

Trump administration preparing to escalate provocations against Iran

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The Trump administration is preparing to intensify military and diplomatic pressure on Iran over its nuclear program and more broadly against its interests throughout the Middle East. President Trump and the cabal of generals directing his administration's foreign policy are reportedly discussing plans that would give military commanders and diplomats greater latitude to aggressively confront Iran over ballistic missile tests and its support for militant groups in Syria, Lebanon and Yemen.

Defense Secretary James Mattis and Secretary of State Rex Tillerson were involved in drafting a document outlining these plans, which was presented to Trump at a National Security Council meeting last Friday. Although details on its content remain vague, an official familiar with the draft made clear its wide-ranging scope. "I would call it a broad strategy for the range of Iranian malign activities: financial materials, support for terror, destabilization in the region, especially Syria and Iraq and Yemen," he told Reuters.

The proposal, the broad tenets of which are expected to be made public by the end of the month, will increase the danger of a regional war in the Middle East that could rapidly draw in Russia and the major powers. Trump has intensified the anti-Iran stance he took during the 2016 election campaign since coming to office, declaring Teheran to be the chief sponsor of "terrorism" in the region during a speech delivered in May in Riyadh, the Saudi Arabian capital. He appealed for the creation of a Sunni alliance to push back Iranian influence.

The draft plan reportedly includes changes of rules of engagement for US warships, allowing them to respond more aggressively when confronted with Iranian speedboats in the contentious Straits of Hormuz. US commanders are currently allowed to open fire only if they feel the lives of their crew or their ship are in immediate danger. Now, they will be encouraged to rapidly escalate close encounters into armed clashes. Washington is also preparing to proceed more forcefully against Iranian arms shipments to Hezbollah and Yemen, according to Reuters, a justification already cited by Israel when carrying out illegal air strikes inside

Syria.

The ramping up of American imperialism's military aggression in Syria and Iraq over recent months has produced devastation and led to the commission of ghastly war crimes in Mosul, where one estimate put the civilian death toll at 40,000 from the US-backed assault, and Raqqa, where UN Deputy Secretary General Stephen O'Brien estimated that 27 civilians are being slaughtered daily by US bombs. A conflict with Iran would see such brutality meted out on an even larger scale.

The war danger could be exacerbated still further if Trump, as appears increasingly likely, refuses to certify Iran's compliance with the 2015 nuclear deal or Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) by October 15. The deal, struck with Iran by the Obama administration together with the four other permanent members of the UN Security Council, France, Britain, Russia, and China, as well as Germany (the so-called P5 plus 1), compelled Iran to shut down parts of its civilian nuclear program and freeze others. It also obliges Teheran to accede to intrusive inspections of its civilian nuclear facilities. In rallying support for the deal, Obama repeatedly argued that the only alternative was war.

Last week, US Ambassador to the United Nations Nikki Haley gave a strong hint that discussions on decertifying Iran are far advanced. "If the president finds that he cannot in good faith certify Iranian compliance, he would initiate a process whereby we move beyond narrow technicalities and look at the big picture," she said in a speech to the American Enterprise Institute. She accused Iran of violating the "spirit" of the deal and destabilizing the Middle East.

The cynicism of such remarks cannot be exaggerated. After all, the Iranian government has quite legitimately charged that Washington, which imposed additional sanctions on Teheran last month over its ballistic missile tests and has refused to lift other restrictions, is violating the 2015 agreement. The JCPOA committed the parties not to stand in the way of the normalization of economic relations with Iran.

Haley's comments were all the more provocative given

that days before, the International Atomic Energy Agency acknowledged, as it has on numerous occasions, that Iran is in compliance with the nuclear accord.

Ditching the nuclear deal is a contested issue within the Trump administration, with Mattis and National Security Adviser H.R. McMaster apparently opposed. Far from being motivated by a concern to avoid further escalation, their principal fear is that abrogating the deal would undermine US imperialist interests. This is bound up with a number of interrelated considerations.

First, they fear that abandoning the deal would weaken Washington's position vis-a-vis its European competitors and China, who would almost certainly balk at reintroducing punishing economic sanctions and continue to deepen economic and political relations with Teheran at Washington's expense. This, in turn, would not only leave Washington isolated and divert attention away from moving to confront its chief rivals, Russia and China, but also hamper the efforts of the ruling elite to rally public support for yet another aggressive war.

McMaster and Mattis, known for their hostility towards the Iranian regime, hope to prevent this by stepping up pressure on Iran in other areas, thereby creating the conditions where Iran may be forced into breaking with the nuclear deal, which would weaken the Europeans' ability to resist the Trump administration's push for a further military escalation.

The rift between the European powers, above all Germany, and the Trump administration has grown over recent months. German politicians criticized Trump's open endorsement of Saudi Arabia's diplomatic blockade against Qatar in June, justified by Riyadh on the basis of Doha's ties to Iran.

In an interview with the *Frankfurter Allgemeine Sonntagszeitung*, German Chancellor Angela Merkel praised the Iranian nuclear accord and proposed it as a model for solving the crisis on the Korean peninsula. The 2015 deal had involved a "long, but important period of diplomacy," Merkel said, which had "reached a good conclusion."

But Haley made clear that those in the Trump administration favoring the abandonment of the nuclear deal are prepared to dismiss European concerns. "This is about U.S. national security. This is not about European security. This is not about anyone else," she declared.

Her comments underscore that US imperialism will stop at nothing to maintain its hegemony over the energy-rich Middle East by working to sideline potential competitors, including the European powers, and preparing a military confrontation with its chief rivals, Iran, and, above all, Russia and China. The Trump administration has already announced a major escalation of the 16-year-old war in Afghanistan, with the twin goals of consolidating

Washington's position in the geostrategically significant Central Asian region, and cementing its strategic partnership with India against China.

Washington's incitement of and intervention into the Syrian civil war has resulted in an ever more open confrontation with Iran. Over recent months, a series of incidents have taken place where US aircraft have opened fire on Iranian-aligned troops and Iranian drones on the fraudulent pretext of self-defense. Washington is in the process of training Sunni militias at a base in southeast Syria on the Iraqi and Jordanian border with the aim of preventing Teheran and its ally, Syrian President Bashar al-Assad, from gaining control of territory in eastern Syria. This would enable Iran to establish a land bridge to Damascus and Lebanon, through which it could supply Assad and Hezbollah.

This is an outcome the US, and its closest ally in the Middle East, Israel, are unwilling to tolerate. Israel's Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu is scheduled to meet with Trump on the sidelines of next week's UN General Assembly in New York, where he is expected to press the US president to cancel the nuclear accord or demand further Iranian concessions. Last week, the Israeli Air Force launched another series of air raids in Syria. Tel Aviv has also been covertly backing Islamist militias to weaken Iranian influence and the Assad regime.

If Trump grants his generals the authority to confront Iranian-backed forces more directly in Syria, this would add further fuel to the fire in a part of the world where regional and imperialist powers are increasingly at odds with each other, heightening the prospect of a global conflagration.



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