

Washington threatens new attack on Syria amid US war buildup in Persian Gulf

By Bill Van Auken
22 May 2019

Just days after President Donald Trump threatened to put an “official end” to Iran, Washington has threatened renewed military aggression against Syria based on unsubstantiated charges of the use of chemical weapons in the military campaign being waged by Damascus against Al Qaeda-linked militias in the northwestern province of Idlib.

The new US threats followed back-to-back closed-door briefings on the Iran war drive delivered to members of the US House and Senate Tuesday by US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo, Patrick Shanahan, the acting US defense secretary, and US Joint Chiefs of Staff Chairman Gen. Joseph Dunford.

The thrust of these presentations was reported to be a defense of the trumped-up “intelligence” alleging Iranian threats to carry out attacks on “US interests” or allies in the Persian Gulf region, along with the claim that the massive and menacing US military deployment to the region had thwarted Tehran’s alleged plans.

Even as this testimony was unfolding, the US State Department issued a statement claiming that it was gathering information about an alleged chlorine gas attack on May 19 in Idlib, combined with a threat that the “United States and our allies will respond quickly and appropriately.”

The State Department’s missive included a denunciation of a “continuing disinformation campaign by the Assad regime and Russia to create the false narrative that others are to blame for chemical weapons attacks that the Assad regime itself is conducting.”

This passage was no doubt added in response to the damning leak of a document prepared by a leading investigator from the Organization for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons (OPCW) concerning an April 2018 alleged chemical attack in Douma, a Damascus suburb, that was used as the pretext for US-led missile strikes against Syria.

The analysis established that gas cylinders found on the top of an apartment block and blamed for the deaths of 49 people could not have been dropped from the air, as was alleged in blaming the Syrian government. Instead, they had to have been manually placed there, indicating the culpability of the Western-backed “rebels,” who staged the incident to provide a pretext for a US attack.

The fabrication of new chemical weapons incidents by Washington and its allies in Syria would serve as a means of prosecuting the US campaign against Iran on another front.

The threat over Syria follows Washington’s deployment to the region of a carrier battle group, led by the USS Abraham Lincoln, a bomber task force, including nuclear-capable B-52s and a Patriot missile battery.

The carrier group has joined with a task force of amphibious assault warships carrying US Marines, warplanes and landing craft in a series of highly provocative war games in proximity of the Iranian coast, which a US naval commander said were aimed at “increasing our lethality and agility to respond to threats.”

Meanwhile, the Pentagon has drawn up war plans calling for the shipping of as many as 120,000 US troops to the region—a similar number as that which was deployed to the region prior to the invasion of Iraq—in apparent preparation for an all-out war with Iran.

This military buildup has placed the Middle East once again on a knife’s edge, with the prospect that virtually any incident in the region—either real or invented—can trigger a horrific military conflict that would dwarf the carnage of the US war in Iraq by comparison.

Iran’s Foreign Minister Javad Zarif warned Tuesday that Washington is “playing a dangerous game” with its military buildup in the Gulf.

“Having all these military assets in a small waterway is in itself prone to accident particularly when you have

people who are interested in accidents. So extreme prudence is required and we believe the US is playing a very, very dangerous game,” Zarif said.

Without any proof, Washington has attempted to blame Iran for the alleged sabotage of four vessels, including two Saudi-owned oil tankers, off the coast of the United Arab Emirates (UAE) last week as well as the firing of a Katyusha rocket into Baghdad’s heavily-fortified Green Zone, which fell about a third of a mile from the US embassy.

A previously unknown group on Tuesday claimed responsibility for firing the rocket, saying that it was in retaliation for Trump’s issuing a full pardon to a former US Army first lieutenant convicted and sentenced to 25 years in prison for the 2008 extra-judicial execution of a prisoner, Ali Mansur Mohamed, in Iraq.

Another potential trip wire for a full-scale war is the near-genocidal four-year-old Saudi-led and US-backed war against Yemen, that has killed an estimated 80,000 civilians, while bringing some 10 million to the brink of starvation.

On Tuesday, both the Houthi-rebel movement that controls most of Yemen and the Saudi monarchy reported that an explosive-laden drone launched from Yemen struck an airport in Saudi Arabia’s southern Najran region. The Houthi-run al-Masirah television channel said that the attack was in retaliation for Saudi airstrikes that have caused the vast majority of the civilian casualties in Yemen.

The Saudi regime branded the drone strike an attack on a “civilian target” and referred to the Houthis as “the terrorist militias of Iran.” In reality, the airport is the site of a military base from which attacks are launched on Yemen. US troops were earlier stationed there to aid the criminal Saudi-led war, but a Pentagon spokesman said that none were present when the drone strike took place.

The claim that the Houthis are a proxy of Tehran is patently false, though incessantly repeated by both Washington and Riyadh.

In the midst of the provocative military threats against both Syria and Iran, a bipartisan Congressional group comprising the majority of both the House and the Senate signed a letter to President Trump urging an even more aggressive policy in the region and in particular in Syria.

The letter amounted to a demand that the Trump administration maintain a strong military presence in Syria, escalating confrontation with the government of President Bashar al-Assad as well as Iran and Russia and unconditionally supporting Israeli attacks on the country.

It was signed by nearly 400 members of Congress, including leading Democrats in both the House and Senate. The letter was issued in the names of the Representatives Eliot Engel and Michael McCaul, the chairman and ranking member of the House Foreign Affairs Committee, and Senators James Risch and Bob Menendez, chairman and ranking member of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee.

While briefly referring to the continued presence of Al Qaeda and ISIS in Syria, the letter centered on charges concerning the “Iranian regime’s threatening behavior” and “Russia’s destabilizing role” in the country. It demanded that the administration “increase pressure on Iran and Russia with respect to activities in Syria” in order to “stop the growing threats to US interests, Israel, and regional security and stability.”

The letter is a bipartisan demand that the Trump administration maintain the US troop presence in Syria, which officially has been stated at 2,000, but is undoubtedly significantly higher. While last December, Trump announced that he was withdrawing all US forces from the country, within weeks the administration backed off this position and indicated that several hundred troops would remain.

Whatever criticisms have been leveled by Democrats over Trump’s reckless tweets, the Congressional letter only confirms that the war drive against Iran is the working out of a bipartisan policy that has been pursued for decades by successive administrations, Democratic and Republican alike, to militarily assert US hegemony over the Persian Gulf and its vast energy resources, at the cost of millions of lives.

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