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War threats mount as Iran exceeds limit on enriched uranium stockpile

The International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) confirmed Iran's announcement Monday that it has breached the limit imposed by the 2015 nuclear agreement on the amount of enriched uranium the country is allowed to stockpile.

The deal, known as the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA), reached between Tehran and six major world powers—the US, China, Russia, Britain, France and Germany—limited the stockpile to 300 kilograms.

Iran warned that it would deliberately exceed this amount in response to the failure of the European signatories to alleviate the re-imposition of punishing US sanctions after the Trump administration unilaterally tore up the nuclear agreement in May of last year.

The increase in the stockpile is a largely symbolic act, which Tehran insists it is entitled to take under the terms of the agreement in response to Washington's abrogation of the deal and its "maximum pressure" campaign to strangle the country's economy. It is not clear whether Iran would have ended up with a larger stockpile in any case, given the difficulty in exporting excess enriched uranium and heavy water as a result of the US sanctions regime.

Tehran has set another deadline of July 7, after which it is expected to increase the rate of enrichment of uranium beyond the 3.67 percent limit imposed by the accord. Again, such a step would be of a symbolic character, given that uranium must be enriched to around 90

percent for use in a nuclear weapon. It would have to be increased to 20 percent to significantly reduce the time needed to reach that level.

The government of the Islamic Republic of Iran has insisted, both before and after the signing of the 2015 agreement, that its nuclear program has been dedicated to peaceful purposes only and that it has never sought nuclear weapons. The predecessor regime, the US-backed puppet dictatorship of the Shah, was actively seeking nuclear weapons capability before its overthrow in the 1979 Iranian Revolution.

The US State Department responded to the Iranian announcement with a bellicose statement demanding that Iran be barred from enriching uranium “at any level.”

“The Iranian regime, armed with nuclear weapons, would pose an even greater danger to the region and to the world,” the State Department declared. “The United States is committed to negotiating a new and comprehensive deal with the Iranian regime to resolve its threats to international peace and security. As long as Iran continues to reject diplomacy and expand its nuclear program, the economic pressure and diplomatic isolation will intensify.”

The White House, meanwhile, issued a bizarre statement claiming that “there is little doubt that even before the deal’s existence, Iran was violating its terms.”

US imperialism has implemented sanctions with the stated aim of reducing Iranian oil exports to zero by targeting any country importing Iranian crude and any financial institutions facilitating such transactions with secondary sanctions and exclusion from US markets.

At the same time, it has ringed Iran with thousands of additional US troops, a naval armada and a nuclear-capable B-52-led bombing strike force placing the threat of a major regional and even world war on a hair trigger.

Trump himself claimed last month that he called off air strikes that could have triggered a spiraling escalation into a catastrophic conflict with only 10 minutes to spare before bombs and missiles were set to fly. The US bombardment had been ordered in response to Iran’s downing of a \$200 million Global Hawk spy drone that Tehran charged had violated Iranian airspace.

The “new and comprehensive deal” that Washington proposes to negotiate with Iran is based not merely on its complete renunciation of its nuclear program, but also an abject surrender to US dominance in the Middle East that would turn the country into a semi-

colony of Washington. As for American “diplomacy”, this consists of an attempt to starve the Iranian population into submission, combined with the relentless buildup to war.

The response of the European powers to Iran’s announcement of its breach of the cap on its enriched uranium stockpile was muted. There were reports that the European signatories to the deal would issue a joint statement and that French President Emmanuel Macron might be dispatched to Tehran for direct talks with the Iranian government. The immediate aim appears to be to dissuade Tehran from taking the further step of increasing its level of uranium enrichment.

Last Friday, at a meeting in Vienna between Iran and the remaining signatories to the nuclear deal, the European powers announced that they had set up the long-promised EU-Iran exchange mechanism, Instex, had been brought online as a means of allowing European and other companies to do business with Iran, while evading US sanctions.

Tehran, while acknowledging the action as a positive step, treated it as too little, too late, demanding that the European powers do more to defy Washington and guarantee Iran the ability to sell its oil on the world market.

The British government, which is the most closely aligned with Washington and has sent its own military assets into the region, responded with a threat.

“We want to preserve that deal because we don’t want Iran to have nuclear weapons but if Iran breaks that deal then we are out of it as well,” British Foreign Minister Jeremy Hunt, a candidate to succeed Theresa May as prime minister, said Monday.

The most direct threats, however, came from Israel, which demanded that the European powers retaliate against Iran’s breaching of the stockpile limit by re-imposing sanctions. “You committed to act as soon as Iran violates the nuclear deal, you committed to activate the mechanism of automatic sanctions that were determined by the security council. So I’m telling you: do it. Just do it,” Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu ranted on Monday.

Netanyahu’s statement came in the wake of a major Israeli bombardment of Iranian and Iranian-linked forces deployed in Syria in support of the government of President Bashar al-Assad against the Al Qaeda-linked militias deployed as part of a Western-backed regime change war.

The strikes, carried out by 10 Israeli warplanes sent into Lebanese airspace as well as Israeli warships, hit at least 10 targets across the country, including an airbase in the

suburbs of Damascus. Among the victims were at least six civilians, including an infant and two children. At least another 21 were wounded.

The Israeli intelligence-linked website Debka reported that the raids had been postponed in advance of unprecedented talks held last week between US National Security Adviser John Bolton, a leading proponent of a US war against Iran, and his Israeli and Russian counterparts. The apparent aim of the discussions was to secure Russia's collaboration in a bid to drive Iran and Iranian-backed forces out of Syria. Monday's strikes indicate that Bolton's bid failed.

The *Jerusalem Post* on Monday reported that a debate within the Israeli military and intelligence apparatus has heated up over whether to launch a preemptive strike against Iran's nuclear facilities.

According to the report, one faction believes that "Israel's military and deterrence are so strong that Jerusalem could order a surgical strike on the Islamic republic's nuclear facilities and likely avoid a major conflict from Tehran's proxies," in particular Lebanon's Hezbollah militia, which is capable of firing large numbers of rockets at Israeli cities.

"This camp appears ready to order a preemptive strike earlier, possibly before Iran has enough enriched uranium for a bomb, even if it cannot yet deliver the explosive material," the paper reported. It added that "those calling for putting the preemptive strike option front and center probably have gained at least a temporary upper hand."

Whether or not the Israeli tail succeeds in wagging the US dog in precipitating an attack on Iran, US imperialism is driven to war by its own crisis and internal contradictions. It is continuing a decades-long campaign to militarily assert its hegemony over the oil-rich Middle East in order to deny or ration its resources to American capitalism's main rivals, in particular China. The logic of this campaign leads inexorably toward a third world war.

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