

Pentagon shifts Mideast command center to US in preparation for war on Iran

By Bill Van Auken
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In an action with ominous implications, the Pentagon over the weekend shifted the operations of the command and control center for its warplanes in the Middle East from its long-time base in Qatar to a South Carolina air base more than 7,000 miles away.

The transfer of the so-called US Air Force Combined Air and Space Operations Center from the Al Udeid Air Base in the Qatari desert to South Carolina's Shaw Air Force Base was carried out on Saturday. After a 24-hour period, operations were shifted back again to Al Udeid.

The *Washington Post*, which was invited to witness the transfer and first reported on it Sunday, cited US commanders as indicating that the transfer, which amounted to a dress rehearsal, was carried out with some "urgency" due to "constant Iranian threats of targeting US bases in the region in case of any military conflict."

The report added that issue had become more pressing following the September 14 attacks on Saudi oil installations, which temporarily cut the kingdom's production in half and sent oil prices soaring by 20 percent. While Yemen's Houthi rebels claimed responsibility for the attack, Washington, the Saudi monarchy and the major European imperialist powers have blamed Iran, while as yet providing no evidence to support their accusations.

"Iran has indicated multiple times through multiple sources their intent to attack U.S. forces," Col. Frederick Coleman, commander of the 609th Air and Space Operations Center, told the *Post*. "Frankly, as the war against ISIS winds down and as we continue to work through a potential peace process in Afghanistan, the region is calming down and potentially more stable than it has been in decades. Except for Iran."

Tehran has made it clear that it has no intention of

attacking US forces, which have encircled Iran and have been steadily built up since last May, unless the US launches an attack on Iran first. In that case, in self-defense, Iran would strike the string of American bases that have been set up across the Persian Gulf, with the Al Udeid Air Base and its 10,000 US personnel, along with hundreds of bombers, fighter planes, drones and other aircraft, little more than 100 miles away, becoming a principal target for Iranian missiles.

US commanders indicated that the weekend's 24-hour transfer of command over the operations conducted by hundreds of US warplanes daily over a vast territory stretching from Syria and Iraq to Afghanistan would be followed by such exercises monthly, and then Shaw Air Force Base or another facility in the US assuming control for one eight-hour shift every day.

This operational change constitutes a deadly serious warning that Washington is making active preparations for yet another war in the Middle East, this one against a country with nearly three times the population and four times the land mass of Iraq. Moreover, due to its massive oil and gas resources and its strategic centrality to control over the Eurasian landmass, a war against Iran would inevitably draw in all of the major powers, including nuclear-armed Russia and China. And, unlike Iraq under the regime of Saddam Hussein, Iran has made serious preparations to fight back.

In an interview broadcast Sunday on the CBS news program "60 Minutes," Saudi Arabia's de facto ruler Crown Prince Mohamed bin Salman warned that a war with Iran would lead to a worldwide economic collapse.

"The [Persian Gulf] region represents about 30 percent of the world's energy supplies, about 20

percent of global trade passages, about four percent of the world GDP (gross domestic product),” bin Salman said. “Imagine all of these three things stop. This means a total collapse of the global economy, and not just Saudi Arabia or the Middle East countries.

The Saudi royal tyrant echoed US charges that Iran was responsible for the attacks on its oil facilities last month and called for world powers to take “strong and firm action to deter Iran.” At the same time, however, he stressed that a “political and peaceful solution is much better than the military one.”

Whether he was speaking just for the Saudi monarchy or its patron in Washington is unclear. The Saudi regime has ample reason to fear a direct military confrontation with Iran. While inundated with tens of billions of dollars worth of advanced weapons from the US, the UK and other suppliers, Riyadh was incapable of defending its most vital facilities against a drone attack.

Moreover, after more than four years of war against Yemen, it has not only proven incapable of defeating lightly armed Houthi rebels, its near-genocidal campaign—initiated by bin Salman—has increasingly turned into a debacle.

According to a report issued by the United Nations in April titled “Assessing the impact of war on development in Yemen,” by the end of this year, the death toll resulting from both military violence and the hunger, disease and collapse of infrastructure inflicted by the US-backed Saudi siege will reach 233,000. A staggering 140,000 of these deaths will be of children under the age of five.

While laying waste to what was already the poorest country in the Arab world, the US-backed Saudi offensive has done nothing in terms of dislodging the Houthis’ control over the bulk of the country. On the contrary, it is the Saudi regime that has suffered a series of staggering blows.

The Houthis over the weekend publicly revealed—and released hours of video to prove it—that they inflicted a devastating defeat on Saudi troops and Saudi-backed forces on the Saudi-Yemen border in August.

The Houthis claimed to have killed or wounded 500 troops in the operation and taken 2,000 prisoners. The videos show long lines of prisoners of war as well as US-supplied armored vehicles and large quantities of weapons captured in the offensive. Among those taken

prisoner were both Saudi soldiers as well as mercenaries imported from as far away as Pakistan.

The Saudis and their US-backed puppet, President Abed Rabbo Mansour Hadi (now residing in Riyadh), had already lost control of the port city of Aden to forces of the separatist Southern Transitional Council (STC), backed by Riyadh’s erstwhile ally, the United Arab Emirates.

While the US has thus far refrained from carrying out military strikes against Iran, it has conducted other forms of warfare. This includes an economic blockade of the country. This “maximum pressure” campaign, aimed at slashing Iranian oil exports to zero, has been steadily tightened with escalating sanctions. It has resulted in the cutting off of imported food and medicine to Iranians, leading to numerous deaths of people denied drugs for cancer and other diseases.

Iran’s Foreign Minister Zarif has also accused Washington of targeting Iranian infrastructure, including nuclear facilities, with cyberattacks.

“There is a cyber-war going on,” he said on the NBC news program “Meet the Press” Sunday. “The United States started that cyber war, with attacking our nuclear facilities in a very dangerous, irresponsible way that could have killed millions of people.”

He went on to warn: “There is a cyber-war, and Iran is engaged in that cyber war. Any war that the United States starts, it won’t be able to finish.”

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