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By Bill Van Auken
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US prepares to deploy thousands more troops against Iran

The Pentagon Thursday provided a series of conflicting responses to a *Wall Street Journal* report, citing unnamed US officials, that the Trump administration is considering the deployment of 14,000 more troops to the Persian Gulf along with dozens more warships. This would effectively double the number of additional personnel sent into the region since Washington launched a major military buildup against Iran in May.

Initially, a Pentagon spokeswoman sent out a tweet declaring that “the reporting is wrong. The US is not considering sending 14,000 additional troops to the Middle East.”

On Thursday, however, John Rood, the third-ranking civilian official in the Defense Department, told a Senate panel that the administration is indeed discussing a major new deployment of troops in the region, but declined to give any numbers.



US soldiers deployed in the Middle East (Credit: U.S. Army by 1st Lt. Jesse Glenn)

“We haven’t made a decision yet,” Rood told the Senate Armed Services Committee. “Based on what we are seeing ... it is possible we would need to adjust our force posture. I think that would be a prudent step, depending on what we observe, because our objective is to deter Iranian aggression.”

While saying that no decision has been made to deploy 14,000 more troops to the region, he acknowledged that an increase was under consideration that could include fewer than 14,000. “We are evaluating the threat situations,” he said. “We will need to make dynamic adjustments to our posture.”

The discussion of a major US military escalation in the Persian Gulf has been accompanied by a steady drumbeat of reports leaked by unnamed US military and intelligence officials to the major media alleging Iranian “threats” to the US and its allies in the region: the right-wing government of Israel, Saudi Arabia’s despotic monarchy and the other Gulf oil sheikdoms.

This includes claims that Iran has stockpiled an arsenal of hidden short-range ballistic missiles in Iraq, which, reports have stressed, could reach Jerusalem from the outskirts of Baghdad. The claim has also been made that these missiles could be targeted at US military bases in the region.

Underscoring the bipartisan character of the US war drive against Iran, one of the major sources for a *New York Times* article Wednesday promoting this unsubstantiated charge was first-term Democratic Congresswoman **Elissa Slotkin** of Michigan, who served three tours as a CIA operative in Baghdad, under both the George W. Bush and Obama administrations. “People are not paying enough attention to the fact that ballistic missiles in the last year have been placed in Iraq by Iran with the ability to project violence on the region,” she told the *Times* .

This followed a CNN story Tuesday citing unnamed Pentagon and Trump administration officials claiming that there existed “fresh intelligence of a potential Iranian threat against US forces and interests in the Middle East,” while failing to provide any details about this supposed intelligence.

“The officials would not say in what format the intelligence exists,” the television news network reported. “But in the last several weeks there has been movement of Iranian forces and weapons that the US worries could be put in place for a potential attack, if one is ordered by the Iranian regime.”

This has been combined with claims that the US Navy intercepted a ship carrying ballistic missile parts to the Houthi rebels fighting US-backed Saudi forces in Yemen, along with repeated statements by US Central Command (CENTCOM) chief Gen. Kenneth McKenzie that an Iranian attack is imminent and the US needs more forces in the region.

This concerted propaganda campaign, aided and abetted by the corporate media, points to a growing danger that Washington is preparing to launch a war of aggression against Iran under conditions in which it believes its government has been weakened by a series of violent protests triggered by a hike in gas prices that shook the country last month.

The conditions for this unrest have been created in the main by the unrelenting attempt of US imperialism to drive Iranian oil exports down to zero, depriving the country of the overwhelming source of its wealth. There is also no doubt that agents of US imperialism and its allies have been active in stoking up violence. These conditions have been exacerbated, however, by the policies of Iran's capitalist government, which has sought to shift the burden of the crisis onto the backs of the working class, while seeking to maneuver for some kind of a deal with the major powers.

The US already has between 60,000 and 80,000 troops deployed in the region, ringing Iran with military bases. Just last month, the Pentagon sent the USS Abraham Lincoln carrier strike group into the Persian Gulf from the Arabian Sea, docking the warships in Bahrain just opposite central Iran.

A month earlier, the Trump administration announced the deployment of an additional 3,000 US troops to Saudi Arabia—which the White House claimed were being paid for by the Saudi monarchy—along with two jet fighter squadrons and additional missile defense batteries. The pretext for the deployment was the destruction of Saudi oil infrastructure by missiles that Yemen's Houthi rebels claimed to have fired.

For all of Trump's demagoguery about ending Washington's "endless wars," there are now more troops deployed in the Middle East and Afghanistan than before he took office, and the threat of a far wider conflagration is steadily mounting.

US Defense Secretary Mark Esper clarified Wednesday that the permanent US presence in Syria has been set at 600—just 40 percent less than the 1,000 deployed there when Trump announced that he was pulling all US forces out of the country. Esper told the Reuters news agency that he had the authority to "dial up a little bit" in terms of troop numbers. While Trump has claimed that he has left the troops there to "take the oil," their strategic purpose is to counter both Iranian and Russian influence in the country.

Meanwhile, the major European powers, which claimed to oppose the Trump administration's unilateral abrogation of the 2015 nuclear agreement between Iran and the major world powers, followed by the imposition of "maximum pressure" sanctions that are tantamount to a state of war, have also piled on.

The ambassadors of France, Germany and the UK to the United Nations submitted a joint letter to the UN Secretary-General Wednesday charging Iran with developing "nuclear-capable ballistic missiles" that were "inconsistent" with a UN resolution endorsing the 2015 nuclear accord, known as the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA).

The 2015 nuclear agreement made no mention of Iran's ballistic program, while the UN Security Council resolution endorsing the deal cautioned only against Iran developing missiles designed to deliver nuclear weapons. Iran has always denied any intention of obtaining a nuclear weapon.

Since tearing up the agreement in May of last year, the Trump administration has demanded that Iran scrap its ballistic missile program along with all of its nuclear facilities as part of a general submission to US domination of the country and the entire energy-rich and strategically vital region.

Iranian Foreign Minister Javad Zarif issued a sharp response to the three European powers, declaring that their focus on the country's ballistic missile program represented a "desperate falsehood" designed to "cover up their miserable incompetence in fulfilling bare minimum of their own #JCPOA obligations."

The European powers have failed to meet their obligations under the agreement to normalize economic and trade relations with Iran, the main incentive for Tehran to enter the agreement. Instead, they have bowed to the US sanctions regime that is strangling the country and driving ever larger sections of the population into desperate poverty. While setting up the Instrument in Support of Trade Exchanges (Instex), ostensibly to bypass US sanctions on Iran's sale of oil and buying of products by avoiding exchange in dollars, the system has yet to facilitate any transactions.

No less predatory than Washington, the European powers also smell blood with the deepening economic crisis and social unrest confronting Iran's bourgeois-clerical regime and are trying to position themselves to participate in any imperialist carve-up of Iran and the entire oil-producing region of the Middle East. Such a redivision of the spoils, however, poses the threat of a region-wide and even world war.