

Iran seizes UK tanker in Strait of Hormuz as danger of Middle East war mounts

By Jordan Shilton
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The danger of a catastrophic military conflict in the Middle East involving the major powers grew Friday, as Iran seized a British oil tanker in the Strait of Hormuz. This came a day after US President Trump claimed that an American warship had downed an Iranian drone and prompted the US Air Force to announce that it was sending an armed air escort through the Strait to accompany an American commercial ship.

The Iranian Revolutionary Guards reported Friday that it seized the *Stena Impero* for violating international maritime rules and regulations. The Swedish-owned ship, sailing under a British flag, turned off its transponder and failed to respond to Iranian warnings as it passed through the Strait of Hormuz, according to Iranian media reports. The ship's owner alleged that the *Stena Impero* was surrounded by small boats and a helicopter as it sailed in international waters.

The British government initially claimed that a second ship, the *Mesdar*, operated by British company Norbulk Shipping, was also seized. However, Iranian state media confirmed that it was allowed to continue its passage after being warned of "safety" violations.

The detention of the British ship comes after top Iranian officials, including Supreme Leader Ayatollah Khamenei and President Hassan Rouhani, vowed to retaliate for Britain's seizure earlier this month of an Iranian super tanker, *Grace 1*, in the overseas territory of Gibraltar. On Friday, the Gibraltar Supreme Court announced that it was extending the detention of *Grace 1* until August 31, based on unproven British allegations that it was transporting oil to Syria in violation of European Union (EU) sanctions.

The extension of the ship's seizure was finalized after Gibraltar's Chief Minister, Fabian Picardo, met in London for talks with UK Prime Minister Theresa May and Foreign Minister Jeremy Hunt, making clear that the source of the decision was not Gibraltar, but the British government.

Chief responsibility for the growing war danger in the Persian Gulf rests squarely with US imperialism, which has relentlessly escalated its provocations against Iran. In May

2018, Trump unilaterally withdrew from the 2015 nuclear accord, then re-imposed devastating economic sanctions and initiated a military build-up across the region. This has included the deployment of an aircraft carrier and the drafting of plans to send 120,000 troops to the Middle East in the event of war. On Wednesday, the Pentagon announced the deployment of 500 troops to a Saudi air base, where the US plans to establish a Patriot missile battery.

Washington aims to bully the Iranian regime into accepting its complete subordination to US imperialism's predatory economic and geopolitical interests in the energy-rich and strategically vital region. At the same time, the American ruling class is determined to consolidate its regional and global dominance vis-à-vis its geostrategic rivals, above all Russia and China.

Last month, the region teetered on the brink of war as Trump came within 10 minutes of launching devastating air strikes on Iranian radar and air defence facilities in retaliation for Iran's downing of a US spy drone that entered Iranian air space. According to sources close to Trump who spoke anonymously to CNN Friday, the President has hardened his stance towards Tehran since the abortive attack and now speaks less often of reaching a negotiated settlement. The sources added that Trump told aides that if the conflict escalates, he would adopt "appropriate measures."

Both Trump and Hunt exploited the *Stena Impero*'s seizure to issue new threats against Iran. Speaking at the White House, Trump denounced Tehran as "nothing but trouble," while Hunt remarked that the disruption of shipping in the Strait of Hormuz was "unacceptable" and warned that Iran would face "serious consequences" if it did not free the ship.

The State Department hosted a meeting of 100 diplomats Friday on establishing a coalition to secure "freedom of navigation" for ships in the region. Brian Hook, Trump's special representative on Iran, appealed to the gathering to establish a "coalition of navies" to guarantee "maritime security."

The British government convened a meeting of its Cobra emergency security council. Sections of the military and big business openly endorsed the military build-up against Iran, advocating military action. Lord West, the former First Sea Lord and an ex-Labour government minister, stated: “They are the ones who escalated by attacking one of our merchant ships, so if they attack one of our merchant ships then they get their comeuppance.”

Bob Sanguinetti, chief executive of the UK Chamber of Shipping, declared, “This incident represents an escalation. While we call for measured response, it is also clear that further protection for merchant vessels must be forthcoming to ensure enhanced security to guarantee free flow of trade in the region.”

The highly unstable character of all the regimes involved makes the danger of a bloody military conflagration all the greater. The latest incidents in the Strait of Hormuz occur at the end of a week in which Trump has denounced his political opponents in fascist terms, warning against subversive socialists and attacking critics of his policies as disloyal to the United States. This aggressiveness reflects the deep crisis of Trump’s government, whose policies are reviled by the vast majority of working people.

The British ruling elite is no less despised by working people. It confronts its greatest strategic crisis in peacetime with the impending Brexit and presides over a country riven by unprecedented levels of social inequality after a decade of vicious austerity.

A conflict in the Middle East, moreover, would further destabilise the global capitalist system, shaken by ever-deepening crises in recent years with the rise of trade conflicts and inter-imperialist rivalries. Friday’s incidents in the Strait of Hormuz, through which fully one fifth of total world oil exports are transported, were enough to send oil prices up by over \$0.50 to \$62.47 per barrel.

Iran’s seizure of merchant vessels, while mounted as retaliation for constant provocations launched by Washington and London, also reflects the desperation of the bourgeois-clerical regime in Tehran. An Associated Press report this week revealed that food prices in Tehran have shot up by between 50 and 100 percent in recent months. Prices for beef trebled and flour doubled between September 2018 and May 2019.

The devastating economic impact of US sanctions, which have already resulted in Iranian oil exports collapsing from 2.5 million to just 500,000 barrels per day, has left the government with virtually no means of combatting this rampant inflation. This in turn fuels social opposition among Iranian workers and poor to the Rouhani regime.

Desperate for a deal with imperialism to obtain the lifting of economic sanctions and enable Iran to export oil to and

import much-needed foodstuffs and other products from the world market, the Iranian regime is lashing out recklessly. While it seizes tankers, it is at the same time offering to initiate talks.

On Thursday, Foreign Minister Mohammed Javad Zarif offered a significant concession to Washington. During a trip to New York for a United Nations meeting, he suggested that Tehran would accept a drastic intensification of permanent international inspections of its nuclear facilities in exchange for a relaxation of US sanctions. Previously, Zarif and other top officials insisted that Iran’s nuclear programme would not be discussed until sanctions imposed by Trump were lifted.

Predictably, Trump and other US officials dismissed Zarif’s offer out of hand, before making clear that the pressure on Iran would be increased. The US Treasury Department announced the blacklisting of a number of companies Thursday it claimed had helped Iran procure materials for its nuclear program.

Following the seizure of the Stena Impero, Lieutenant Colonel Earl Brown, a spokesman for US Central Command, confirmed that aerial patrols through the Strait of Hormuz are being stepped up. Brown added that the US Navy was in contact with American ships travelling through the region to ensure their safety.

Behind the backs of the working class, the imperialist ruling elites are in the advanced stages of preparation to launch a catastrophic military conflict with Iran, threatening the lives of countless millions across the region and beyond. Under the guise of defending “maritime security,” an armada of warships, aircraft and troops from the US and its European allies is to be placed on a hair trigger in a region already simmering with great-power conflicts.

The urgent task now posed is the construction of a global anti-war movement led by the working class to oppose the ruling class’s war conspiracy and the capitalist profit system that is its source. Only an international socialist perspective can unify working people in the United States and Europe with their counterparts in Iran and across the Middle East in a common global struggle against imperialist war.

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