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US steps up pressure on Iran with new round of sanctions

The announcement by the Treasury Department Thursday of a new round of sanctions against Iran is part of US imperialism's aggressive drive to isolate and subjugate Tehran. As well as threatening to unleash an economic crisis in Iran, the sanctions, unveiled just two days after Trump blew up the Iran nuclear accord, also further exacerbated tensions between Washington and the European powers.

The sanctions, presented in a statement posted on the Treasury Department's website, target six individuals and three companies allegedly tied to the powerful Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corp (IRGC) and its Quds force. Accusing the IRGC of "malign activity," US Treasury Secretary Steven Mnuchin also blamed Iran's central bank for assisting the Revolutionary Guards to obtain US dollars through a currency exchange network. Mnuchin added, "We are intent on cutting off IRGC revenue streams wherever their source and whatever their destination."

Coming just hours after Israel's aggressive assault on various Iranian positions in Syria early Thursday, which Tel Aviv justified by claiming the Quds force fired a handful of rockets at Israeli territory, the Treasury Department's sanctions make clear that Washington is steering towards a direct military confrontation with Tehran. The Israeli bombardment, involving 28 warplanes, claimed the lives of as many as 18 foreigners, all of whom were likely Iranian personnel. Even though the Iranian "attack" followed a missile strike by Israel late Tuesday that claimed the lives of eight Iranians near Damascus, marking the third time in less than a month that Israel had caused Iranian

casualties, the White House warned Iran in a statement also released Thursday to stop its “provocative” activities and stressed Israel’s right to “self-defence.”

The Treasury Department’s efforts to paint Tehran as the chief destabilizing factor in the Middle East were no less absurd. The sanctions, which it unveiled in conjunction with the United Arab Emirates, were supposedly aimed at curbing IRGC support for “terrorist” groups and Iranian “proxies” in Syria, Lebanon, and Yemen.

Notwithstanding the reactionary political character of Iran’s bourgeois-clerical regime, Tehran’s backing of Hezbollah, a movement with a mass base of support in Lebanon, can hardly be denounced as the funding of “proxies,” least of all by two countries which have poured millions of dollars and weapons into the backing of Islamist militias in Syria. These proxies, which lack any significant popular support and have therefore suffered a series of defeats, have been used by the US to wage a brutal seven-year-long civil war for regime change in Damascus—a war that has claimed over half a million lives.

Moreover, given the IRGC’s significant role in the Iranian economy, including holdings in the construction, energy, and telecommunications sectors, those hit hardest by the new round of sanctions and the reimposition of economic sanctions more generally will be the Iranian working class.

Trump gave the go-ahead for the full reimposition of punishing sanctions on the Iranian economy on Tuesday in his speech abrogating the nuclear deal. After denouncing the deal as “horrible” and “one-sided,” Trump declared that Washington would enforce the highest level of economic sanctions against the Islamic Republic, meaning that the next step in any conflict would involve a resort to military means.

Underscoring the hardline approach the Trump administration plans to take, Mnuchin announced Tuesday that licenses granted to aircraft producers Boeing and Airbus to trade with Tehran would be cancelled. Trump vowed that Washington would also sanction any foreign company that continues to do business with Iran, leaving open a timeframe of three to six months for businesses to wind down their operations.

US imperialism hopes with the sanctions to bully Iran into capitulating to its predatory demands, including the abandonment of Iran’s ballistic missile program and the ending of its support for Hezbollah, Hamas, and other foreign groups. In this way, Washington aims to remove Tehran as a regional obstacle to its consolidation of unchallenged hegemony over the energy-rich and strategically significant Middle East. Two larger obstacles in this agenda are Russia and China, which have their own interests in the region. As if to underscore how their ambitions clash, Beijing announced the opening of a new freight

railway connecting western China with Iran the same day as Washington presented its new sanctions.

However, alongside economic pressure, plans are far advanced for all-out war with Tehran. There can be no doubt that Washington was made aware beforehand of Israel's plans to strike Iranian infrastructure across Syria on Thursday and gave its backing to the aggressive action—not least because the bombardment would weaken the Iranian forces stationed in the country and enable the US and its Islamist allies to strengthen their position in the oil-rich east of the country.

Trump's decision to scrap the Iran deal and reimpose sanctions has thrown the bourgeois nationalist Iranian regime into crisis. President Hassan Rouhani touted the 2015 agreement as a means for Iran to improve ties with the West and spur economic development. The collapse of this strategy is encouraging representatives of the hardliner faction of the ruling elite, who always warned against cooperation with the United States, to speak out more forcefully. Iranian supreme leader Ayatollah Khamenei raised doubts about the commitment of France, Germany, and Britain to salvaging the nuclear accord, declaring in a speech Wednesday, "I do not trust these three countries either." An Iranian government statement chastised the European powers for having been "incapable of fully performing" their obligations under the deal "even while the US was nominally a party."

This bluster notwithstanding, the Iranian bourgeoisie is determined to cut a deal with imperialism. Tehran has already appealed to Airbus to confirm its commitment to sell 100 aircraft to the country in spite of the threat of US sanctions. Meanwhile, Foreign Minister Mohammad Javad Zarif will travel to Europe early next week to negotiate terms for the maintenance of the nuclear accord.

While the European powers, led by France and Germany, took a critical view of Trump's cancellation of the Iran deal, they also made clear that they will demand additional concessions of Tehran if the deal is to be rescued. This is because the ruling elites in Berlin, Paris, and London are determined to pursue their predatory imperialist interests in Iran and the broader Middle East just as ruthlessly as their counterparts in Washington.

The new round of US sanctions prompted an even sharper response from the European powers, which see their expanding economic interests under threat. Calls are growing for European companies to defy the sanctions, and for the European Union to take measures to protect European companies against fines or other punishments adopted by Washington. French Finance Minister Bruno Le Maire stated Friday that Europe is prepared to take measures to counter the enforcement of any penalties by the United States against a

European firm for doing business with Iran. “We have to work among ourselves in Europe to defend our European economic sovereignty,” he declared in an interview with Europe 1. “Do we accept extraterritorial sanctions? The answer is no,” he told reporters. “Do we accept that the United States is the economic gendarme of the planet? The answer is no. Do we accept the vassalization of Europe in commercial matters? The answer is no.”

Last year, French exports to Iran doubled compared to the previous year, while German exports climbed by around €400 million.

Le Maire advanced three proposals designed to counteract the impact of any US sanctions. The first would be a European-wide blocking statute to prevent US sanctions impacting European firms. He also suggested giving Europe more “financial independence” from the US, including by establishing a body to oversee European trade with Iran, and an agency tasked with following the activities of foreign companies.

In a speech delivered in the western German city of Münster Friday, German Chancellor Angela Merkel struck a similarly critical tone toward US policy on Iran. Trump’s decision had “damaged trust in the international order,” according to Merkel. “Even in tough times, we decide to strengthen multilateralism,” she stated.