

US Middle East commander proposes permanent buildup against Iran

By Bill Van Auken
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The chief of Central Command (CENTCOM), which oversees all of the Pentagon's operations in the Middle East, claimed over the weekend that Iran continues to pose an "imminent" threat to Washington's interests in the region and that a permanent military escalation against the country and its 82 million people may be required.

Gen. Frank McKenzie during a tour of the region that included both Baghdad and the carrier USS Abraham Lincoln, sailing in the north Arabian Sea, told reporters that he is "negotiating" with the Pentagon on plans for "bringing additional resources into the theater" to step up the military campaign against Iran.

Last month, the Trump administration ordered the USS Lincoln's carrier battle group, a bomber strike force led by nuclear-capable B-52s, along with 900 additional ground troops and a Patriot missile battery into the region on the pretext of responding to supposed Iranian threats.

Plans were also leaked calling for the mobilization of as many as 120,000 troops for deployment to the region, a similar force as that which was assembled in advance of the 2003 US invasion of Iraq.

General McKenzie claimed that the military deployments and US threats had caused Iran to "step back and recalculate the course that they apparently were on."

He told the Associated Press, however, "I don't believe the threat has diminished. I believe the threat is very real."

Speaking with reporters, he said that US intelligence on Iranian threats was "clear" and "compelling," adding that these alleged threats were "advanced, imminent and very specific."

The AP noted, however, that the general provided no specific information on the "threats," insisting that the "compelling" intelligence was all classified.

In addressing thousands of sailors assembled on aircraft carrier Lincoln, McKenzie declared: "I am the reason you are here. I requested this ship because of ongoing tensions with Iran, and nothing says you're interested in somebody than 90,000 tons of aircraft carrier and everything that comes with it.

"My intent by bringing you in here was to stabilize the situation, let Iran know that now is not the time to do something goofy."

If Washington has failed to provide any evidence of Iranian "threats," it is not because the intelligence is classified, but rather because none exists.

Yet the corporate media, sending its "embedded" reporters to slavishly record McKenzie on his Middle East tour, has largely repeated the Pentagon's unsubstantiated allegations against Iran as if they were facts.

None of them bother to place these allegations in the context of the unrelenting threats and aggression of US imperialism against Iran, an oppressed country that was ruled for more than a quarter century by the brutal US-backed dictatorship of the Shah, before it was overthrown in the 1979 Iranian Revolution.

The present confrontation has been prepared by what the Trump administration terms a campaign of "maximum pressure" against Iran, which has the objective of regime change and the imposition of another US puppet dictatorship in Tehran.

Since unilaterally abrogating the 2015 Iran nuclear agreement one year ago, the Trump administration has imposed the most punishing sanctions regime in history against Iran, an economic blockade that is tantamount to a state of war.

Last week, Washington piled on a new layer of sanctions, placing an embargo on Iran's petrochemical industry, advancing as a pretext its alleged funding for the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps, a component of the country's military that Washington has branded as an international terrorist organization. Tehran responded to this designation by declaring the US Central Command as a terrorist entity.

The latest sanctions come on top of an oil embargo that is aimed at reducing the country's oil exports to zero, measures that bar Iran from the US-dominated world financial system and sanctions against its metal industry, its largest non-oil-related source of external revenue.

The stated aim of these sanctions is to force Iran to

renegotiate the nuclear deal and submit to Washington's demands to scrap its nuclear program altogether, give up its ballistic missiles and cease any and all attempts to assert its influence in the Middle East. Tehran has rejected this colonial-style diktat, along with Trump's cynical statements that he is open to talks, pointing out that there is no point in negotiating with a government that rips up already existing agreements.

Far from "stabilizing" the situation in the Persian Gulf, the massive US military deployment has escalated tensions to the brink of war. The carrier and bomber groups dispatched to the region come on top of Iran's permanent encirclement by tens of thousands of US troops in a string of bases across the region.

Both the B-52-led bomber strike group and the contingent of 70 F-18 Hornet fighter jets based on the deck of the USS Lincoln have been carrying out provocative operations near Iranian air space.

The US military budget, meanwhile, is some 50 times greater than that of Iran. The question of who is threatening whom answers itself.

At a press conference Monday, Iran's Foreign Minister Mohammad Javad Zarif rejected US claims that it was Iran that was destabilizing the region.

"Who is causing instability in this region? Did we give Saddam Hussain weapons? Did we back al-Qaeda? Did we imprison the Lebanese prime minister?" he said. "Is it us who are bombing civilians in Yemen every day? Did we support Daesh and al-Nusra [the al Qaeda-linked militias in Syria] or were they American weapons that Saudi Arabia gave them?"

General McKenzie's claims of an "imminent threat" from Iran was severely undercut last month when British Army Maj. Gen. Christopher Ghika, a deputy commander in charge of intelligence for Operation Inherent Resolve, the US-led coalition deployed to the region on the pretext of combating ISIS, stated flatly that there was no threat from Iranian-backed forces in either Iraq or Syria. The Pentagon was compelled to repudiate Ghika's statement, which ran directly counter to its narrative justifying the aggressive buildup against Iran.

Before moving to the Tampa, Florida headquarters of the US Central Command, McKenzie was assigned to the Pentagon, serving as the director of "Strategic Plans and Policy" during the period in which strategic plans were drawn up to shift the focus of US militarism abroad explicitly toward the preparation for confrontation with "great power" rivals, particularly China and Russia.

The *Wall Street Journal* noted Monday that the CENTCOM commander's proposal for a new buildup in the Middle East would mean "a significant reversal in the U.S.

global military posture, which has shifted away from the Middle East under the Trump administration's national security strategy, which emphasizes risks from competition with Russia and China."

This contradiction, however, is more apparent than real. US imperialism is seeking to offset the decline of its economic hegemony and the rise of China as a potential rival by utilizing its military might to assert its unchallenged hegemony over the major energy-producing regions of the planet—in particular the Middle East and Venezuela—placing itself in a position to put China on rations.

At the same time, the confrontation with Iran is bound up with the increasingly bitter and growing conflicts between US and European imperialism over access to markets and natural resources and global domination.

Monday saw a visit to Tehran by Germany's Foreign Minister Heiko Maas, who said he spoke for all the major European powers, including Britain and France, in support of the so-called Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA), the Iran nuclear deal repudiated by Washington.

Maas claimed that the Instrument in Support of Trade Exchanges (INSTEX), a nondollar, barter-based system designed to elude the US sanctions regime and maintain European-Iranian trade would go into effect "in the foreseeable future."

At the same time, the German foreign minister said that, while the European powers wanted to meet their commitments to lift economic sanctions in return for Iran's curtailing of its nuclear program, they could not "pull off miracles" in the face of Washington's economic warfare.

Bound up with these "great power" rivalries, a military confrontation with Iran could trigger a third world war fought with nuclear weapons. Such a global catastrophe can be averted only through the independent political mobilization of the international working class against war and its source, the capitalist system.

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