

Washington pushes to brink of war against Iran

By Bill Van Auken
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The abrupt trip staged by US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo to Brussels to push Washington's hard line against Iran, combined with the deployment of still more US military assets to the Persian Gulf, point to Washington's calculated escalation of a war crisis in the region.

Late Monday, the *New York Times* posted an article under the headline "White House Reviews Military Plans Against Iran, in Echoes of Iraq War." The article cited as sources "more than half a dozen national security officials" and reported that a meeting of President Trump's top national security aides last week discussed a plan to send as many as 120,000 troops to the Middle East.

The spark for an all-out conflict can come from any one of a number of staged provocations, including the alleged sabotage of two Saudi oil tankers and two other vessels off the coast of the United Arab Emirates (UAE) reported on Sunday.

Saudi Energy Minister Khalid al-Falih stressed that one of the Saudi tankers that was allegedly damaged was en route to pick up Saudi oil to take to the United States, a detail apparently highlighted to make the case that "US interests" were at stake in the incident.

Pompeo, national security adviser John Bolton and other US officials have repeatedly vowed to take "swift and decisive" military action in defense of US interests in the oil-rich region. They have threatened to unleash "unrelenting" force against Iran in retaliation for any action alleged to be carried out by a wide array of forces dubbed by Washington as Iranian "proxies," ranging from Hezbollah in Lebanon to Hamas in the Palestinian Gaza Strip, the Houthis rebels in Yemen and various Shia militias in Iraq and Syria.

The alleged sabotage of the four vessels took place in the Gulf of Oman, east of Fujairah, a major oil port that lies approximately 85 miles south of the strategic Strait of Hormuz, through which passes roughly one-third of the world's oil transported by sea.

Saudi and UAE officials indicated that there were no casualties and no oil spills resulting from the alleged sabotage. A video posted online showed a hole torn into the

hull of a Norwegian-owned ship at its waterline.

The timing of the incident dovetailed neatly with the US escalation of tensions in the region. It came just days after the May 9 warning issued by the US Maritime Administration (MARAD) that commercial ships, including oil tankers, could be targeted in the growing buildup to war.

"Iran or its proxies could respond by targeting commercial vessels, including oil tankers, or US military vessels in the Red Sea, Bab-el-Mandeb Strait, or the Persian Gulf," the MARAD statement said.

Iranian officials expressed concern over the incident. Foreign Ministry spokesman Abbas Moussavi described the incident as "lamentable" and "worrying" and called for a thorough investigation. Moussavi also warned countries of the Persian Gulf to stay vigilant in the face of potential "adventurism by foreign players" or any "conspiracy orchestrated by ill-wishers" to undermine maritime security.

There has been no clear explanation from either the UAE or the Saudi monarchy of what exactly took place in the Gulf of Oman. The involvement of covert operations aimed at creating the pretext for war, either on the part of Washington or its two principal regional allies, Israel and Saudi Arabia itself, both of which have long sought to bring the US into a war with Iran, is a very real possibility.

One thing is certain. Nothing coming from the US government or its propaganda servants in the corporate media regarding the crisis in the Persian Gulf can be believed. The pretexts for war this time around will prove as fabricated as Iraq's "weapons of mass destruction" or the lies about a US warship being attacked in the Gulf of Tonkin that were used to justify the War in Vietnam.

The Trump administration has continued to escalate its military intervention in the region, dispatching a Patriot missile battery to the Persian Gulf along with a Navy amphibious assault ship. This follows last week's arrival in the Red Sea of the USS Abraham Lincoln aircraft carrier battle group, as well as the landing of a bomber strike wing consisting of four B-52s at the US Al Udeid airbase in Qatar.

The Pentagon announced on Monday that the B-52s had carried out their “first mission... to defend American forces and interests in the region,” consisting of operations near Iranian airspace.

Such is the war threat that even a White House reporter questioned Trump during his Monday appearance with the far-right prime minister of Hungary, Viktor Orbán: “Are you at war with Iran? Are you seeking regime change there?”

Trump did not deny the looming war threat, declaring: “If they do anything, they will suffer greatly. We’ll see what happens with Iran.”

Underscoring the brazen recklessness of the US drive to war, Secretary Pompeo abruptly shifted his travel plans for the second time in a week, canceling a trip to Moscow to fly to Brussels and effectively crash a scheduled meeting of European foreign ministers called to discuss their response to the Persian Gulf crisis.

The US military buildup as well as the tightening of US sanctions described by the Trump administration as “maximum pressure” against Iran, designed to suffocate the country’s economy and drive its oil exports down to zero, have sharpened tensions between Washington and its erstwhile European allies.

Since the beginning of the month, Washington has withdrawn waivers that had allowed China, South Korea, Japan, India and Turkey to continue purchasing oil from Iran, and has imposed a new round of sanctions aimed at halting all exports of Iranian iron, steel, aluminum and copper.

The US and the major European powers have been divided since Trump unilaterally abrogated the so-called Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) nuclear agreement reached between Iran and the US, Russia, China, Germany, the UK and France. Washington reimposed sanctions that are tantamount to a state of war. The European governments, as well as the UN nuclear inspection agency, the International Atomic Energy Agency, have insisted that Iran has remained in compliance with the agreement, which was supposed to combine strict limits on the Iranian nuclear program with the lifting of economic sanctions.

The issue for the Trump administration, however, has never been the nuclear deal, but rather the drive for regime-change, i.e., the restoration of a US-backed puppet dictatorship in the oil-rich country like that of the Shah.

As Bolton, one of the architects of the current military buildup, put it a year before becoming national security adviser: “The declared policy of the United States should be the overthrow of the mullahs’ regime in Tehran... The behavior and the objectives of the regime are not going to change and, therefore, the only solution is to change the

regime itself.”

Pompeo’s meetings in Brussels with the EU foreign policy chief Federica Mogherini and the foreign ministers of Germany, France and the UK only underscored the transatlantic tensions over Iran. Mogherini said the European representatives had stressed that the crisis in the Persian Gulf had produced a “crucial delicate moment” in which “maximum restraint and avoiding any escalation on the military side” was necessary.

She said the European ministers “continue to fully support the nuclear deal with Iran,” meaning the normalization of trade and investment. She added that this included the “operationalization” of the so-called Instrument in Support of Trade Exchange (INSTEX), which is supposed to create a non-dollar direct payment channel with Iran to circumvent US sanctions. Transactions through this exchange, she claimed, would begin within the next few weeks.

Tehran last week put the European signatories to the accord on notice that it would resume uranium enrichment at a higher grade within 60 days unless they took measures to allow Iran to export its oil and access financial markets. European companies and banks, which had previously seen an opportunity for exploiting the country’s oil wealth, have withdrawn in the face of threats to be frozen out of the US market.

The European powers’ opposition to the US drive toward war against Iran is based not on any concern for the fate of 80 million Iranians, but rather on the pursuit of their own imperialist interests in the region. The conflict exposes fault lines that point to the danger of a new military conflict in the Persian Gulf becoming the antechamber of a third, nuclear, world war.

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