19 Iranian sailors killed in live-fire exercise

Bill Van Auken
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The Iranian Navy confirmed Monday that 19 of its sailors were killed and 15 others wounded in an accidental missile strike against one of its own ships during live-fire exercises in the country's southern waters near the strategic Strait of Hormuz.

The Iranian media carried photographs and video of the aftermath of the "friendly fire" incident showing smoke billowing from the stricken ship, and it being towed by tug boats back to the port of Jask, the site of a naval base established by Iran in 2008 in response to US and Israeli threats of attacks on the country's nuclear program.

Iranian state television explained that, "The vessel was hit after moving a practice target to its destination and not creating enough distance between itself and the target."

The Iranian Navy's statement said that, "The forces on board the doomed vessel showed exemplary courage to save their comrades."

The deadly accident unfolded amid mounting tensions over the deployment of US warships in the Persian Gulf, sailing provocatively close to Iran's coastline.

Currently deployed in the Gulf is the Bataan Amphibious Ready Group (ARG), led by the amphibious assault ship USS Bataan and including the 26th Marine Expeditionary Unit (MEU), consisting of approximately 2,200 Marines, as well as an amphibious transport dock and a dock landing ship. The ARG is essentially a mobile US military base positioned directly off Iran's shore.

In addition, the carrier strike group led by the aircraft carrier USS Eisenhower is deployed nearby in the North Arabian Sea, in easy striking distance of Iran.

The region remains on a knife-edge, the result not only of the Pentagon's provocative military deployments, but also the unrelenting US "maximum pressure" sanctions, which have only been escalated in the face of the global coronavirus pandemics in which Iran has suffered one of the highest mortality rates. While official figures place the number of confirmed cases at 109,286 and deaths at 6,685, the real figures are far higher.

Last month, US President Donald Trump tweeted a startling threat saying, "I have instructed the United States Navy to shoot down and destroy any and all Iranian gunboats if they harass our ships at sea." The threat, issued in response to Iranian patrol boats monitoring the movement of the aggressive US force in the Persian Gulf, had the potential of triggering a catastrophic war throughout the Middle East and beyond.

On Saturday, May 9, the White House convened its national security officials and the Joint Chiefs of Staff in a highly unusual weekend meeting. The only statement coming out of it was a brief remark by Trump to the media that, it had been a "very, very productive meeting."

"Our military is very strong, more—more so than it's been in many, many years." he said. "I think I can say 'in many, many decades.' We've spent one and half trillion dollars rebuilding our military, and it shows it. And we are discussing various things."

The only reporting by the corporate media coming out of the session was that no one wore masks, under conditions in which two White House staffers have tested positive for the virus, along with two top generals.

Among the "various things" that Trump may have been discussing with the top military brass is certainly the increasingly dangerous escalation in the Persian Gulf and the prospect of a war with Iran.

There is also the menacing deployment of US warships in a so-called freedom of navigation operation (FONOP) launched in response to alleged Chinese Coast Guard harassment of a Malaysian drillship, the

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West Capella, engaged in exploratory drilling in two oil and gas fields off the northwest coast of Brunei. The intervention has placed the US Navy in the middle of a territorial dispute in the South China Sea that could lead to a military clash between two nuclear powers.

In addition, the Pentagon and NATO dispatched three US destroyers from the Sixth Fleet and one British warship into the Barents Sea on the pretense of another FONOP, this time in one of the most sensitive areas for the Russian military. It marks the first time in 40 years—since the height of the Cold War between Washington and the Soviet Union—that US surface warships have been sent into these waters, which is home to Russia's Northern Fleet headquarters located at Severomorsk.

The area has become a focal point of the new "scramble for the Arctic," a region that is estimated to hold 13 percent of the world's undiscovered oil reserves and 30 percent of its natural gas reserves, as well as huge deposits of rare-earth elements and other strategic minerals. Climate change has led to a reduction of the Arctic sea ice levels, making these resources more accessible for extraction. It is also opening up a direct sea route from Europe to Asia.

The Pentagon issued a May 4 press release defending this deployment—roughly the equivalent of the Russian Navy conducting maneuvers in the Gulf of Mexico. They are meant, it stated, to "assert freedom of navigation and demonstrate seamless integration among allies." It quoted Vice Admiral Lisa Franchetti referring to the impact of the global coronavirus pandemic, stating, "In these challenging times, it is more important than ever that we maintain our steady drumbeat of operations."

This "steady drumbeat" of military provocations and aggression, far from being curtailed by the impact of COVID-19, is only escalating. The Navy and the US military as a whole are signaling that not even the spread of the virus within their own ranks, most notoriously in the wholesale infection of the sailors of the aircraft carrier USS Theodore Roosevelt, will stand in their way.

Then there are also the threats against Venezuela, where a pair of abortive armed landings by US-led mercenaries on the country's northern coast last week ended with two ex-US special operations troops in Venezuelan custody and facing trial on terrorism charges. US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo stated last week that Washington "will use every tool we have available" to rescue the two American mercenaries, who have testified to ties to the Trump White House. These "tools" include direct military intervention against Venezuela, which is suffering under the impact of a "maximum pressure" sanctions regime tantamount to war.

The day before Trump's meeting with his military commanders and national security advisers at the White House, Washington used its veto power on the United Nations Security Council to upend weeks of diplomatic negotiations that had produced a resolution calling for a global ceasefire in all military conflicts in order to allow a united international campaign to address the coronavirus pandemic.

While Washington offered no official explanation for this action, US officials, speaking on condition of anonymity, claimed it had to do with the resolution's mention of the World Health Organization (WHO), which the Trump administration has branded as a front for Beijing, and, for its failure to include language about "transparency and accountability in the context of COVID-19," a reference to the efforts by the White House to scapegoat China for the catastrophic failure of the US government to combat the spread of the virus.

Whatever the immediate motivations, the reality is that for Washington there will be no ceasefire. It views the pandemic as a weapon of war to be exploited in pursuit of the geostrategic interests of US imperialism. Even as millions are infected and hundreds of thousands die, the threat of a global war that could claim the lives of billions only continues to grow.

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