Clinton renews military threat against Iran

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During her visit to Israel yesterday, US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton renewed the threat of a US attack on Iran. After meeting with top Israeli leaders, she declared: “We will use all elements of American power to prevent Iran developing a nuclear weapon.” That obviously includes America’s massive military firepower.

Clinton claimed that the US would prefer a diplomatic solution to the standoff, but talks between Iran and the P5+1 grouping—the permanent UN Security Council members plus Germany—have all but broken down. A summit in Moscow last month reached no agreement. It was followed by low-level technical talks in Istanbul on July 3, which only agreed to a further meeting of second-rung negotiators on July 24.

Responsibility for the failure of three summits rests squarely with the US and its European allies. They have effectively delivered an ultimatum to Iran to end uranium enrichment to the 20 percent level, ship its stockpile of that material out of the country and shut down its Fordow enrichment plant.

Washington has flatly dismissed Iranian demands that economic sanctions be ended or eased, and that its right under the Nuclear Non-proliferation Treaty (NPT) to enrich uranium for peaceful purposes be recognised. Clinton yesterday ruled out any concessions: “I made very clear that the proposals that we have seen from Iran thus far within the P5+1 negotiations are non-starters.”

At the Moscow summit, the US and EU refused to consider delaying harsh new sanctions that came into force this month. European countries have imposed an embargo on the import of oil from Iran. At the same time, US legislation threatens to exclude from the American financial system all foreign banks and corporations doing business with Iran’s central bank.

International sanctions have already had a devastating impact on the Iranian economy. Oil exports have shrunk from 2.5 to 1.5 billion barrels per days. The government depends on oil exports for 80 percent of its revenue. Over the past six months, Iran’s currency has lost half of its value, contributing to the high inflation that is hitting working people.

Last Thursday, the Obama administration imposed a new round of sanctions against 11 Iranian companies allegedly involved in defence projects, as well as dozens of banks and shipping companies supposedly engaged in evading oil sanctions. The latter include Swiss, Chinese, Malaysian and United Arab Emirates trading entities and 20 Iranian financial institutions.

US Treasury Department official David Cohen declared: “Iran today is under intense multi-national pressure, and we will continue to ratchet up pressure as long as Iran refuses to address … well-founded concerns about its nuclear program.” In reality, unsubstantiated US claims that Iran is developing nuclear weapons are a pretext for a concerted campaign aimed at fashioning a regime in Tehran amenable to US interests.

Clinton is just the latest in a string of top US officials to visit Israel for discussions, above all on Iran. Like the US, the Israeli government has repeatedly threatened to launch an unprovoked attack on Iran and its nuclear facilities. Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu has been dismissive of international talks with Iran and demanded even tougher conditions for any diplomatic settlement.

In Israel, Clinton stressed that the US and Israel were

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"on the same page" in trying "to figure our way forward to have the maximum impact on affecting the decisions that Iran makes."

Military strikes against Iran were undoubtedly among the topics discussed by Israeli leaders with Clinton. The close coordination of military plans is underscored by the visit by US National Security Adviser Tom Donilon to Israel last Sunday and the upcoming trip by US Defence Secretary Leon Panetta.

The US and Israel both have advanced plans for attacking Iran. In recent months, the Pentagon has built up its forces in or near the Persian Gulf, including a doubling of the number of aircraft carriers from one to two and the stationing of a squadron of advanced F-22 fighters. The US military has also established a floating base in international waters in the Gulf, giving it more flexibility to launch special forces operations inside Iran.

The *Los Angeles Times* reported last week that the US navy was "rushing dozens of unmanned underwater craft" to the Persian Gulf to enhance its anti-mine capability. The sophisticated submersibles, launched from helicopters, are designed to detect and destroy mines. The Pentagon had already announced a doubling of the number of minesweepers in the Gulf to counter any attempt by Iran to mine the Strait of Hormuz in retaliation for a US attack.

The Pentagon also announced yesterday that it was dispatching another aircraft carrier, the USS John C. Stennis, to the Gulf to ensure that the US navy has at least two such battle groups in the region at all times.

The US military build-up in the Persian Gulf has a logic of its own. An unforeseen incident or a deliberate naval provocation, for which the US in notorious, could become the starting point for a conflict that threatens to involve the entire region and draw in other powers.

Yesterday the USNS Rappahannock fired on a small boat about 15 kilometres off the coast of Dubai's Jebel Ali port, killing one person and injuring three. A US navy spokesperson claimed that the small vessel had approached fast and failed to heed warnings, yet there is no independent corroboration. A United Arab Emirates official confirmed that the dead man was an Indian citizen, but made no further comment. Fishermen often use the port of Jebel Ali.

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