

Iran's Foreign Minister Vows 'All-Out War' if U.S. or Saudis Strike



Foreign Minister Mohammad Javad Zarif, center, told CNN that Iran “won’t blink to defend our territory.” Credit: Abedin Taherkenareh/EPA, via Shutterstock

A military strike against Iran by the United States or Saudi Arabia would result in “an all-out war,” the Iranian foreign minister, Mohammad Javad Zarif, said on Thursday, repeating his government’s denial of responsibility for an attack last week that damaged Saudi oil facilities and hampered the global flow of oil.

The Houthi rebels in Yemen, who are supported by Iran in their fight against a Saudi-led coalition, claimed responsibility for the attack on Saturday, but top American officials blamed Iran, and some within the Trump administration are advocating military retaliation.

The administration is still weighing how to react, but President Trump has appeared reluctant to order military action. Asked on Thursday about Mr. Zarif’s comments, Secretary of State Mike Pompeo said that Mr. Trump wanted to find a

peaceful path forward.

“We’d like a peaceful resolution, indeed,” he told reporters traveling with him in the United Arab Emirates before flying back to Washington after a two-day emergency trip. “We’re still striving to build out a coalition. I was here in an act of diplomacy while the foreign minister of Iran is threatening all-out war to fight to the last American.”

Mr. Pompeo said the United States, which withdrew last year from a nuclear agreement with Iran, planned to impose more sanctions, as Mr. Trump announced on Wednesday. “We have set about a course of action to deny Iran the capacity and the wealth to prevent them from conducting their terror campaigns,” Mr. Pompeo said. “And you can see from the events of last week there’s more work to do.”

On Wednesday, Mr. Pompeo accused Iran of committing an “act of war” with the aerial attacks. Saudi officials also displayed debris from drones and missiles that they said had been used in the attack, citing it as evidence of Iranian complicity while stopping short of directly blaming Tehran.

In an interview with CNN on Thursday, Mr. Zarif said, “This is agitation for war because it’s based on lies; it’s based on deception.” He did not specify what statements about the attacks had been untrue.

“I’m making a very serious statement that we don’t want war; we don’t want to engage in a military confrontation,” he added. “But we won’t blink to defend our territory.”

As for the Houthis, Mr. Zarif said: “I cannot have any confidence that they did it, because we just had their statement. I know that we didn’t do it.”

Analysts for the United Nations and Western governments have said that Iran supplies weapons to the Houthis, including sophisticated missiles and drones that have expanded the rebels’ offensive capabilities. But Mr. Pompeo said on Wednesday that intelligence gathered by the United States over the years did not show that Iran had supplied the Houthis with the kinds of weapons used in the Sept. 14 attack, which meant, he said, that the Houthis’ claim of responsibility was a misdirection effort.

“The intelligence community has high confidence that these were not weapons that would have been in the possession of the Houthis,” he said.



Saudi officials displayed on Wednesday what they said were parts from an Iranian cruise missile and drones used to attack its oil facilities. Credit Amr Nabil/Associated Press

American and Saudi officials have said that the strikes came from the north or northwest — in the direction of Iran or Iraq — and not from Yemen, which is to the south, though they have not provided clear evidence for that claim. Mr. Pompeo and the Iraqi government have said the strikes did not originate in Iraq, which has Shiite militias with ties to Iran.

On Wednesday, Mr. Pompeo met the Saudi crown prince, Mohammed bin Salman, in Jeddah, Saudi Arabia. He flew to Abu Dhabi on Thursday to meet with the de facto ruler of the United Arab Emirates, Prince Mohammed bin Zayed.

The Emirates is a close partner of Saudi Arabia's, and the two nations have been leading a coalition in the war against the Houthis in Yemen, though the Emirates has been withdrawing most of its forces from that campaign in recent months. The yearslong war has resulted in thousands of civilian deaths and what the

United Nations calls the world's worst humanitarian crisis. A bipartisan group of lawmakers in the United States has tried to force Mr. Trump to end American military and arms support for the coalition.

Before departing Abu Dhabi, Mr. Pompeo said that as a result of his meetings in the two Gulf nations, "I think I'll be able to give the president some important information about how it is we should think about proceeding."

"I think it's abundantly clear and there's an enormous consensus in the region that we know precisely who conducted these attacks," he added. "It was Iran. I didn't hear anybody in the region who doubted that for a single moment."

On Wednesday, Mr. Pompeo and the Saudi prince remained at a working dinner in Jeddah until 11:30 p.m. The State Department said the two "discussed the need for the international community to come together to counter the continued threat of the Iranian regime and agreed that the Iranian regime must be held accountable for its continued aggressive, reckless and threatening behavior."

Mr. Pompeo told reporters he expected the United States and Saudi Arabia to bring up the Iranian aggression at the United Nations next week when foreign leaders will gather for the annual General Assembly.

Before the attack, top Iranian officials, including President Hassan Rouhani, were expected to attend the conclave. There had been speculation about whether Mr. Trump would meet with Mr. Rouhani to discuss the continuing tensions among the United States, Iran, the Gulf nations and Europe, which have been punctuated by violence this past summer — including attacks on international oil tankers for which American officials blamed Iran and the downing of an American drone by the Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps, part of the Iranian military.

A senior Trump administration official said on Wednesday that Iran had sought visas for 124 people to assist its delegation to the United Nations conference and that the State Department had denied around 40 for people with connections to the Revolutionary Guards, which the administration designated as a terrorist organization in April.

American and Saudi officials will probably find it hard to persuade other nations to take strong action on Iran, whose economy is suffering under severe sanctions imposed by Mr. Trump. Other governments say that Mr. Trump set off the current

conflict by withdrawing the United States from a 2015 agreement to prevent Iran from developing a nuclear weapon, and by reimposing sanctions.

The Trump administration took its harshest actions involving sanctions in May when it ended exceptions it had granted eight governments to buy Iranian oil. That meant China, India, Japan, South Korea, and Turkey — the five governments that used the exceptions — had to comply with oil sanctions. Though China still imports some oil from Iran, the end of the exceptions led to a sharp drop in revenue for Iran.

Iran responded by breaching limits on its nuclear program set by the 2015 agreement, even though American intelligence officials and foreign officials had said Tehran was adhering to the terms of the agreement. Analysts say the violence of the summer in the Gulf of Oman and the Persian Gulf, along with the Sept. 14 attack in Saudi Arabia, were also direct results of the American actions.

“Iran is fighting back, and now we have a major threat to global oil markets, not to mention Iran’s walk back from nuclear commitments,” said Dalia Dassa Kaye, an Iran expert at the RAND Corporation, a research group based in the United States. “It’s at times like these when the United States needs allies, but Trump’s policies have left us with few good options.”

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