Iran accuses 17 of spying for CIA as tensions escalate

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Amidst rapidly spiraling tensions, the Iranian government announced Monday that it had arrested 17 Iranian nationals working in military and nuclear installations whom it accused of being US intelligence agents.

According to the Iranian Students News Agency, the intelligence ministry's counter-espionage department said some of the alleged agents had already been sentenced to death, while others were said to be assisting Iranian efforts to garner information on US activities. Iran says those alleged to have been CIA spies were employed in "sensitive centres" in military and nuclear facilities and arrested over a 12-month period up until March this year.

Tehran claimed the individuals had received "sophisticated training" and been promised US visas or jobs in the US.

US President Donald Trump rejected the Iranian claims as "totally false" while Secretary of State and former CIA Director Mike Pompeo said that "the Iranian regime has a long history of lying." He admitted however that there was "a long list of Americans that we are working to get home from the Islamic Republic of Iran."

The arrests come after weeks of escalating tensions. In late June, the Trump administration was 10 minutes away from a potentially catastrophic military attack on Iran that would trigger all-out regional conflict and threaten to draw in the world's major powers on opposing sides.

In the intervening weeks, the US administration has worked to ramp up more sustained pressure on Iran. Over the weekend, Iran's seizure of the British flagged oil tanker Stena Impero as it transited the Strait of Hormuz was made the pretext for new naval and air provocations.

The Stena Impero was seized in retaliation for the July 4 boarding of the Iranian flagged supertanker Grace 1 by British Royal Marines off Gibraltar in an unprovoked act of piracy.

Marking a new and dangerous phase in the US campaign of unrestrained gangsterism against Iran, bringing the region to the brink of war, the crisis over the Stena Impero is inflaming already deep divisions within British ruling circles.

The Conservative government upholds the 2015 Iran nuclear accord, which the US government has abrogated. Like the EU, British companies hold substantial interests in Iran. But British imperialism has for decades relied on US influence and military backing in order to punch above its weight.

Following a meeting yesterday morning of the government's Cobra emergency committee chaired by outgoing prime minster Theresa May, Foreign Minister Jeremy Hunt issued a statement in the House of Commons.

Hunt described Iran's action as "an act of state piracy" and a "flagrant breach of the principle of free navigation on which the world economy depends."

He said he had spoken to the foreign ministers of the US, Oman, France, Germany, Italy, Spain, Finland and Denmark and would now "seek to put together a European-led maritime protection mission to support safe passage of both crew and cargo in this vital region."

Hunt described this EU dominated force as a complement to US proposals in the region, but made clear, "it will not be part of the US maximum pressure policy on Iran because we remain committed to preserving the Iran nuclear agreement."

Hunt's position was immediately endorsed by Labour's shadow defence minister Fabian Hamilton,

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who intoned, “Iran’s actions in recent weeks in the Strait of Hormuz have been utterly unacceptable and should be condemned from all sides.”

However, military conflict with Iran had to be avoided he said, voicing the concerns of substantial sections of the British state over the recklessness of US actions in the Gulf. “Escalation has been inevitable since the United States walked away from the Iran nuclear deal and re-imposed sanctions ... on any country or company that continues to deal with Iran.”

Hamilton asked whether the UK’s seizure of the Iran tanker Grace 1 off Gibraltar on July 4 was carried out at the request of the United States. “We know from the Spanish newspaper *El País* that the US told the Madrid Government 48 hours in advance that Grace 1 was headed for the Iberian peninsula, which could also explain why, 36 hours in advance, the Gibraltar Government introduced new legislation to shore up the legal basis for the seizure taking place in their waters.”

Hunt refused to give a categorical answer to Hamilton’s question.

Hamilton asked Hunt how the government intended to “get the nuclear deal back on track” and “persuade the Trump administration to drop its sanctions against Iran” before “we reach the point of no return.”

Putting the issue more bluntly, Labour’s shadow justice secretary Richard Burgon tweeted over the weekend, "A war on Iran could be even more damaging and destabilising than the war on Iraq. We need to avoid being the sidekicks of Donald Trump and [US National Security Adviser and anti-Iranian hawk] John Bolton and instead pursue the path of diplomacy."

Former Foreign Secretary Boris Johnson, Hunt’s rival for the Tory leadership who is set to become party leader and prime minister, has cemented close ties with Trump since the 2016 referendum vote to leave the European Union.

While a section of Johnson’s supporters have demanded he takes a firmer stance against Iran than has been advocated by May, Johnson has so far ruled out backing any US military strikes against Tehran.

However, Johnson supporter, Brexiteer and former Tory leader Iain Duncan Smith accused the May government over the weekend of being unprepared to follow through on the Grace 1 capture. “I understand ... from reasonable sources that Washington had offered the UK Government—even in the event that they haven’t quite agreed an allied position to this—to use US assets to support British shipping and they were not taken up at the point.”

On Monday, Pompeo was asked about Iran’s capture of the Stena Impero and replied, “The responsibility in the first instance falls to the United Kingdom to take care of their ships.” He added, “The United States has a responsibility to do our part but the world’s got a big role in this too, to keep these sea lanes open.”

Pompeo didn’t miss an opportunity to continue threatening Iran, declaring it a “bad regime” which has “conducted what amounts to national piracy, a nation state taking over a ship that’s traveling in international waters… We don’t want war with Iran. We want them to behave like a normal nation. I think they understand that and I think the whole world is waking up to the fact that this threat is real.”

None of this rules out that events could escalate into warfare, with a number of influential political and military figures noting over the weekend—as did Britain’s Admiral Lord West—that “despite what some people think, should a war start there is no way the UK could avoid being fully involved on the US side.”

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