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By Bill Van Auken
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Pentagon escalates tensions with Iran in Persian Gulf

The US Navy charged Wednesday that 11 Iranian vessels had “repeatedly conducted dangerous and harassing approaches against multiple US naval ships operating in international waters.”

The protest, issued by the command of the US Navy’s Fifth Fleet, represented a further ratcheting up of tensions that have steadily escalated since 2018, when the Trump administration unilaterally and unlawfully abrogated the 2015 nuclear agreement between Teheran and the major powers. Since then, Washington has imposed a “maximum pressure” sanctions regime, tantamount to a state of war, and steadily built up its air, land and sea forces confronting Iran.

The “dangerous” actions consisted of small speedboats belonging to the Iranian Revolutionary Guards Corps (IRGC) allegedly coming too close to a squadron of US warships sailing close to Iranian waters. These warships included the expeditionary mobile base vessel Lewis B. Puller—a ship designed to serve as a platform for a US invasion—the Paul Hamilton, a guided missile destroyer, the coastal patrol boats Firebolt and Sirocco, and two Coast Guard ships, the Wrangell and Maui.



Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps Navy (IRGCN) vessels cross the path of US warships in Persian Gulf.

NAVCENT, the naval arm of the US Central Command (CENTCOM), which oversees US military operations throughout the Middle East and in Afghanistan, stated, “The IRGCN’s dangerous and provocative actions increased the risk of miscalculation and collision, were not in accordance with the internationally recognized Convention on the International Regulations for Preventing Collisions at Sea (COLREGS) ‘rules of the road’ or internationally recognized maritime customs, and were not in accordance with the obligation under international law to act with due regard for the safety of other vessels in the area.”

The claim that the monitoring of a US naval force within striking distance of Iranian shores constitutes a “provocative action” is absurd on its face. One can only imagine the US reaction if an Iranian naval force were to conduct similar operations off the coast of Florida. The provocation that gives rise to any alleged incident is US imperialism’s own aggressive deployment in the Persian Gulf.

As for the invocation of Iran’s “obligation under international law,” Washington is hardly in a position to lecture Teheran on such matters. In January, it carried out the drone assassination of one of Iran’s most senior officials, Gen. Qassem Suleimani, at Baghdad’s international airport, one of the most egregious violations of international law imaginable. It has defied the rulings of the International Court of Justice (ICJ) which has found US sanctions illegal.

Moreover, the Trump administration has maintained and intensified the sanctions regime under conditions in which Iran faces one of the worst outbreaks of the coronavirus pandemic on the planet. As of Thursday, the official figures were 76,389 cases and 4,777 deaths. As everywhere, these numbers are a severe underestimation of the true ravages of the disease.

US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo and other American officials have cynically claimed that the “maximum pressure” sanctions regime does not affect humanitarian supplies, which are exempt under the language of the punitive US measures. However, this exemption is pure fiction. By labeling Iran’s central bank a terrorist entity and threatening all companies and financial institutions doing business with the country with secondary sanctions, Washington has effectively cut off Iran’s access to critically needed medicines and medical supplies. This murderous sanctions regime has cost the lives of Iranians suffering from cancer and other diseases even before the advent of COVID-19.

On Wednesday, Iranian Foreign Minister Javad Zarif denounced Washington for its decision to withdraw funding for the World Health Organization (WHO) in the midst of the raging pandemic, saying that it had exposed the world to the same criminal policy that had been carried out against Iran.

“The world is learning what Iran has known and experienced all along: US regime’s bullying, threatening & vainglorious blathering isn’t just an addiction: it kills people,” Zarif tweeted. “Like ‘maximum pressure’ against Iran, the shameful defunding of WHO amid a pandemic will live in infamy.”

The Iranian government’s request for a \$5 billion emergency credit from the International Monetary Fund to support its fight against the coronavirus—the first such request from the country in half a century—has been blocked by Washington, which exercises a de facto veto over the decisions of the IMF’s governing board.

Washington’s provocative operations in the Persian Gulf are unfolding as the US Navy confronts a deepening crisis over the ever-widening spread of the coronavirus among American sailors. The scope of the problem was first laid bare after the commander of the US aircraft carrier Theodore Roosevelt, Capt. Brett Crozier, addressed a letter to over 20 senior officers in the Pacific Command demanding that his ship be evacuated and its crew quarantined after dozens of them became sick from the virus.

Crozier’s plea, “We are not at war. Sailors do not need to die,” earned him the wrath of the White House and the Pentagon for cutting across the militarist objectives of US

imperialism and exposing the lie that the government had the pandemic under control. His summary firing and subsequent denunciation by the acting US Navy secretary before his crew unleashed a political firestorm that forced the secretary, Thomas Modly, to resign.

The Navy has since been forced to accede to Crozier's demand, evacuating and quarantining the ship's crew in Guam. Some 600 of the ship's sailors have tested positive and the first of them, a 41-year-old chief petty officer, died from COVID-19 on Monday.

Three other aircraft carriers, the Nimitz, the Ronald Reagan and the Carl Vinson are also being held in port because of sailors testing positive, while a fourth, the Truman, is being kept at sea for fear that its crew will become infected if it comes into port.

Former Navy Secretary Ray Mabus, who held the post from 2009 to 2017, said Wednesday that the only way to confront the spread of coronavirus was to bring every US Navy ship into port and quarantine the majority of their crews while the vessels are given a deep clean.

"What I think what they need to do is bring every ship in," said Mabus. "Offload most of the crew ... leave a very skeletal force on board, sanitize the ship, quarantine people for two weeks, make sure nobody's got COVID." After that, he added, crews would have to be kept on the ships indefinitely until the pandemic is mitigated.

Unless such drastic measures were taken, he warned, "You're going to see the situation that played out on the Roosevelt play out over and over again, not just on those big ships, but virtually every ship that we have in the Navy."

That the Pentagon has no intention of taking such steps to protect rank-and-file sailors, disrupting US imperialism's aggressive operations worldwide in the process, was made clear by the Trump administration's Defense Secretary Mark Esper.

Referring to 90 other US warships at sea, Esper stated in an interview Thursday, "They've had no problems, completely ready, conducting their wartime mission today. This was a special case. We're going to get it behind us. And I'm sure that T.R. will be back to sea soon, performing its important wartime mission."

Esper offered no explanation as to what war any of these ships are fighting. His use of the phrase "wartime mission," however, is an indication that no matter how disastrous the impact of the coronavirus upon the US population, Washington has no intention of curtailing its military aggression abroad or halting its preparation for a third world war.

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