal of the exercise is to improve the overall capabilities of the F-35 jet...a senior Israeli Air Force officer acknowledged that in part, this drill...was meant to prepare Israeli pilots for using the fighter aircraft against Iranian forces.”

The above comment was ascribed to an unidentified senior Israeli military official, who also told reporters, "[Iran is in our focus.](#)"

The current exercise is the first one in which Israeli F-35s have engaged in joint maneuvers with F-35s from other nations.

Late last month a comparable exercise was held at the Amendola Air Base and Aviano Air Base in Italy. The latter was used extensively for the U.S.'s and NATO's wars against the Bosnian Serb Republic, Yugoslavia, Afghanistan, Iraq and Libya and would likely be used against Iran should that nation become a U.S.-NATO-Israeli target.

Two Italian F-35 Lightning IIs, assigned to the 32nd Wing at the Amendola base, landed at the Aviano Air Base on May 20-21 in support of Astral Knight 2021, an air combat exercise that occurred at Aviano and in other locations in Albania, Croatia, Greece and Slovenia.

Described as an integrated air and missile defense exercise, military aircraft involved were U.S. Air Force F-15E Strike Eagles, F-16 Fighting Falcons, HH-60 Pave Hawks and C-130J Super Hercules aircraft; Italian Air Force F-35 Lightning IIs, Hellenic Air Force F-16s Fighting Falcons and Emb-145 Eerie aircraft, and Croatian MiG-21 BisD/UMDs.

A liaison with the Headquarters U.S. Air Forces in Europe-Air Forces Africa 5th-generation integration team maintenance and logistics was quoted in a release as saying:

["The current program of record shows European nations' F-35 inventories outnumbering US F-35s based in Europe by almost 10 to one. European nations would have 10 times as many F-35s as the U.S. does in Europe. That's why we're taking great steps now to learn how to interoperate with partners. That's what this is all about."](#)

He was further cited disclosing the intended mission of qualitatively increasing European NATO member states' arsenals of the fifth-generation warplane:

"The more exercises like [Astral Knight 2021] that are in place, the more partnerships will strengthen and the more we become a unified force ready to carry out the assigned tasks for the protection of NATO airspace."

The integration of NATO air combat capabilities and a potential war against Iran are intricately related developments; as was the first with air wars and bombing campaigns in Bosnia, Yugoslavia, Afghanistan, Iraq and Libya, with Syria narrowly avoiding the same fate.

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Featured image: Astral Knight 2021 (Source: Anti-bellum)



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Michel Chossudovsky

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