US war threats mount against Iran and Venezuela with six weeks remaining in Trump term

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Barely a week and a half after the assassination of Iranian physicist Mohsen Fakhrizadeh, a criminal act carried out by the Israeli spy agency Mossad in collaboration with Washington, threats of a major act of US military aggression in the six weeks remaining in President Donald Trump's term of office continue unabated.

The murder of Fakhrizadeh, considered the most prominent scientist in Iran and a leading figure in the country's nuclear program, was a calculated provocation aimed at precipitating an Iranian retaliation that could then be seized upon as the pretext for war.

Iran's bourgeois-clerical ruling establishment, besieged on the one hand by the "maximum pressure" sanctions regime and facing growing unrest in the working class, on the other, has refrained from such action. The faction in power led by President Hassan Rouhani appears to be placing its bets on an incoming Biden administration easing sanctions and rejoining the 2015 nuclear agreement that was unilaterally abrogated by Trump two years ago. Other sections of the Iranian state, however, have urged swift retaliation, including the expulsion of IAEA nuclear inspectors, and even military strikes on Israel.

The prospect of a new provocation remains high as the Trump administration pursues a bellicose foreign policy, imposing a raft of new sanctions against not only Iran, but China and Venezuela as well, while staging menacing military operations from the Persian Gulf to the South China Sea and the Caribbean.

The relations between Iran and Venezuela, both targets of "maximum pressure" sanction regimes that are tantamount to a state of war, have become a particular target of US threats.

This was made clear last week by the US "Special Representative for Iran and Venezuela" Elliott Abrams, a veteran Washington war criminal who traces his career back to his position as the Reagan administration's point man in defending the near-genocidal wars waged by US-backed military dictatorships in Central America in the 1980s. He was subsequently convicted on charges related to the Iran-Contra affair, the secret and illegal operation to fund the CIA-backed Contras, a right-wing guerrilla army that waged a terrorist war against Nicaragua.

The joining of the special envoy positions for both Iran and Venezuela in the hands of Abrams in September provided a clear warning of Washington's intentions.

In a webinar held last Thursday by the National Security Institute at George Mason University, Abrams delivered a direct threat of US military action against any shipment of Iranian missiles to Venezuela.

"We will not accept, we will not tolerate, the placement in Venezuela of Iranian missiles that can reach the United States," he said. "We will not accept it, and if they try to do it, at least in this administration, we will try to interdict it, and if they arrive in Venezuela, they will be dealt with in Venezuela. It is not acceptable to have Iranian missiles in Venezuela that can reach the United States."

That there is absolutely no evidence suggesting that Iran is shipping missiles to Venezuela does not preclude Washington from turning a supposed "Venezuelan missile crisis" into a pretext for war.

Similar suggestions of a supposed Iranian threat in Venezuela were floated last week by the chief of the US Southern Command (SOUTHCOM) Admiral Craig Faller.

In a presentation to the Pentagon press corps, Admiral Faller claimed, "We see growing Iranian influence in [Venezuela] to include the Quds force, which is alarming and concerning, and some weapons ties."

"It's not just oil shipments. It's arms shipments as well," Faller added. "We saw an uptick in that this year. We're watching the rate of change very carefully to see if it connects to any other Iranian malfeasance around the globe."

As far as the threat of a US military provocation, it is not just imaginary missiles, but real fuel shipments. A fleet of

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some 10 Iranian tankers is sailing for Venezuela carrying gasoline and other fuel products needed by Caracas to refine its crude oil, according to sources cited by Bloomberg. The tankers are to return loaded with Venezuelan petroleum to be sold on the world market, likely to China.

This fleet would be twice as large as the five tankers that brought Iranian fuel to Venezuela in May. The US government retaliated with sanctions imposed against the ships' captains.

Washington intercepted four other tankers it claims were bound for Venezuela, offloading their fuel shipments on the high seas and subsequently selling them for $40 million. Iran denied that it owned either the tankers or the oil. Ship owners in Oman, the UK and the UAE have filed lawsuits against this act of piracy.

If the US military, which, on the pretext of combating drug trafficking, has deployed the largest naval force in the region since the 1989 invasion of Panama, were to carry out a similar operation against the latest Iranian fleet, it could trigger an escalating spiral of military retaliation.

As the Trump administration has repeatedly stated, the option of military action against Venezuela itself also remains "on the table."

US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo, who made a provocative three-day tour of all of the countries bordering Venezuela in September, stepped up his denunciations of the government of President Nicolas Maduro in the context of Sunday's election of a new National Assembly, which saw a 67 percent victory for the electoral front led by Maduro's United Socialist Party of Venezuela (PSUV) amid a dismal 32 percent voter turnout.

Juan Guaidó, the US puppet and former head of the National Assembly, who in January 2019 proclaimed himself "interim president" and was immediately recognized as the "legitimate" government of Venezuela, boycotted the elections, claiming they had been rigged by the government. Another section of the right-wing opposition, including the old traditional Venezuelan ruling parties, COPEI and Acción Democrática, ran candidates, winning approximately 18 percent of the vote.

The split in the right-wing opposition reflects the failure of the US-backed regime change operation led by Guaidó, which has seen an abortive attempt at a military coup in April 2019 and the fiasco of a mercenary invasion in May of this year.

Reflected in the mass abstention on Sunday was the increasing anger within the working class over the response of the Maduro government to the country's deep economic crisis, which has been to defend capitalist interests while suppressing popular resistance. The devastation of the Venezuelan economy, which has been vastly intensified by the US sanctions regime, has led to mass unemployment and hyperinflation, even as the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic continues to escalate.

Guaidó's boycott could not conceal the fact that he enjoys little support among the Venezuelan population, which is overwhelmingly hostile to his calls for intensified sanctions and foreign intervention to bring about regime change.

Rather than run in the election, Guaidó, with US backing, is staging his own pseudo-electoral stunt, a "Popular Consultation," which is asking Venezuelans to vote—including online—in favor of removing Maduro from office and obtaining "international assistance" to "rescue our democracy." The results of such a poll could be invoked as justification for US intervention.

Pompeo issued a statement on Twitter Monday denouncing Sunday's vote in Venezuela as "a fraud and a sham, not an election" and "nothing more than an attempt to steal Venezuela's democratic future."

The statement drew immediate denunciations and ridicule, given that Pompeo represents an administration that is openly attempting to overturn the results of the US election and install a presidential dictatorship. Pompeo himself recently answered a reporter's question about whether there would be a smooth transition of power at the State Department by saying that there would be a "smooth transition to a second Trump administration."

The threats, provocation and sanctions by the Trump administration are being interpreted by the corporate media as an attempt to box in an incoming Biden administration by making a return to the Iran nuclear accord or a reduction of tensions difficult if not impossible.

There is a far more sinister interpretation, however. Provoking a war would provide the White House with a pretext for carrying through Trump's repeated threats to invoke the Insurrection Act and call troops into the streets as a means of nullifying the US elections. With six weeks to go before the end of Trump's term, this remains a real and present danger.

Whatever the outcome of Trump's coup plot, and whoever occupies the White House after January 20, the drive toward war and dictatorship, which has its source in the insoluble crisis of US and world capitalism, will only continue to escalate.

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