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By Robert Stevens
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War danger in Middle East exacerbates political crisis in Britain

Tensions continue to mount over the stand-off with Iran over its seizure of a British oil tanker in the Strait of Hormuz last Friday, posing the danger of a catastrophic military conflict in the Middle East.

The Stena Impero, a Swedish-owned ship sailing under a British flag, was **seized** by the Iranian Revolutionary Guards for what they said was a violation of international maritime rules and regulations.

The crisis-ridden British Conservative government—which carried out an act of piracy, seizing an Iranian oil tanker off Gibraltar it still holds after nearly three weeks—responded with a series of threats against Iran, warning of “serious consequences.” Several meetings of its Cobra emergency security council have been convened at which it was agreed to beef up Britain’s military presence in the region, including in the Straits of Hormuz, a crowded 21-mile wide sea lane through which a fifth of all global oil and a third of the world’s liquefied natural gas passes.

On Sunday, UK Defence Minister Tobias Ellwood said Britain was considering a “series of options,” including freezing all Iran’s assets, if the tanker was not released.

Already agreed, according to reports in the *Sun*, is that a “British Astute-class nuclear-powered submarine, believed to be at sea already, is expected to head to the region within days.”

The *Sun* reported that “[t]he Royal Marines ... would be authorised to use heavy-calibre machine guns, snipers and light anti-tank missiles to deter Iranian forces.”

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Also being deployed is HMS Duncan, a Type 45 air-defence destroyer, to back up another UK warship already in the region, HMS Montrose. A Royal Navy support ship, RFA Cardigan Bay, is based in Bahrain, with the newspaper reporting that “HMS Kent, another Type 23 anti-submarine frigate, is due to depart for the Gulf in five weeks.”

While the public position is that all options are on the table, the *Daily Telegraph* reported Saturday evening that “[t]he UK is believed to have asked its US ally to initially refrain from making inflammatory public statements about the seizure of the Stena Impero by Iran as they sought a diplomatic solution to the crisis.”

It said, “[Foreign Secretary] Jeremy Hunt ... spoke with his counterpart [US] Mike Pompeo, who was in Argentina, on Friday night. British and US officials continued to speak through the night on Friday. White House officials did not push back on reports that the UK conveyed a message to the US that it wanted to try to de-escalate the situation.”

The Strait of Hormuz events have massively escalated the political crisis in Britain. Prime Minister Theresa May, who has been a lame duck for months—will almost certainly be replaced this week as Conservative party leader and prime minister by Hunt’s challenger—the pro-Brexit Boris Johnson.

May has been sidelined to such an extent that she reportedly did not attend Friday’s Cobra meeting, “not even by secure videolink” (according to Sky News), despite the fact that they are normally chaired by the prime minister.

Johnson, who resigned as May’s foreign secretary in July last year after less than a year in the position, is not a Cabinet minister and was not in attendance either. As the most prominent pro-Brexit Tory, Johnson advocates deepening ties with the US based on securing a post-Brexit free trade deal with the Trump administration. He has built up a close relationship with anti-European Union US president. Sky News reported Friday evening, “Boris Johnson had a secret call with Donald Trump yesterday...”

Given the vast geopolitical implications of Britain backing the Trump administration in any military action against Iran—with a population deeply hostile to any further imperialist plunder in the Middle East—Johnson and Hunt both felt the need to pledge that they would not back US military strikes against Iran in the Tory election hustings.

Several columnists in the nominally liberal and right-wing media have given voice to these qualms, opposing the UK becoming embroiled in another Middle East war for being against the “national interest.”

Simon Tisdall's *Guardian* column, "How Trump's arch-hawk lured Britain into a dangerous trap to punish Iran," argued that as a result of the seizure of Iran's tanker, "Britain has been plunged into the middle of an international crisis it is ill-prepared to deal with. The timing could hardly be worse. An untested prime minister, presumably Boris Johnson, will enter Downing Street this week. Britain is on the brink of a disorderly exit from the EU, alienating its closest European partners. And its relationship with Trump's America is uniquely strained."

In the *Financial Times*, Gideon Rachman warned that Johnson, "[F]aces the prospect of having to deal with a major diplomatic crisis with Iran that could spiral into military conflict."

Relations between the US, UK and European Union face meltdown as "A British decision to align its Iran policy with that of Washington, would probably finally kill off the EU's efforts to keep the Iran nuclear accord alive." Rachman added, "It would also represent the abandonment of a long-standing British foreign-policy position and might increase the chances of a military confrontation further down the road."

Sections of the military and big business openly endorse the military build-up against Iran. Among those are Lord West, the former First Sea Lord and an ex-Labour government minister, who stated: "They [Iran] are the ones who escalated by attacking one of our merchant ships, so if they attack one of our merchant ships then they get their comeuppance."

However, West also warned in a *Guardian* column Saturday, "A military response against Iran is not appropriate and, in any case, is beyond the capability of our armed forces acting alone."

"But we should make it clear to the Iranians that, while up until now we have been trying to talk to Washington about easing sanctions, we will side with the US and strengthen sanctions unless Iran releases our ship and its crew."

He warned, "Some powerful groups in Israel, Saudi Arabia and the United States want war and think a precision strike against key parts of Iran's military capability would lead to regime change. They are wrong. It would lead to an open-ended war with catastrophic consequences across the region and the globe."

West cautioned, "There are very real risks of a miscalculation or some foolhardy action leading to a war." In comments aimed at Johnson and Hunt, he wrote, "despite what some

people think, should a war start there is no way the UK could avoid being fully involved on the US side.”

The escalation of tensions over the last weeks demonstrates that the general tendency is towards military conflict. Every day Britain moves closer to the brink of war. The crisis is being seized on by those advocating a drastic increase in the UK’s military budget and the reversal of cuts to the Armed Forces.

The media of billionaire oligarch Rupert Murdoch has served as a long-time conduit for airing these positions. Deborah Haynes, the foreign affairs editor at Sky News and previously defence editor at Murdoch’s *Times*, has been exposed as part of the UK group of journalists who are members of the UK “cluster” of the Integrity Initiative (II). The II was set up by the London-based Institute of Statecraft to spread propaganda on behalf of British imperialism.

Haynes wrote in a Sky News editorial this weekend of the “reality that the Royal Navy no longer has sufficient warships to dedicate to escorting maritime traffic through the Gulf and at the same time maintain its other commitments around the world.”

Referring to the decrease in the size of the UK’s military arsenal, she bemoaned, “The degradation of the Royal Navy and the rest of the armed forces has been a political choice since the end of the Cold War.”

She continued, “Defence experts have warned for years that the moment when Britain finally acknowledges what some see as a self-inflicted act of national vandalism (in terms of cost-saving cuts to the military) will be when we suffer a defeat or catastrophic failure on the international stage.

“Could the seizure of the Stena Impero tanker be that wake-up call?”

“Longer term, let the limitations the Gulf crisis has exposed in Britain’s defences prompt the next prime minister to invest sufficient money, strategic thought and innovation into rebuilding the armed forces so the UK is not caught short again.”

Haynes insisted, “More immediately, defence chiefs need to be empowered by their political leaders to adopt a stronger stance on Iran.”

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