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European Languages

زبانهای اروپایی

By Bill Van Auken
19.09.2019

Washington steps up threats against Iran over strikes on Saudi oil facilities

The threat that Washington will unleash a major new war in the Middle East continued to escalate Tuesday as US intelligence and military officials—speaking not for attribution—claimed to have established that last Saturday’s attacks on Saudi Arabian oil installations were launched from southwestern Iran.

Not a shred of evidence has been provided to substantiate this charge, and, according to Pentagon officials who spoke anonymously to National Public Radio, the evidence claimed is “circumstantial,” consisting of satellite surveillance imagery showing activity at supposed Iranian launch sites in advance of the attack on Abqaiq, the world’s largest crude oil processing facility, and the Khurais oil field, both in eastern Saudi Arabia.

Despite the failure of US authorities to make public any of their alleged evidence, the US corporate media is reporting the charge against Iran as incontrovertible fact.

Iran has denied any responsibility for the attacks, which were claimed by the Houthi rebels in Yemen as an act of retaliation for the near-genocidal war waged by Saudi Arabia against the impoverished Arab country for the past four-and-a-half years.

An unrelenting bombing campaign, waged with indispensable US supplies of arms, ammunition and logistical support, is responsible for the bulk of the nearly 100,000 Yemeni deaths in the course of the war. The Saudi attacks, combined with a blockade enforced with the aid of the US Navy, has driven some 8 million Yemenis to the brink of starvation.

The Houthis claimed to have staged the attacks with a swarm of 10 weaponized drones, weapons that they publicly unveiled last July. The strikes cut Saudi Arabia's oil production in half, reducing it by 5.7 million barrels daily, or more than 5 percent of global crude production.

The attacks sent crude oil prices spiraling, increasing by as much as 20 percent on Monday before receding over the course of the day's trading. Prices fell further on Tuesday after Saudi Energy Minister Prince Abdulaziz bin Salman announced that the kingdom would be able to maintain supplies by tapping its inventories and had already restored 50 percent of the production halted by the attacks. Other Saudi sources indicated that oil production would be fully restored within as little as two weeks, far earlier than initially anticipated.

Nonetheless, oil prices remained sharply higher than before the strikes, and the projected rise in gas prices in the US declined only from 25 cents to 20 cents. Markets are factoring in not just the immediate impact on Saudi production, but the immense geostrategic tensions roiling the Middle East and the real prospect of a devastating new war.

What actions Washington will take over its unsubstantiated charges against Iran—and when—is far from clear. Defense Secretary Mark Esper and Gen. Joseph Dunford, the chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, joined other national security officials at the White House on Monday to present President Donald Trump with a range of military options, which reportedly include US airstrikes on Iranian oil facilities and military installations. It has also been reported that the seizure of Iranian ships on the high seas—an act of piracy—together with cyber attacks are under consideration.

The US military command is, according to officials who spoke to both the *New York Times* and the *Washington Post*, cautioning against major military action against Iran, fearful that it could provoke Iranian attacks on the 70,000 US military personnel deployed at bases and on warships scattered throughout the region, all of them within range of Iranian ballistic missiles. The military brass also sees such a conflict as a diversion from US imperialism's overriding strategic objective of preparing for confrontation with "great power" rivals, in the first instance, China and Russia.

US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo, an advocate of a hard line against Iran, departed Tuesday for Riyadh where he is to meet with Saudi Arabia's de facto ruler, Crown Prince Mohamed bin Salman, who organized the brutal assassination of journalist Jamal Khashoggi and ordered the beheadings of at least 134 people in just the first half of this

year. Pompeo is reportedly charged with “coordinating” a response to last Saturday’s attacks with the royal murderer.

Meanwhile, Vice President Mike Pence, in a speech before the right-wing Heritage Foundation think tank in Washington Tuesday, echoed the earlier declaration by Trump that the US military was “locked and loaded” and “ready to defend our interests and allies in the region, make no mistake about it.”

Trump subsequently stated that he “would certainly like to avoid” a war with Iran and that, while he had “a lot of options” he was “not looking at options right now,” waiting for “definitive” proof of who was responsible for Saturday’s attacks.

White House press aides were sent out to tell the media that by “locked and loaded” Trump was merely referring to US energy independence, and that he is still prepared to negotiate with Iran. Iranian leaders have ruled out such talks until the US administration ends its abrogation of the 2015 nuclear agreement between Tehran and the major world powers and halts its “maximum pressure” sanctions, an economic blockade tantamount to a state of war.

Virtually in the same breath, the US president said that he was “not looking to get into a new conflict, but sometimes you have to. This was a very large attack, and it could be met by an attack many, many times larger.”

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Perhaps the most telling symptom of the immense danger of a new war is the fact that the bourgeois media is complacently suggesting that it will not take place because Trump does not want it.

The US president’s “America First” rhetoric notwithstanding, his mercurial reactions to the recent events in the Middle East reflect pressure from conflicting layers within America’s ruling oligarchy and its massive military intelligence apparatus.

Clearly, there is significant support with the US ruling class for a military intervention to effect regime change in Iran and assert unfettered control by US imperialism over the strategic energy resources of the entire Middle East. This has found its most explicit expression in the call by leading Republican Senator Lindsey Graham for US airstrikes against Iranian oil refineries in order to “break the regime’s back.”

Beyond the tactical divisions within the US ruling establishment, the rising war tensions in the Persian Gulf are driven by powerful geostrategic conflicts that have their roots in the crisis of world capitalism.

A US military confrontation with Iran is in direct conflict with the interests of China, which is dependent upon the Persian Gulf region for a large portion of its immense energy requirements. The threatened cutoff of oil exports from Saudi Arabia posed the greatest threat to China, which counts the kingdom as its second largest source of oil after Russia. Moreover, Iran, also a key source of energy for China, is a crucial link in Beijing's One Belt, One Road initiative, with China offering some \$400 billion in long term investments in Iran's energy, transport and manufacturing sectors.

A US stranglehold over the Persian Gulf would confront China with an intolerable threat of being placed on energy rations by its principal global rival, or cut off from supplies altogether.

US aggression against Iran likewise cuts across the interests of the European imperialist powers. Anxious to secure their own access to Iran's lucrative markets and energy resources, they are conducting what amounts to a rebellion on their knees against Washington's drive to war.

Germany's Chancellor Angela Merkel and British Prime Minister Boris Johnson discussed the attacks on Saudi Arabia in a telephone call Tuesday, stressing "the need to work together, alongside international partners, to agree a collective response," and the "importance of avoiding the further escalation of tensions in the region."

French Foreign Minister Jean-Yves Le Drian, meanwhile, insisted that Paris "doesn't have evidence to say that these drones came from one place or another, and I don't know if anyone has evidence." Speaking alongside the foreign minister of the Egyptian dictatorship in Cairo. Le Drian added that "there must be a strategy of de-escalation."

However timid the challenge to Washington today, the logic of conflicting imperialist interests is driving the European powers to rearmament and preparations for war.

Further exacerbating tensions in the region is the political crisis in Israel, where longtime Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu appeared unable to win a ruling majority in Tuesday's elections. The run-up to this second vote in barely five months has seen Israel conduct a reckless series of military strikes against targets in Syria, Iraq and Lebanon, while continuously threatening an attack against Iran.

In Israel, as in the United States and every major capitalist country, there is a powerful incentive for the ruling class to direct the tensions created by insoluble economic and political crises, social inequality and growing class conflict outward in an eruption of military violence.

Whatever the subjective intentions of Trump or anyone else, the objective contradictions of world capitalism—between social production and private ownership of the productive forces, and between the integrated character of the world economy and the nation-state system—are driving inexorably toward a new period of global war that threatens the survival of humanity.

The only means by which this threat can be countered is through the independent political mobilization of the working class against war and imperialism. There is no other movement on the face of the planet that consistently opposes imperialist war outside of the International Committee of the Fourth International. Its sections must be built in every country to provide the revolutionary leadership that the working class requires to put an end to war and the capitalist system that is its source.

18 September 2019