

Military Buildup in Persian Gulf: US escalates military threat against Iran

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The Obama administration has ordered a major buildup of American military forces in the Persian Gulf, as punishing economic sanctions imposed by both the US and the European Union within the last week have sharply escalated tensions with Iran. The Pentagon has deployed both a large number of warships in the Gulf itself, as well as advanced warplanes in neighboring countries.

The purpose of this buildup, according to a report published Tuesday in the *New York Times*, is to send various “signals”—to warn Iran against any attempt to close the strategic Strait of Hormuz, to convince Israel not to carry out its own strike on Iranian nuclear facilities and to deflect Republican criticisms of Obama as “weak” on Iran.

Whether or not these are the real intentions of the US military buildup, the effect is to put a hair trigger on the threat of an armed confrontation that could provoke a devastating and potentially nuclear war with untold consequences in terms of human life, physical destruction and economic disruption throughout the region and internationally.

The US Navy, the *Times* reports, “has doubled the number of minesweepers assigned to the region to eight vessels,” while the Air Force has, since late spring, deployed “stealthy F-22 and older F-15C warplanes” at US bases in the region. These warplanes are in addition to “combat jets already in the region and the carrier strike groups that are on constant tours of the area.”

According to the *Times*, “Those additional attack aircraft give the United States military greater capability against coastal missile batteries that could disrupt shipping, as well as the reach to strike other targets deeper inside Iran.”

In addition, the military has sent the USS Ponce, an amphibious transport and docking ship specially converted into an “Afloat Forward Staging Base (AFSB),” into the Persian Gulf. Equipped with a helicopter landing deck, field hospital and a large number of bunks for Special Operations troops, it can be used as a floating staging area for sea, air and land attacks on Iran.

The *Times* report, which appears to stem from a deliberate attempt by the Obama administration and the Pentagon to intimidate Iran, is laced with highly provocative and bellicose rhetoric from unnamed “senior administration officials.”

“When the president says there are other options on the table besides negotiations, he means it,” said one official, referring to the military buildup in the gulf.

“The message to Iran is, ‘Don’t even think about it’” the Times quoted an unnamed “senior Defense Department” official as saying. “Don’t even think about closing the strait. We’ll clear the mines. Don’t even think about sending your fast boats to harass our vessels or commercial shipping. We’ll put them on the bottom of the gulf.”

The real message is that Washington is treating the Persian Gulf like an American lake under conditions in which the US and its European allies are ratcheting up economic sanctions that more and more resemble a blockade, an act of war.

On Sunday, the European Union, which previously accounted for one fifth of Iran’s oil exports, put into effect a total embargo on Iranian oil. The move followed even more sweeping sanctions imposed by the United States, which penalizes third countries by denying access to the US banking and financial system to banks and corporations that do business with Iran’s central bank.

These measures come on top of a host of previously enacted sanctions that together have reportedly cut Iran’s oil exports by approximately 40 percent since last year. The real impact of this economic warfare is felt by working people in Iran in the form of sharply rising prices of basic necessities and growing unemployment.

The ostensible purpose of these sanctions is to force the Iranian government to bow to Western ultimatums regarding the country’s nuclear program. The US and its allies have repeatedly made unsubstantiated charges that the Iranian government is seeking to develop nuclear weapons. Tehran has denied these allegations, insisting that its nuclear program is for peaceful purposes.

Another round of the stalled talks between Iran and the so-called P5+1 countries—the five permanent members of the United Nations Security Council plus Germany—took place in Istanbul on Tuesday, although on a lower level than previous negotiations. The session was held between nuclear experts from Iran and the major powers to determine whether differing technical interpretations were impeding the talks.

Talks held in Moscow last month stalemated, however, because the US and its allies issued a series of ultimatums to Tehran—that it halt its enrichment of uranium to the 20 percent level, relinquish its stockpile of enriched uranium and shutter its enrichment plant at Fordow. The US and its allies, however, brushed aside Iranian demands that they recognize Iran’s right under the nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty to enrich uranium and lift economic sanctions.

Tehran has questioned Washington’s stated desire to resolve the nuclear issue by means of diplomacy. “Many people are starting to conclude that maybe there are specific goals in dragging out the talks and preventing their success,” Iranian Foreign Ministry spokesman Ramin Mehmanparast told a weekly briefing. “One option is that perhaps there is a link with the US [presidential] election.”

The senior Pentagon official quoted by the *New York Times* Tuesday openly indicated that the confrontation over Iran’s nuclear program was largely a pretext for using economic and military aggression in pursuit of US strategic interests.

“This is not only about Iranian nuclear ambitions, but about Iran’s regional hegemonic ambitions,” the Defense Department official told the *Times*. “This is a complex array of

American military power that is tangible proof to all our allies and partners and friends that even as the US pivots toward Asia, we remain vigilant across the Middle East.”

In other words, Iran is seen as an obstacle to US “hegemonic ambitions” in the oil-rich regions of the Persian Gulf and Central Asia. Having spent the last decade fighting two wars, in Afghanistan and Iraq, it is now preparing a third and far more dangerous one against the country that lies between them, Iran.

The Iranian parliament, the Majlis, has responded to the escalating Western aggression with a threat to close down the strategic Strait of Hormuz to shipping from the US, the EU and other countries supporting the embargo against Iranian oil. A resolution to that effect was passed by the body’s National Security and Foreign Policy Committee, with 120 members of parliament signing their support. A government spokesman said that if the measure was approved by the full body, Tehran would be obliged to act upon it.

Meanwhile, Iran’s Revolutionary Guards initiated three days of military exercises Monday, firing medium range ballistic missiles at mock enemy bases in the Iranian desert. One of the missiles, the Shahab-3, has a range of 800 miles, able to reach both Israel and US military bases throughout the region.

“It is a response to the political impoliteness of those who talk about all options being on the table,” Gen. Hossein Salami said in explaining the test firings.

Also on Monday, Iranian officials joined relatives of the 290 people, including 66 children, killed in the shooting down of Iran Air Flight 655 on July 3, 1988. The 24th anniversary commemoration was held just off Bandar Abbas, the Iranian port where the flight was hit by a missile fired by the USS Vincennes just after it took off.

In a statement issued Monday, the Iranian Foreign Ministry said: “This inhumane crime is clear proof of the innocence of the Iranian nation and [provides] clear evidence that the United States is not committed to any international legal and ethical principles and norms, and (it) will remain in the historical memory of the Iranian nation.”

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