The debate over Trump's plans for a "massive" escalation in Iran: Everything is discussed except the crime

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On Sunday, the *New York Times* published a news analysis by David Sanger, its veteran White House and national security correspondent, under the headline "Trump Seems Trapped by Iran War, Even as He Wields the World's Biggest Hammer." Trump, Sanger writes, "has seemed trapped, his presidency gradually consumed by a war he cannot find his way out of."

The United States halted its bombing Friday, after 13 consecutive nights. Trump has threatened to launch a "massive" attack on Iran, which he has not yet launched—in the words of Sanger, because "his real hesitation may come from the fact that the war has depleted U.S. stockpiles of missile interceptors."

Over four decades at the *Times*, Sanger has functioned as the newspaper's chief liaison with the US military-intelligence apparatus. His analysis is significant as a statement of how the war is seen and discussed within the state itself.

What is most significant, however, is what is left out. The analysis simply ignores the question of the war's legality. The war is presented as a policy that has failed, not a crime that has been committed. In this, the piece is representative of the entire discussion of the war within the American political establishment and its media.

As a matter of international law, the US war against Iran is a criminal war of aggression. The attack was launched on February 28, under cover of negotiations, against a country that had neither attacked nor threatened the United States, and lacked the capability to do so.

The opening strikes killed Iran's head of state, Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, and much of the country's military and political leadership. By the time Trump signed the June 17 ceasefire memorandum, Iranian authorities had counted at least 3,468 dead, among them 376 children.

The International Military Tribunal at Nuremberg, in the judgment under which the leaders of the Third Reich were hanged, defined the initiation of a war of aggression as "the supreme international crime differing only from other war crimes in that it contains within itself the accumulated evil of the whole."

By this standard—the standard the United States itself wrote into international law—the war on Iran is a criminal enterprise, and every official who ordered, planned and executed it is a war criminal.

If the issue of legality is ever broached, it is quickly passed over as if it were a minor question. On Friday in the Oval Office, a reporter asked Trump: "You're talking about blowing up civilian power plants and bridges. Much of the civilized world would consider that a war crime. Do you?" Trump replied, "I won't respond to that question."

This exchange was effectively buried in the news coverage of the war, treated as an issue of no serious or significant consequence.

This is in keeping with the conspiracy of silence that surrounds the war. During Vietnam, American correspondents reported from the battlefield. No American reporter is covering this war from inside Iran, no footage of the bases struck by Iranian missiles has been released, and the Pentagon was caught this week altering the casualty figures, cutting its count of American dead from 18 to 14.

To raise the question of legality is to indict not just Trump, but the entire political establishment. American imperialism is dripping from head to toe in criminality,

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presided over by a gangster-president who represents the criminal underworld in power. But Trump is not an individual, he is the representative of a social class and a state apparatus.

The Democratic Party bases its tactical opposition to Trump's conduct of the war entirely on the framework that the war is ineffective—not that it is illegal. At last week's Senate hearing on the war funding bill, Senator Gary Peters of Michigan told Defense Secretary Pete Hegseth: "You don't have a strategy. You don't have a long-term plan to actually win this war. Win the war!"

The attack on Iran is, moreover, the product of decades of criminality: such as the illegal invasion of Iraq, which, by one calculation, killed over a million people; the Gaza genocide, which has killed more than 73,000 Palestinians with American funding, arms and diplomatic protection.

On Tuesday, Trump will meet with Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, who was issued an arrest warrant in November 2024 by the International Criminal Court. Trump has declared that Netanyahu "will not be arrested, in any way, shape, or form." The architect of the Gaza genocide, a fugitive from an International Criminal Court arrest warrant, is being welcomed to the White House as an honored guest.

Under these conditions of deepening crisis, the administration is planning even greater crimes, including the potential use of nuclear weapons.

Veteran reporter Seymour Hersh reported on June 10 that Trump had asked whether striking Iran's underground missile plants with nuclear weapons "was doable." Trump has declared that the United States is planning an attack on Iran's Pickaxe Mountain, and the *Economist* noted Sunday that Iran's deep underground facilities "are essentially invulnerable to non-nuclear weapons."

The escalation of the Iran war—as part of the global eruption of US imperialism—confronts all of humanity with disaster. The global war being waged by the Trump administration faces no meaningful opposition from the political establishment, which fundamentally supports the aim of subjugating the Middle East in order to subdue US imperialism's main global rivals, Russia and China.

Despite the best efforts of the media and political establishment, the question of legality will not disappear. The war against Iran is a crime, but no institution of the existing order will hold the criminals to account, because all of them belong to and defend the same system that produced it.

That task falls to the international working class, the one social force with no stake in the system of imperialist plunder and the only force capable of bringing the war to an end. The struggle against war must be united with the defense of the social and economic rights of the working class and with the fight against the capitalist system that is the source of inequality, dictatorship and war.

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