

Washington escalates “maximum pressure” campaign against Iran

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It is now little more than a year since Washington re-imposed economic sanctions against Iran that are tantamount to a state of war. The punishing measures previously had been lifted with the signing of the Iran nuclear agreement, formally known as the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA), which was negotiated between Tehran and the major powers in 2015.

In abrogating US commitment to that deal, in flagrant violation of international law, the Trump administration embarked upon a strategy of US aggression and regime change in Iran. This has involved the steady escalation of a “maximum pressure” campaign aimed at starving the Iranian people into submission, combined with a buildup of US military forces in the Persian Gulf in preparation for armed intervention.

The “maximum pressure” campaign’s stated aim is to drive Iran’s oil exports, which account for the overwhelming share of the country’s earnings, down to zero. According to most estimates, exports of Iranian crude oil have been slashed by roughly 80 percent.

Trump gloated over the effects of the sanctions during a White House press briefing Wednesday. “They’ve got a big problem,” he said. “They’re getting killed, financially. Their inflation is at a number that few people have ever seen inflation at.”

The measures taken by the United States amount to a criminal act of collective punishment against Iran’s 83 million people. In addition to slashing the country’s export income, the US sanctions regime has also frozen Iran out of the US-dominated world financial system, severely hindering the country’s ability to import vital necessities, including food and medicines that are technically exempt from the US blockade.

As a result, children on cancer wards are being denied the drugs needed to combat the disease and are dying in growing numbers. What imported drugs are available are in short supply, and their prices have skyrocketed. The financial sanctions have disrupted supply chains for Iran’s own extensive pharmaceutical industry, further reducing the

availability of drugs and condemning many more to an early death. Among Iran’s working people, those not being killed outright by the sanctions are more and more being driven into poverty and hunger as the cost of food, housing and other basic necessities skyrocket.

There is no evidence, however, that the sanctions have destabilized the Iranian government, while its principal base, Iran’s capitalist ruling class, continues to reap profits, even as masses of workers are confronting increasingly desperate conditions.

Washington is steadily mounting a military siege against Iran. At the end of last month, it initiated its so-called joint maritime security initiative in the Persian Gulf with the ostensible mission of guarding oil tankers and merchant vessels around the Strait of Hormuz, through which a third of the world’s seaborne oil passes. The only countries joining the Pentagon’s operations—and with minimal deployments—are the UK, Australia and Bahrain.

The US naval operation was announced within days of Donald Trump’s public admission that he had come within 10 minutes of launching missile strikes on Iranian targets in retaliation for Iran’s downing of a US spy drone flying over its territory. Trump called off the assault not, as he claimed, out of concern for Iranian lives. Rather, his generals had warned him that such an attack would provoke retaliation that could kill large numbers of US troops and leave American warships at the bottom of the Persian Gulf.

Since then, Washington has been flailing about for a means of escalating its drive for regime change in Iran. On Wednesday, the Trump administration unveiled a new set of sweeping sanctions aimed at paralyzing the shipment of Iran’s oil exports. Claiming that the shipping network being used to evade Washington’s unilateral sanctions is run by Iran’s Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps-Quds Force, it threatened to target any “non-U.S. persons who knowingly provide significant goods, services, or support” to Iran’s oil shipments with punishing sanctions. “Failure to take heed ... bears grave consequences,” an administration official told the *Washington Post*.

Even as the administration announced a \$15 million bounty for anyone providing information serving to disrupt the shipping network, it was revealed that the administration's special envoy on Iran, Brian Hook, had personally contacted the captain of the *Adrian Darya*, the oil Iranian tanker that was seized by British Royal Marines off the coast of Gibraltar on July 4 and held for nearly six weeks before being released.

Hook emailed the captain, an Indian national, identifying himself as "the US Representative for Iran" and offering a bribe of several million dollars if he would sail the vessel to a port where it could be seized by US forces on the pretext of enforcing Washington's extraterritorial sanctions.

"With this money, you can have any life you wish and be well-off in old age," Hook wrote in an email to Kumar. He added, "If you choose not to take this easy path, life will be much harder for you."

The captain failed to take the "easy path" and was targeted by the US Treasury Department with individual sanctions.

"Having failed at piracy, the US resorts to outright blackmail—deliver us Iran's oil and receive several million dollars or be sanctioned yourself," Iranian Foreign Minister Mohammad Javad Zarif tweeted on Wednesday.

These methods have all the dignity of a Mafia enforcer. They are being employed by a criminal ruling class that has been engaged in unending wars of aggression for the last three decades in a desperate attempt to reverse by military means the decline of US imperialism's global hegemony.

The recklessness of US policy toward Iran can be explained only by the profound crisis gripping American capitalism, both domestically and on a world scale.

Trump himself swings wildly between offers of negotiations and threats of all-out war.

At the G7 summit last month, he seemed to embrace a proposal by French President Emmanuel Macron to extend a \$15 billion line of credit to Iran to convince it to continue abiding by the terms of the JCPOA, which was supposed to trade a severe curtailment of Iran's nuclear program for a lifting of the sanctions that have been re-imposed by Washington. Macron's invitation to Iranian Foreign Minister Zarif to talks at the G7 were seen as a preparation for direct US-Iranian negotiations.

On Wednesday, however, Washington indicated it had no intention of allowing France to go through with the deal, while Trump told reporters that he didn't need Macron to talk to Iran. Administration officials speaking to the media dismissed the "French scheme," exposing the sharp conflicts between Europe and America over the Iranian question.

The threat that the escalating tensions produced by US imperialism's "maximum pressure" campaign will erupt into a full-scale war was underscored by a lengthy article

published by the *New York Times* Wednesday reviewing the protracted collaboration between Washington and Israel in relation to Iran.

Citing US and Israeli officials, the article made clear that Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu is actively considering the launching of a unilateral military strike against Iranian nuclear installations, an action that would receive a green light from the Trump White House. Confronting a growing political crisis and the threat of criminal prosecution, Netanyahu has in recent weeks ordered Israeli military strikes against targets allegedly linked to Iran in Syria, Iraq and Lebanon.

The article also underscored the bipartisan character of the protracted US campaign for regime change in Iran. Trump, the article states, "inherited a loaded gun: military plans for an Iran strike that had been meticulously refined during the Obama years." The *Times* piece cites how, under the Obama administration, the Pentagon built a full-scale replica of Iran's Fordow nuclear facility in a desert in the American southwest, destroying it with a 30,000-pound bunker-busting bomb designed by the US Air Force.

Whatever tactical differences exist between the Democrats and the Trump administration, there exists no faction within the US ruling establishment that opposes the relentless buildup toward a Third World War.

There is deep popular hostility to war—and a profound distrust of the lies of the government and the corporate media used to promote it—that finds no expression within the existing political setup. The resurgence of the class struggle, both within the United States and internationally, however, provides the foundations for the emergence of mass antiwar movement based on the independent political mobilization of the working class in the fight for socialism.



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