

In bid to blow up nuclear talks, US imposes sanctions, steals Iranian oil

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With Washington deliberately stoking tensions that could trigger all-out military clashes with both Russia and China, there is every indication that it is simultaneously seeking to blow up Iranian nuclear talks, setting the stage for a dangerous new escalation of conflict in the Middle East.

On the eve of the resumption of talks in Vienna between Iran and the P4+1 (the four permanent members of the UN Security Council still nominally party to the agreement plus Germany), along with indirect talks between Tehran and Washington, the Biden administration has carried out a series of flagrant provocations.

On Tuesday, the US Treasury and State Departments piled on a set of new sanctions against Iranian government entities and officials on the grounds of alleged “human rights” abuses. These come on top of the “maximum pressure” sanctions campaign imposed by the Trump administration in 2018 after it unilaterally abrogated the 2015 Iran nuclear accord.

The US sanctions regime amounts to an economic blockade of Iran, targeting countries and companies daring to do business with the nation of over 85 million people and resulting in deepening poverty for the Iranian masses, while severely hindering the country’s response to the COVID-19 pandemic, which has inflicted over 130,000 recorded deaths.

The Biden administration has maintained Trump’s “maximum pressure” campaign in place, continuing actions against Iran that are tantamount to a state of war.

On Wednesday, the US Justice Department announced that it had carried out the “successful forfeiture” of 1.1 million barrels of Iranian petroleum products seized by the US Navy from four tankers bound for Venezuela. Seized in separate acts of US piracy in the Arabian Sea were Iranian weapons, including surface-to-air and anti-tank weapons, allegedly bound for Yemen to aid Houthi

rebels in their protracted struggle against the US-backed forces of the Saudi monarchy.

The proceeds from the “forfeitures”—court orders allowing the government to sell seized goods—amounted to nearly \$27 million, according to the DOJ.

Meanwhile, the Pentagon announced that US Defense Secretary Gen. Lloyd Austin (ret.) will meet with his Israeli counterpart Benny Gantz today “to discuss the United States’ commitment to Israel’s security and shared concerns regarding Iran’s nuclear provocations and destabilizing actions in the region.”

Mossad chief David Barnea is also in Washington for meetings with US intelligence chiefs on Iran. The Israeli officials are pushing for a joint military campaign with the United States. No doubt they presented their American counterparts with a menu of options ranging from an escalation of Tel Aviv’s assassination campaign against Iran’s scientists and sabotage of its facilities, to strikes against Iranian interests elsewhere in the Middle East and all the way to an all-out war.

Senior Israeli military officials visited the Pentagon’s Central Command headquarters in Florida at the end of last month for detailed discussions on Iran. The Israel Defense Forces reported that the two sides “deepened their operational preparedness and strategic discussions.”

Israel has engaged in increasingly bellicose threats and actions against Iran in apparent coordination with Washington’s provocations. Early Tuesday morning, Israeli warplanes carried out missile strikes against Syria’s Mediterranean port of Latakia, blowing up containers in a cargo area and igniting a blaze. Israeli officials claimed the containers held weapons destined for Iranian-backed militias in Syria and Iraq. The Latakia port is Syria’s main lifeline to the outside world and is used by both Iranian and Russian vessels.

Israel is preparing exercises over the Mediterranean in the coming spring designed to rehearse a major bombing

campaign against Iran's nuclear program, the Kan broadcasting network reported. The drill would include dozens of warplanes, including F-15s, F-35s and F-16s, as well as spy planes and refueling jets, flying 1,000 kilometers to simulate the distance to Iran.

Earlier this year, Tel Aviv publicly announced a \$1.5 billion program to prepare for an attack on Iran and obtain weapons, including bunker-busting bombs, to destroy Iranian underground nuclear facilities.

Amid US-Israeli talks on confronting the Iranian "nuclear threat," the United Nations General Assembly passed a resolution Monday calling for a nuclear-free zone in the Middle East by a vote of 178-1. Israel cast the sole opposing vote, with the US and Cameroon abstaining. Iran was among those voting in favor.

While Israel maintains a nuclear arsenal and has rejected all international nuclear treaties and inspection regimes, CIA Director William Burns, speaking on Monday before the *Wall Street Journal's* annual CEO Council, acknowledged that the agency "doesn't see any evidence that Iran ... has made a decision to weaponize" its nuclear program.

In advance of Thursday's talks in Vienna, US Secretary of State Antony Blinken declared that "the runway is getting very, very short" for achieving a negotiated settlement with Iran. Blinken has repeatedly threatened that "all options are on the table" if a deal is not struck.

In an interview with Reuters last Friday, Blinken charged that Iran "does not seem to be serious about doing what's necessary to return to compliance" with the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action, or JCPOA, as the 2015 agreement is known.

This imperialist arrogance turns reality on its head. It was not Iran that sabotaged the JCPOA, but rather Washington. When the Trump administration tore up the agreement in 2018, Tehran remained in full compliance with the agreement's demands that it curtail up to 80 percent of its civilian nuclear program and submit to an unprecedentedly intrusive international inspections regime.

This was despite the fact that the US never offered any significant sanctions relief. Tehran continued to maintain its strict observance of the agreement's terms for another year after the US abrogation, taking steps to increase its levels of uranium enrichment and stockpiles only after it had become clear that the Western European signatories to the JCPOA would do nothing to challenge Washington's "maximum pressure" campaign.

The Iranian government's position is clear. Washington

deserted the agreement, not Tehran. It must return to compliance by lifting sanctions, and then Iran will roll back its nuclear activities.

The Biden administration, however, has sought to put the onus on Iran, demanding even further concessions in return for the US returning to the accord. Blinken has stated US demands for an accord that is "stronger and longer." This would include both Iran's scrapping its missile program and ceding its influence in the Middle East to Washington's continued drive to assert US hegemony over the oil-rich region.

Tehran has also called for the US to provide guarantees that it will not pull out of the deal once again, given a shift in the political winds in Washington. The Biden administration's ability to push a binding treaty through the US Senate is virtually nil.

Given the scant prospect of genuine sanctions relief from Washington, Tehran has little motivation for accepting new concessions.

While the "pivot to Asia" initiated under the Obama administration was supposedly a shift of US military might from the decades of wars in the Middle East toward confronting China, every region of the globe, and the Middle East in particular, remains a battlefield.

Under the impact of the US economic blockade and Western Europe's complicity, Tehran has forged closer ties to Beijing, signing an agreement earlier this year that guarantees China discounted oil exports for the next 25 years in exchange for some \$400 billion in investment under the Belt and Road initiative.

Whatever the motivation advanced by the Biden administration for military confrontation with Iran, it will be bound up with the drive toward global war with China.

Confronted with growing class struggle within the United States, amid unprecedented levels of social inequality that have deepened as the ruling elite has enriched itself amid the mass death of the COVID-19 pandemic, the US ruling class is driven toward war. It provides a means for diverting the irrepressible contradictions of US capitalism outward in an explosion of military violence, in the Middle East, the Asia Pacific and internationally.



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