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By Bill Van Auken
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US threatens military strikes against Iran and Venezuela

A senior Trump administration official threatened this week that Washington would carry out military action to prevent Iran's sale of missiles to Venezuela, either by means of confiscating the weapons on the high seas or destroying them with air strikes if they were to reach the South American country.



President Donald J. Trump displays his signature on an Executive Order to place further sanctions on Iran Monday, June 24, 2019, in the Oval Office of the White House. (Official White House Photo by Joyce N. Boghosian)

The threat was issued by Elliott Abrams, who holds the combined posts of US special envoy for both Venezuela and Iran. A veteran right-wing operative, Abrams was convicted in connection with the Iran-Contra scandal in the 1980s, when he played a central role in creating a covert and illegal network for funding the terrorist "Contra" forces organized by the CIA to attack Nicaragua. He has remained a thuggish defender of every crime carried out by US imperialism internationally.

"The transfer of long-range missiles from Iran to Venezuela is not acceptable to the United States and will not be tolerated or permitted," Abrams said. "We will make every effort to

stop shipments of long-range missiles, and if somehow they get to Venezuela they will be eliminated there.”

He added, “Every delivery of Iranian arms destabilizes South America and the Caribbean, and is especially dangerous to Venezuela’s neighbors in Brazil, Colombia, and Guyana.” The three named countries were visited last month by US Secretary Mike Pompeo in an anti-Venezuela, anti-China tour of Latin America that was accompanied by threatening joint maneuvers by US troops and the Colombian armed forces.

While Abrams presented no evidence of any imminent missile deal between Tehran and Caracas, his threat follows the October 18 lifting of a United Nations ban on Iran’s purchase or sale of conventional weapons that had been imposed in 2007. The restriction was ended as part of the 2015 nuclear deal struck between Tehran and the major powers, known as the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action, or JCPOA. Under the JCPOA, Iran agreed to restrictions on its civilian nuclear program in exchange for the lifting of sanctions.

While the Trump administration unilaterally abrogated the accord in 2018, imposing a “maximum pressure” sanctions regime tantamount to an act of war, it nonetheless arrogantly demanded that the UN invoke a “snapback” provision to reimpose international sanctions and, in particular, the arms embargo. The proposal found no support from the other signatories of the deal—China, France, Germany, Russia, the United Kingdom and the European Union—and was rejected by the UN Security Council.

In response, Washington has intensified its own regime of punishing international sanctions. In addition to imposing secondary sanctions against any entity trading in arms with Iran, it extended its financial blockade of the country to virtually every Iranian bank, even further hindering Iran’s importation of vitally needed food, medicine and other humanitarian supplies.

On Monday, US Treasury Secretary Steven Mnuchin announced yet another round of sanctions, targeting the Iranian Ministry of Petroleum, the National Iranian Oil Company (NIOC), and the National Iranian Tanker Company (NITC) effectively as terrorist entities on the grounds that oil revenues have funded Iran’s Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC). Washington has also branded the IRGC as a terrorist organization, the first time that such a designation has been employed against any country’s armed forces.

Iran’s Foreign Ministry denounced the unrelenting escalation of US sanctions in the midst of the global coronavirus pandemic. “Corona’s proven deadly, vicious & brutal everywhere, but it’s worse in Iran as it has a cruel collaborator: [the] U.S. regime,” the ministry tweeted. It added, “U.S. has elevated maximum pressure to Health Terrorism & targeted Iranian people with inhuman sanctions while they’re fighting the pandemic. We’ll overcome but NEVER forget.”

On Wednesday, Iran reported 415 COVID-19 deaths, the highest one-day total since the pandemic began. This brings the country’s official death toll to 33,714. It also reported another 6,824 confirmed coronavirus infections, bringing the total number to 558,648. Iran has been the country hardest hit by the coronavirus in the Middle East. Even before the pandemic, unilateral US sanctions blocked Iran’s access to medications, leading to numerous preventable deaths from cancer and other diseases.

Now, Iranian hospitals are reportedly overwhelmed and undersupplied, with ambulances driving patients to one facility after another searching for available beds. In addition to the US sanctions regime, the pandemic has been exacerbated by the policies of Iran’s bourgeois government, which recklessly sought to reopen schools and the economy with the spread of the virus still out of control.

Iran has defended its right to sell arms in defiance of Washington’s unilateral sanctions. Iran’s Defense Minister Brig. Gen. Amir Hatami said last Sunday that Tehran was prepared to sell weapons to countries under attack by Washington.

“Many countries have already talked to us; we have held negotiations with some countries, and the grounds are totally prepared for exchanges [of weapons], both for selling and for supplying certain needs” of the Iranian military, Hatami said.

Iran and Venezuela have conducted trade, particularly in terms of Iranian shipments of gasoline and oil products, despite US threats to seize such shipments on the high seas. A seizure of an Iranian vessel shipping arms to the South American country would have the potential of triggering retaliation and the eruption of a wider war throughout the Middle East. Washington came to the brink of provoking such a conflict at the beginning of this year with its drone missile assassination of one of Iran’s top officials, Gen. Qassem Suleimani, after he arrived at Baghdad’s international airport for an official state visit.

Since then, the US has steadily escalated both sanctions and military provocations, including the dispatch of a US Navy carrier strike group to the Persian Gulf for the first time in a year, along with open threats to carry out military strikes against Iranian-aligned militias in Iraq.

A similar escalation of military threats has been carried out against Venezuela, with the deployment of the largest US force in the region since the Panama invasion of 1989 under the phony pretext of interdicting drugs. Despite the abject failure of Washington’s puppet, self-proclaimed interim president Juan Guaidó, to overthrow the government of President Nicolas Maduro, including through an attempted military putsch and an invasion by US mercenaries, the Trump administration remains committed to regime change.

According to Bloomberg, it sent its former ambassador to Germany Richard Grenell to meet Venezuelan Vice President for Communications Jorge Rodriguez in Mexico last month with the aim of brokering Maduro’s ouster. The talks reportedly went nowhere. The Trump administration had hoped to pull off a foreign policy coup, particularly with an eye to Cuban and Venezuelan exile voting blocs in Florida.

With the US election barely a week away and Trump’s campaign in crisis, there is a clear and present danger that his administration may deliberately provoke a war. While such an action has been generally referred to in American politics as an “October Surprise,” with Trump threatening to reject the results of the election if he loses, such a deadly “surprise” could well be staged in December or January to derail a transfer of power and create the pretext for martial law. Such a political maneuver would count on the Democrats subordinating themselves to the military under conditions of war.

The working class must prepare to conduct its own struggle against the war danger by building a mass independent political movement fighting for socialist policies and against all the parties of the capitalist ruling elite and the profit system. This is the perspective fought for only by the Socialist Equality Party.

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