Secretary Michael R. Pompeo Statement on Iran

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U.S. Department of State

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SECRETARY POMPEO: Good afternoon, everyone. Just a few minutes ago, I delivered letters to both the UN Secretary-General Guterres and to the president of the Security Council.

I notified them that the United States is initiating the restoration of virtually all UN sanctions on Iran lifted under UN Security Council Resolution 2231. This process will lead to those sanctions coming back into effect 30 days from today.

Our message is very, very simple: the United States will never allow the world’s largest state sponsor of terrorism to freely buy and sell planes, tanks, missiles, and other kinds of conventional weapons. These UN sanctions will continue the arms embargo.

I’m pleased to say, too, that these restored sanctions will also reimpose accountability for other forms of Iranian malign activity that the authors of the nuclear deal foolishly downplayed. Iran will be again prohibited from ballistic missile testing. Iran will be back under sanctions for ongoing nuclear activities – such as the enrichment of nuclear material – that could be applied to a nuclear weapons program.

This is happening, of course, at a moment when Iran is refusing to allow the IAEA to inspect sites suspected of undeclared nuclear activity, that were formerly part of Iran’s nuclear weapons program.

President Trump and this administration have discarded the fiction that the regime merely seeks a peaceful nuclear program. We will never allow the Islamic Republic of Iran to have a nuclear weapon.

Our actions today too should come as no surprise to anyone. Our team has made every diplomatic effort over now almost two years to renew this arms embargo. I want to thank the Dominican Republic for standing with us in this effort.

Our friends in Germany, France, and the United Kingdom – the E3 – all told me privately that they don’t want the arms embargo lifted either.

And yet today, in the end, they provided no alternatives, no options. No country but the United States had the courage and conviction to put forward a resolution. Instead, they chose to side with ayatollahs. Their actions endanger the people of Iraq, of Yemen, of Lebanon, of Syria – and indeed, their own citizens as well.

In stark contrast, the Gulf Cooperation Council nations deserve praise for showing courage and unity in warning about the danger from Iran.

Two weeks ago, Bahrain, Kuwait, Oman, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, and the United Arab Emirates sent a letter to the Security Council urging a renewal of the arms embargo before it expired in October.

As Iran’s neighbors, they know better than anyone else the havoc that Iran could create with these weapons. Look, the world – and especially our European friends on the Security Council – should have heeded their words.

America won’t join in this failure of leadership. America will not appease. America will lead.

The leadership begins with recognizing the Islamic Republic of Iran for what it truly is: a theocratic, revolutionary, brutish regime that will not voluntarily seek peace or make life better for the Iranian people.

The one-sided, foolish nuclear deal didn’t bring security for America, it didn’t bring stability to the Middle East, nor did it moderate the regime’s behavior – and it never can. It never will.

Today’s actions puts additional pressure Iran to behave like a normal country, and to come back to the bargaining table.

We call on the international community to join us in crafting a stronger deal that addresses the full range of Iran’s malign behavior, and protects people of all nations that simply want to live free from Iranian predation.

Thank you. Happy to take a few questions.

MS ORTAGUS: Let’s go start with Reuters.

QUESTION: Thank you, Mr. Secretary. Michelle Nichols from Reuters. As you just mentioned, this process can take up to 30 days, unless someone puts a resolution forward beforehand to extend the sanctions relief on Iran. Has the United States asked the Dominican Republic to do this so you can veto that, or are you considering putting forward that resolution yourself to veto? And on Europe, the – your European colleagues have just put out a statement saying they can’t support this move. Russia has said this is nonexistent. What’s your message to Russia, China, and other countries who may not reimpose sanctions on Iran after 30 days?

SECRETARY POMPEO: Well, as for the process, we’re confident that a resolution will be introduced. It’s required under Security Council Resolution 2231, and we spoke with the president of the council about that today. We’re confident that that will happen.

As for decisions that other nations make, they’re sovereign countries; they get to make their own choices. But make no mistake about it: It is an enormous mistake not to extend this arms embargo. It’s nuts, right? And I haven’t heard privately from any country that thinks it’s wise, except for perhaps from Iran. Everyone understands that this country – since 1985 alone, the Iranian regime has conducted terrorist operations across Europe. It’s hijacked commercial jets; its bombings murdered innocent Europeans. It’s conducted assassinations of dissidents in Europe, plots to blow up Jewish synagogues. This is all in Europe by the Iranians. Does it make any sense for them to have more weapons?

But we should not forget that just this year they took down a commercial airliner. This is not a nation that is capable of or trustworthy to be able to buy and sell weapon systems. And so I just urge the whole world to unite. We have every capacity under 2231 to do this, and we’ll continue this effort. We’re going to make sure that this arms embargo doesn’t come back in place.

QUESTION: So you’re expecting Indonesia to put forward that resolution to extend —

SECRETARY POMPEO: The resolution’s going to come forward.

MS ORTAGUS: Wait. Let’s go right here.

QUESTION: Thank you. David Wainer from Bloomberg. Secretary of State, what can you —

SECRETARY POMPEO: I can barely hear you. If you could speak up just a bit, sir.

QUESTION: Can you – sorry, it’s the mask. Can you hear me now?

SECRETARY POMPEO: Thank you, yes.

QUESTION: If China and Russia begin to sell weapons to Iran when the arms embargo expires, what action specifically can the United States take to stop them? Thank you.

SECRETARY POMPEO: Well, we never get out in front of a decision the President may or may not make. But you just need look no further than the history of the last two and a half years. When the U.S. sanctions were violated, we enforced them. When UN sanctions are violated, we’re going to do everything we can to enforce them as well.

MS ORTAGUS: Let’s go (inaudible).

QUESTION: Hi. Valeria Robecco from ANSA News Agency. Mr. Secretary of State, when like diplomats and others from some countries say that the process of the snapback is difficult and is difficult to happen, what does they mean? They mean because like the U.S. are not in the deal anymore? So do you think they – do you agree with that? Of course not, but why?

SECRETARY POMPEO: Yeah. So you need to be a little more precise, and you should ask them to be a little more precise. When you say they’re not in the deal anymore, what do you mean?

QUESTION: Well, that the U.S. like withdraw from the nuclear deal in 2018.

SECRETARY POMPEO: Yes. Yes, yes.

QUESTION: That’s the position of the countries saying you know – but I know that you —

SECRETARY POMPEO: Yes. So this much is accurate. The President in May of 2018 made a decision that we would no longer comply with the political commitments attached to the JCPOA. But go read paragraphs 10 through 12 of the 2231. They are completely separate. We provided no notice to the UN, right, when we withdrew, because it wouldn’t have made any sense to provide notice. 2231 is completely independent.

Indeed, I thought it’d be worthy to take just a moment to read you what the State Department – the United States State Department told me when I was a member of Congress back in 2015. I asked this very question. I knew I’d be here five years from now. I’m kidding. (Laughter.)

Here’s what they told me when I asked this very question five years ago. They knew this day would come. Here’s what they said. This is written – this signed by the Assistant Secretary of Legislative Affairs at the State Department dated November 19th of 2015. It said everything – this is the Obama-Kerry-Biden State Department. They said the following. They said: “Everything in the JCPOA and its annexes are commitments Iran made, and must keep, to remain in compliance. If Iran breaks these commitments, [the United States] can snap back both unilateral and UN sanctions.”

This – look, just, it’s important to emphasize this. 2231 gave every one of the participant states the right to execute snapback unconditionally. There are other nations that are not in compliance with the JCPOA today as well. They would have the right to conduct snapback as well. It’s written; it’s plain. It’s very straightforward. I know the Russians and the Chinese will try and obfuscate; they’ll use their disinformation tactics.

But just read the plain text of the document. It’s not the case that a political agreement arranged by a group of parties, including the United States, can undo the amazing work of the UN Security Council. No resolution can be altered unilaterally by any country – not by Iran, not by Russia, not China, nor by the United States. Security Council resolutions can only be changed by subsequent Security Council resolutions.

And so we think this is really straightforward. We think this is very simple. These UN Security Council resolutions will come back into place 31 days from now and the United States will vigorously enforce them.

MODERATOR: The lady in the front.

QUESTION: Mr. Secretary, is there anything that would make you to change your mind to actually withdraw the request? And what do you think of the Russia’s proposal for a summit to convene and to actually avoid a confrontation? Thank you.

SECRETARY POMPEO: So there’s no confrontation here, so there’s no – there’s no need to avoid any confrontation. This is straightforward. We stand here at the United Nations. The UN Security Council has withstood lots of difficult times. This is easy. This Security Council resolution is very plain, very simple, very straightforward. We know precisely how it will proceed, and so there’s – it’s not a matter for anger or frustration; it’s just we’ll follow the rules of the UN Security Council and that will lead to the sanctions being re-imposed 31 days from now.

As for things that would cause us to change our mind, if we could get to a place where we got a full-on agreement with the Islamic Republic of Iran to behave like a normal nation and live up to the commitments we’ve asked for, we have been prepared to have that conversation for a long time. Were we able to achieve that, we would consider withdrawing this. I think it’s unlikely in the 31 days between here and there, but, as a diplomat, I always live in hope.

MODERATOR: Let’s do the gentleman next to her, and then we’ll go – we’ll go up top next.

QUESTION: Thank you. Mr. Secretary, do you think you will have a different support from what you had last week when your draft resolution was voted on in the Council? Did any other members in the Council promise to support your process? And you mentioned your European partners, maybe they say privately a different —

SECRETARY POMPEO: “Thank you.” Right, they say, “Thank you.”

QUESTION: — statement from what they say publicly.

SECRETARY POMPEO: “Thanks for doing this, America. We appreciate it.” Yes, that’s what they say. Yeah.

What’s your question?

QUESTION: So do you expect different support from the Council members from what you had last week?

SECRETARY POMPEO: Yes, we do. We suspect – we expect every UN member to comply with their obligations under the Security Council resolution. We have every confidence that when these sanctions snap back that every nation will execute them. That’s your obligation as a member of the United Nations to do that, and we have every expectation that every Security Council member will do that.

MODERATOR: This gentleman up here.

QUESTION: Thank you very – thank you very much, sir. Mr. Secretary of State, can you walk us – it’s less than two months from the 18th of October. Can you walk us through the timeline where you think these sanctions will be restored on Iran before October 18th? And if on the 19th of October you’ve found that companies and banks from Russia and China are dealing with Iran regardless, are you willing to sanction them?

SECRETARY POMPEO: So the answer to the second question is we’ve been consistent throughout this entire process. Once the President made the decision back in May of 2018, we put U.S. sanctions in place and we’ve done our level best to enforce them. We’ve been pretty effective. I remember some of the commentary, maybe from some of you, that said U.S. sanctions alone won’t be successful. I would argue that today Hizballah is in a much worse place, that the militias inside of Iraq that are run and controlled by the Iranians have fewer dollars, that Iran has less capacity in Syria today, all because of the U.S. sanctions and our enforcement efforts.

So I think we’ve been enormously successful. We will continue to enforce the sanctions after these UN Security Council resolutions come back in place. We’ve done it already. We’ve already gone after entities that violated the Iranian sanctions regime. It doesn’t – the country is immaterial. If they’re in violation of these sanctions, we’ll do our level best to enforce them. It’s our – it will become our obligation as a member of the UN in the same way it’s been our obligation to enforce UN – U.S. sanctions alone.

QUESTION: And the timeline?

SECRETARY POMPEO: It’ll come back within the next 31 days.

QUESTION: Okay, thank you.

MODERATOR: The lady —

SECRETARY POMPEO: I’ll take one more.

MODERATOR: Okay. The lady in the green skirt.

QUESTION: Thank you, Mr. Secretary. So my question to you – I just want first to clarify something you said about the fact that you only drew out of the JCPOA, or if politically – can you explain that, please? And also, isn’t your own sanctions that you imposed on Iran after 2018, May 2018 – don’t they go against the Security Council Resolution 2231 because – thank you.

SECRETARY POMPEO: So the agreement that – the nuclear deal, the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action, the JCPOA, is – wasn’t a treaty; it wasn’t ratified by the United States Senate or the legislatures of other nations. It was just a political agreement made amongst the leaders. The commitments that each entered into were mutual. The Iranians are not in compliance with the political commitments that they made, today, and President Rouhani says that the E3 is not in compliance either. He says that they haven’t lived up, says that the Germans, the French, and the United Kingdom hasn’t lived up to their commitments under the JCPOA as well. They may well be in noncompliance, I suppose.

Those are a set of political agreements. Those are far and separate and apart from UN Security Council Resolution 2231. UN Security Council Resolution 2231 is very plain. It says this set of states has the right to execute snapback. There – it’s not conditioned on any other activity. It doesn’t require compliance. It just says these countries can execute snapback. It’s very plain. It’s very simple. It does – and by the way, the UN is really good at drafting documents when they want to condition them. If it wanted to say you may execute snapback if and only if, and place the condition, it knows full well how to do that. It didn’t choose to do it. It didn’t do it for a reason. It didn’t do it for a reason. It wanted to make plain that any nation that found that Iran was not in compliance would have the capacity to do precisely what it is the United States did today. That’s what – that’s what we did. We followed the rules of UN Security Council Resolution 2231 and we have every expectation that the Security Council will do its part as well.

Thank you all very much for being with me. Have a good day.