

France opens first permanent military base in the Persian Gulf

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The inauguration of a French military base in Abu Dhabi, the capital of the United Arab Emirates (UAE), on May 26, demonstrates that French capitalism is eager to secure its interests in the Persian Gulf and has ambitions to be a global player.

Called Peace Camp, France's first permanent military base in the UAE, which is historically closer to Great Britain and the US, is only 150 miles from the coast of Iran. It is also close to the strategic Strait of Hormuz, through which 40 percent of the world's oil supply passes. It represents a toehold for French imperialism in a region militarily dominated particularly by the US.

The base includes an air base, a navy base and training camp and will house up to 500 French troops. The air base houses Mirage and Rafale jets of the French air force at al-Dhafra; the naval base includes 300 meters of quay at Mina Zayed port and currently supports ships deployed in the Indian Ocean. The land base, located in the Emirate of Camp Zayed, in the desert, includes training facilities for urban combat.

In his keynote speech after his inauguration, French Nicolas Sarkozy said, "France's permanent military base at Abu Dhabi shows the responsibilities that France, a global power, intends to take up at the sides of its principal partners, in this region that is absolutely central to the entire world." He added, "France is engaging itself in this military presence, which finds a new era in its partnership relations not only with the UAE but with all of its partners in the Middle East."

The UAE and France agreed to establish the base in Abu Dhabi during Sarkozy's visit to the Gulf region in January 2008. The creation of the base is part of a defence agreement signed in 1995 between the two countries.

The Peace Camp base, France's first overseas base in

50 years following the end of the colonial era, represents a significant shift in French foreign policy. France has up to now had its military bases concentrated in its former colonies in Africa. Of over 12,000 French troops deployed around the world, over half are deployed in Africa, with the largest contingent (2,800 troops) in Djibouti in the Horn of Africa. France has 3,000 deployed troops in Afghanistan.

The establishment of the Gulf base underscores France's focus on these areas to secure energy supplies and potential markets for French corporations, especially in military and energy technology.

Over the past years, France has extended its commercial relations with the UAE. France has been a main military supplier to the UAE since the first Gulf War. According to sources at the Elysée presidential palace, today "50 percent of their military equipment is French." In an interview with WAM, UAE's official news agency, Sarkozy said, "The UAE today is our first partner in the Gulf and the Middle East. Of course, [it is our] first economic partner in the region. The figures speak for themselves. French exports to the UAE have tripled over the last 10 years. The UAE today receives half of the French investments in the Gulf."

Sarkozy's visit was also aimed at winning a multi-billion euro contract for French utility firms Total, GDF and nuclear firm Areva, which are seeking to win a contract to build civil nuclear energy plant in the UAE. France is facing competition from US company General Electric and Korea Electric Power to win a share of the UAE plan to build a nuclear power reactor.

On May 25, the *Financial Times* quoted a chief executive of the Institute for Near East and Gulf Military Analysis, Riad Kahwaji, "From the Abu Dhabi

side, they have the full commitment from another Western power to the security of this region, and also there's no more monopoly from one side for security in the region, and definitely they will look for more of a contribution from the French in terms of transfer of technology and industrial and economic programmes together."

Besides the undoubted individual corporate interests involved, powerful strategic interests are impelling the French bourgeoisie to strengthen its military influence in the region.

Last year, Paris released a white paper outlining France's military plans for the next 15 years and a global reorientation of France's military deployments. According to the white paper, France will concentrate on "a priority geographical axis from the Atlantic to the Mediterranean, the Arab-Persian Gulf and the Indian Ocean. This axis corresponds to the areas where the risks related to the strategic interests of France and Europe are the highest."

In particular, Sarkozy's move is bound up with a redistribution of strategic influence in the Gulf, as expectations grow of US-Iran negotiations and a possible improvement of relations between the US and Iran.

Before his UAE visit, Sarkozy gave an extensive interview to WAM on May 24. Speaking about Iran's nuclear program, he said, "The Iranian crisis is frankly one of the issues threatening world security. My position was clear, and I still insist that Iran owning nuclear weapons is not acceptable."

However, he welcomed the Obama administration's suggestions that it might negotiate with Iran. He said, "I'm convinced that this approach is the best option and may be the only one to settle this issue amicably." Since Obama was elected, Iranian officials have been in favour in negotiating with the new US administration. During his election campaign, Obama offered to talk with the Iranian government.

In his inauguration speech at the base, Sarkozy did not explicitly mention the influence of Iran in the Persian Gulf, but he said that France would stand by the UAE. "This military installation is concrete and strong proof of our desire," he said, "come what may, to stand beside the UAE." At the same time, he added, "The permanent military presence of France is not aimed at anyone."

In response to France's permanent military presence in the Gulf, Iranian officials said that the UAE decision to allow France to set up a military presence in Abu Dhabi will not improve the regional security situation. Iranian foreign ministry spokesman Hassan Qashqavi commented, "The UAE's decision is illogical and cannot be regarded as a move that will improve regional security." He added, "Allowing foreigners to increase their military presence in the region will undermine security and stability and will lead to an arms race."

For its part, the French bourgeois press is calculating that Sarkozy will be able to promote French interests in the UAE by playing on UAE ruling class fears of losing influence in Washington as the US negotiates with Iran.

The French daily *Le Figaro* wrote on May 25, "The small Gulf state fears the perspective of one day having a nuclear Shiite Iran as its neighbour. Abu Dhabi is therefore looking for new protectors." It quoted an anonymous official involved in negotiations over the base, who said, "Two allies are better than one...especially at a time when the Americans are re-evaluating their strategic choices in the world."

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