

Trump's 48-hour ultimatum: A criminal threat of mass murder

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On Saturday evening, United States President Donald Trump posted an ultimatum on his social media platform that must be recognized for what it is: a threat of genocidal violence against a nation of 90 million people, backed by the explicit threat to obliterate the infrastructure upon which their lives depend. “If Iran doesn’t FULLY OPEN, WITHOUT THREAT, the Strait of Hormuz, within 48 HOURS,” Trump wrote, “the United States of America will hit and obliterate their various POWER PLANTS, STARTING WITH THE BIGGEST ONE FIRST.”

This is an act of political criminality without precedent in the post-World War II era. The only historical comparison that can be made is the ultimatum issued by the Truman administration to Japan in August 1945 after it dropped nuclear bombs on Hiroshima and Nagasaki. There is no other government in modern history that has issued so explicit a threat to destroy the foundational life-support systems of an entire civilian population as a condition of political submission.

Iran operates over 110 power generation facilities. Even their partial elimination would trigger a cascade of humanitarian catastrophe that would unfold across days, weeks and months. Within 72 hours, hospitals would lose power, placing thousands of patients on life support, dialysis and ventilators in immediate mortal danger. Within days, water pumping and sewage treatment systems would fail across the country, creating the conditions for mass outbreaks of cholera, typhoid and dysentery.

Trump did not specify what he meant by “the biggest one,” but the largest power plant in Iran by capacity is the Damavand Combined Cycle Power Plant—2,868 megawatts of generating capacity, located 35 kilometres southeast of central Tehran, the primary electrical hub for a capital city. Approximately ten million people would lose power simultaneously.

There is also the Bushehr Nuclear Power Plant, Iran’s only operating commercial reactor, located on the Gulf coast. International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) Director General Rafael Grossi has already warned that a direct strike on Bushehr “could result in a very high release of radioactivity into the environment” with consequences extending far beyond Iran. But a direct strike is not even required to trigger catastrophe.

The IAEA has identified a second, equally devastating mechanism: the destruction of the two main power lines supplying electricity to the facility would cause the reactor core to melt, triggering a catastrophic failure of the plant’s critical safety systems. Even without a nuclear meltdown, a strike on the Bushehr

plant could cause a radiation leak into the Persian Gulf, which would contaminate the drinking water supply for millions of people throughout the region.

Iran has responded to the ultimatum by stating that if its power plants are struck, the Strait of Hormuz will be completely closed and will not reopen until the destroyed infrastructure is rebuilt. All Israeli and US energy infrastructure across the region has been declared a legitimate target. The Gulf states—whose populations depend on desalination plants for 99 percent of their drinking water, plants that run on electricity—face a humanitarian catastrophe of their own.

The ultimatum follows a definite logic. The war began as a decapitation strike—an assassination campaign aimed at breaking Iran by murdering its leadership. It then escalated into relentless bombardment of cities and infrastructure, the destruction of air defenses, and attacks on shipping and naval assets around the Strait of Hormuz. These measures have not achieved their objectives. The United States and Israel have confronted determined resistance, which has driven the escalation to ever more extreme and openly criminal forms.

Destroying Iran’s power grid will not reopen the Strait of Hormuz. Three weeks of bombing have struck more than 8,000 targets, destroyed or damaged over 120 naval vessels and killed dozens of senior officials—and the strait remains closed. Reopening the strait will require ground troops, and those troops are already on the way. The USS *Tripoli*, carrying 2,200 Marines of the 31st Marine Expeditionary Unit, is arriving in the Arabian Sea as of this weekend. A second amphibious group, the USS *Boxer*, carrying 2,500 Marines, has departed San Diego. A third MEU is also en route. In total, roughly 7,500 Marines are steaming toward the war zone—forces configured for direct combat operations on Iranian soil.

More broadly, the war against Iran marks a new stage in a decades-long effort by American imperialism to offset the declining position of American capitalism through relentless violence. The strategic aim is to reestablish conditions of colonial domination through terror and conquest. This is not simply the product of Trump’s mind, any more than the recklessness and criminality of the Nazi regime sprang solely from Hitler’s psychology. It arises from the objective crisis of capitalism and the determination of a ruling class to preserve its power.

In that framework, there is no line the perpetrators will not cross. The normalization of threats to obliterate civilian

infrastructure—and the deliberate courting of a radiological catastrophe in the Persian Gulf—raises the prospect that the United States and Israel will resort to still more extreme measures, including the use of nuclear weapons.

Commenting on the use of nuclear weapons at the end of the Second World War, historian Gabriel Jackson wrote:

In the specific circumstances of August 1945, the use of the atom bomb showed that a psychologically very normal and democratically elected chief executive could use the weapon just as the Nazi dictator would have used it. In this way, the United States—for anyone concerned with moral distinctions in the conduct of different types of government—blurred the difference between fascism and democracy.

This observation takes on a new significance in relation to the war against Iran. The issue is not only the criminality of the threats now being issued, but the fact that they do not encounter any significant opposition from within the established political structure. This is itself a devastating exposure of the advanced breakdown of American democracy and the convergence of imperialist violence abroad with authoritarianism at home.

No major political figure in the United States—not a senator, not a governor, not a single leader of the Democratic Party—has condemned the threat to obliterate the energy infrastructure of a nation of 90 million people. Neither Representative Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez nor Senator Bernie Sanders has issued a statement.

On the Sunday talk shows, the deliberate destruction of a nation's power grid was discussed purely as a tactical question. Not a single guest on any of the shows used the words “war crime,” “international law,” “Geneva Convention,” “collective punishment,” “civilian infrastructure” or “illegal.”

This silence reflects the degree to which the entire political establishment, across party lines, has accepted the framework of American imperial violence as the natural order of international affairs. Former Democratic National Committee (DNC) chair Donna Brazile declared: “Democrats understand that Iran has posed a threat, not just to the region, the Gulf, but to the world itself.”

No war has been declared by Congress. No authorization for the use of military force has been voted on. The president of the United States has, on his sole authority, been waging war for four weeks, and now threatens, again on his sole authority, to destroy the entire energy infrastructure of a sovereign nation. In any democratic system, this would raise the necessity for the removal of Trump from office. And there is not a single significant voice in the political establishment raising it.

The *New York Times* editorial board, speaking for the Democratic Party, published a lengthy critique of Trump's conduct of the war this weekend. The editorial argues that Trump has misrepresented Iran's nuclear capability and concealed the crisis affecting US munitions production. But the *Times* editorial board is at pains to establish, before offering any criticism, that

“there is a reasonable debate to have about the wisdom of this war,” and that Trump “could make a fact-based argument for confronting the regime now.”

The *Times*' objection is not that the war is a crime. It is that Trump has not made a sufficiently coherent case for it.

The corporate media, the Democratic Party and the Republican Party speak for the same financial oligarchy. Their common premise is that American imperialism has the right to impose its will through unlimited violence, and that the lives of millions of human beings are expendable.

There exists immense opposition to this war among workers and youth in the United States and throughout the world. The question is whether this opposition will be transformed into a conscious movement with a strategy and perspective.

On March 28, demonstrations are being held under the banner of “No Kings,” following two major protests last year. At the very center of every protest must be the demand for an end to the war against Iran. No to the US-Israeli war of extermination against Iran! No to the broader assault on the Middle East, including the genocide in Gaza! Any movement that treats war as secondary, or avoids naming it directly, leaves intact the principal mechanism through which the ruling class is driving toward dictatorship and catastrophe.

A movement against war cannot be built through appeals to Congress, to the Democratic Party, or to the corporate press that has normalized extermination. It must be built by bringing the fight against war into the workplaces and industries that make society run: the ports, logistics hubs, refineries, rail networks, manufacturing plants, schools, and hospitals.

Trump's ultimatum is not merely a threat against Iran. It is a warning to the whole world of what the ruling class is prepared to do to maintain its power. It must be answered not with appeals to the institutions complicit in these crimes, but with the mobilization of the immense social power of the working class. The fight to end the war must be placed at the center of the developing struggles over wages, jobs, living standards and democratic rights. The struggle against war is inseparable from the struggle against dictatorship and the capitalist system that produces both. The alternative to barbarism is the independent, international, socialist mobilization of the working class.



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