
Briefing with Senior State Department Officials on Diplomacy to Constrain Iran's Nuclear Program

SPECIAL BRIEFING

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MODERATOR: Thanks very much, and thanks to everyone for joining the call on fairly short notice. As you probably saw, we issued a very short statement from me just a moment ago, and we wanted to take a moment to offer some context around that statement. And to do so, we have two speakers on this call, which will be conducted on background. You can attribute what you hear to State Department officials. But for your awareness only, our two speakers are [Senior State Department Official One]; we also have with us [Senior State Department Official Two]. Again, both will be identified as State Department officials.

The contents of this call will be embargoed until the conclusion of the call, and we will take questions after [Senior State Department Official One] and [Senior State Department Official Two] have a moment to offer some initial thoughts. So with that, I will turn it over to our first official. Go ahead.

SENIOR STATE DEPARTMENT OFFICIAL ONE: Hi, thanks for joining us. So let me just say a few words about some of the things – the developments of the day. And from the outset, President Biden, even candidate Biden, has said that he is committed to resuming a American multilateral diplomatic role in trying to resolve the issues that we have with Iran, and that among those goals was going to be to see whether we could get to a situation where Iran is back in compliance with the JCPOA and the U.S. is back in compliance with the JCPOA, and use that as a platform to then negotiate a longer, stronger deal, and also to deal with some of the regional security concerns that we have and that our partners in the region have.

And today, I think we've seen some of the logical steps in implementing and even materializing that commitment. First, Secretary Blinken met with his E3 counterparts, and I think what is among the most significant outcomes was – and a joint statement is probably the first time in a long time that – in several years that the U.S. and its E3 allies were able to come together and produce a joint statement, a unified vision on how to address the Iran nuclear issue.

And I think it was clear that we're on the same page in saying that we're prepared to come back to talks to get back into compliance if Iran will get back into compliance; and also calling collectively on Iran not to take the steps that it is threatening to take February 23rd in terms of no longer implementing the Additional Protocol and reducing or ending some of the JCPOA verification mechanisms; and saying that it would be a mistake to take – at a time when there's an opportunity to move forward, for Iran to take a step that is decidedly moving backwards; and also, a consensus on the part of all four of us that if we can get back into the – back to the JCPOA, that should be a step on which we should build to both, as I said, strengthen and lengthen the deal and address some of the regional issues of concern. And of course, Iran would bring its concerns to the table.

In the wake of that joint statement, the EU political director in a tweet said that he would be ready as a convener of the joint commission of the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action to convene a meeting of the – informal meeting of the P5+1 and Iran to talk about the way forward in terms of Iran's nuclear program and dealing with Iran's nuclear program. And the State Department issued a response saying that, if invited, we would be there and we'd be prepared – I mean, now I'm – this is not in the statement, but the goal of coming together would be to sit down and to see – start what could be a prolonged path of trying to get back to a situation where both the U.S. and Iran were back into compliance. But that's not going to happen without a meeting, and therefore we'd be prepared to sit down and talk about what are the steps that need to be taken to get back to that point, and then, as I said, build on that to broaden and strengthen the deal.

So that's what today was about. It's about taking diplomatic steps to see whether we can get to the point that President Biden has said he was committed to for years now. And some other diplomatic steps were also taken today, and for that I would turn to my colleague.

SENIOR STATE DEPARTMENT OFFICIAL TWO: Great, thank you, and I'll be very brief before we get to your questions. Just a couple actions up in New York today related to Iran that we would like to highlight as well. The acting representative of the United States to the United Nations, Ambassador Mills, submitted a letter today to the United Kingdom's permanent representative to the United Nations in her capacity as president of the UN Security Council for the month of February reversing the previous administration's position on the UN Security Council Iran sanctions snapback issue. In so doing, the United States is affirming that UN Security Council Resolution 2231 remains in full effect. And that letter was circulated to the full Security Council and has now taken effect.

Separately, the U.S. Mission to the United Nations up in New York has notified the Iranian mission that the United States is bringing the domestic travel controls on Iranian representatives back in line with those in place for several other missions to the UN. So essentially, returning to the status quo of the last few years before the last administration.

Today's actions return our longstanding posture with regard to Iran at the UN and, in our view, will strengthen our ability to work with allies and partners in the UN Security Council to address Iran's nuclear program and other destabilizing activities.

I'll stop there, and with that, happy to take your questions.

MODERATOR: Great. Thanks very much to both of you. Operator, if you want to repeat one more time the instructions for asking questions, then we'll take our first question.

OPERATOR: Certainly, [Moderator:] If you'd like to ask a question, please press 1 and then 0 on your telephone keypad. You may withdraw your question at any time by repeating the 1-0 command. If using a speakerphone, please pick up the handset before pressing the numbers. Once again, if you have a question, press 1 and then 0 at this time.

MODERATOR: All right, we'll start with the line of Nick Schiffrin from PBS.

QUESTION: [Inaudible] in substance. These are significant announcements and a shift from what you've been saying, but we're doing this in a background call. I just noticed that the Secretary just put out a tweet about a totally different topic, and the EU political director, with all due respect to him, is not the most senior official. So I wanted to know what the style of how this is being made says about what you're trying to say through the style.

And on substance, do you believe this should be enough to prevent Iran from following – from following through on its threat to evict inspectors on Sunday, because it does not meet Iran's threshold of the U.S. coming back into compliance that it demanded before Sunday? Thanks.

SENIOR STATE DEPARTMENT OFFICIAL ONE: So let me take those, Nick. Well, first of all, the style, how it was made – listen, I think we recognize that this is just a very first initial step to say that we are prepared to attend the meeting that would be convened by the EU. We recognize that that's not in and of itself a breakthrough. Even the first meeting itself may not be a breakthrough. So we're not going to hype it for what it isn't, but it is a step. Until we sit down and talk, nothing's going to happen. It doesn't mean that when we sit down and talk we're going to succeed, but we do know that if we don't take that step, the situation's just going to go from bad to worse. So I think the style of this, as you said, I think is reflecting – reflective of the fact that it's a meaningful step, but we recognize that it's just one of many that are going to have to be taken by all sides if we're going to get to where we say we want to go.

On whether this is – would be enough to prevent Iran to – not to take its step, frankly, that was not part of the calculation. I think President Biden wasn't particularly eager or in the mode of trying to take unilateral steps to try to prevent Iran from doing what it shouldn't do in the first place. So these are steps that we took because we felt they were the right steps in order to resume diplomacy, whether the steps that my colleague mentioned or the steps that were – or the joint statement with the E3 or our expressed willingness to sit down with Iran and the P5+1, which are all the right steps in order to get back to diplomacy.

I think it will be up to Iran to decide whether it wants to take its own step, which will be viewed in this context as moving backwards, as a step in the wrong direction when we're indicating and I think others are indicating that they are willing to move forward.

So Iran will make its own decision. I think it would be – I think we're not alone and that the E3 feel the same, that it would be a dangerous step if they were further eroding not just the JCPOA but sort of the architecture of the nonproliferation arrangements by diminishing the ability of the IAEA to know what they're doing. So – but this was not done in a sort of a – in a – with the intent or the – or calculated in order to see whether we could measure what we needed to do to get them to stop. We hope they won't do it because we think it would be a mistake, but these steps are steps that we're taking because we think they're the right ones.

MODERATOR: Thanks very much. We'll go to the line of Andrea Mitchell, please.

OPERATOR: One moment.

QUESTION: [Inaudible] that they are willing to take any steps, including some of the issues that were raised in the statement released by the E3 today –

MODERATOR: Andrea, I'm sorry to interrupt. We missed the first part of your question. Could – do you mind just starting over?

QUESTION: No, I'm so sorry. Is there any indication from Tehran that they are willing to take any steps, including some of the issues that were raised by the E3 in their statement today, such as the processing of uranium fuel and metals, to get back into compliance before you resume or as you resume negotiations, in addition to not taking these next threatening steps?

SENIOR STATE DEPARTMENT OFFICIAL ONE: So I think the notion that either side is going to take steps in anticipation of the meeting or as a sort of down payment before the meeting, I think that's probably not realistic. I know President Biden doesn't think that the United States should take steps simply for the – as an entry ticket to get back to the table with Iran. Getting back to the table is where we will discuss all these issues, including the ones that we and the E3 have asked Iran to reverse. And as we know, Iran has made a number of requests about the U.S. and its sanctions. So – but we're not going to resolve it unilaterally. We're not going to resolve these in a vacuum. We're not going to resolve it by assuming that one side is going to take steps on its own.

The only way this is going to happen – if it's going to happen – I assume this is going to be a painstaking and difficult process that's going to take some time for it to see whether both sides agree on what they will define as compliance or compliance. What does it mean? What's the sequence? What steps does the U.S. have to take? What steps does Iran have to take? That's not – that doesn't – it's not something that is sort of preordained. It's going to involve getting together and talking about those, which is why the EU invitation is important and why we said that we would be prepared to go if, in fact, the EU were able to organize such a meeting.

MODERATOR: We'll go to Anne Gearan, *Washington Post*.

QUESTION: [Inaudible] answer, [Senior State Department Official One]. When you said that President Biden doesn't believe the U.S. should take steps just to get back to the table, does that close off some of these sort of creative solutions that various people have come up with – the IMF loan, different ways that Iran could get a cash infusion in the short term, ways to – or ways for Iran to get rid of excess uranium, which would require new waivers? Are those steps and things like it potential things to talk about at this meeting, or do you close those off ahead of time?

SENIOR STATE DEPARTMENT OFFICIAL ONE: No, just to be clear, I think all kinds of things could be discussed at the table. That's why we thought it would – was a good idea when the EU proposed – said that they were ready to invite. We thought, now, this is the right next step, is to sit down to talk about all these issues.

I think the Iranians have the expectation and the desire that the U.S. would take these steps in anticipation of any meeting, sort of as a prerequisite to or as a down payment, if you will. And I think the President's view, the Secretary's view, is we're prepared to talk about all these things, but let's talk about them to work through them together, to see what we would need to do and what they would need to do in order to get back to the point where we're both in compliance. So nothing is off the table in that sense. We want to sit down and see what it is that we could work out together, together with the other P5+1 members.

So yeah, that's my answer. Just that it's not steps that we are considering taking sort of now unilaterally. We think they're the kind of steps that we should talk about and see whether we could reach an understanding about what gets done.

MODERATOR: We'll go to the line of Shaun Tandon.

OPERATOR: Just one moment. Your line is open, sir.

QUESTION: Sure, thanks. Straightforward question: Do you have any indications whether Iran will agree to a meeting? And have you had any informal consultations in any way with the Iranians so far, "so far" meaning since the new administration took office? Thanks.

SENIOR STATE DEPARTMENT OFFICIAL ONE: So, I think as we've said, we have consulted broadly with all sides. I'm not going to get into sort of the logistics of exactly who we spoke to, but I have to say, no, we don't have an indication of whether Iran will agree to a meeting. They've said that they want – they would go back into compliance if we did too, the mirror image of what we've said. Unless – if they think that that could happen simply by both sides separately taking steps, I think that would be unrealistic. So if they genuinely mean what they say, which is that they are prepared to reverse their steps if the U.S. gets back in compliance with the JCPOA, then it's hard to see how that can be done without sitting down. It will be up to them to decide what they do, but I think it would be sort of both unfortunate and at odds with their stated view that they want to come back if we come back. That's not going to happen simply by one side telling the other one what to do. It's going to happen if we sit down together.

So we'll find out, I assume, in the coming days whether they are prepared to join a meeting that the EU would convene. And of course, our hope is that they would, but we'll just have to wait and see.

MODERATOR: Take a couple final questions here. Christina Ruffini, go ahead.

QUESTION: [Inaudible] colleagues got a couple of mine, but just very simply, through the timeline for the meeting, a location in person or virtual, any other details you could provide would be great. Thank you, guys.

SENIOR STATE DEPARTMENT OFFICIAL ONE: So really, that's not up to us; it's up to the EU. And I think all we've seen today is a first indication – the first that we've seen since President Biden has been in office that the EU thinks that the conditions are ready, that they are ready to invite the parties to talk. So timing I don't know, and location I don't know. What I can say it would not be at the ministers level; it would be at the political directors level. So in our case, it would be – well, in our case, it would be the special envoy for Iran and others would – it would be at political directors level. But beyond that, we don't have any – it's not up to us, and so we don't know about either the timing or the location.

MODERATOR: We'll go to Matt Lee of the AP.

QUESTION: Thank you, guys, very much for doing this. A couple really, really brief ones. One, because back in September when the Trump administration said that it had invoked snapback, basically the rest of the world said, "Well, no you didn't." So is there any practical effect to the decision that you made today in terms of what the UN has – how the UN has been treating this?

And secondly, on the travel restrictions of the UN, does this mean now – when you say that they go back to the others, they're kind of like the North Korean ones where they're allowed to travel within that 25-mile radius of the UN, is that correct? Because as I recall, the Trump administration's restrictions basically limited them to going to the UN and to their mission, and that was about it.

SENIOR STATE DEPARTMENT OFFICIAL TWO: Yeah, let me just say a couple words about that. On the travel restrictions, the idea here is to take steps to remove unnecessary obstacles to multilateral diplomacy by indicating the restrictions on domestic travel. Those had been extremely restrictive, as you just indicated, and essentially this just reverses the last administration's imposition of those additional travel restrictions and returns the domestic travel controls on Iranian representatives back in line with those of several other missions to the UN. And that's just a return to our longstanding posture that we've had with regard to the domestic travel of Iranian representatives at the UN.

On snapback, snapback was designed to help ensure that Iran performed its commitments under the JCPOA. And as your question indicated, no other member of the UN Security Council agreed that the previously terminated provisions of prior resolutions had snapped back last September, despite the prior administration's position. So that essentially isolated the United States on the Security Council and in the UN system and weakened our ability to work with our allies and partners on the Security Council to address Iran's destabilizing activity. So by reversing this position, it basically puts us back in good stead with our allies and partners and strengthens our ability to engage other Security Council members on Iran, and work within the format of 2231 as we pursue the diplomacy that my colleague has been talking about.

MODERATOR: I'll try to impose on my colleagues for just a couple final questions given the demand. We'll go to – excuse me, Nick Wadhams. Go ahead.

OPERATOR: Just one moment. Your line is open, sir.

QUESTION: Hey, thank you, [Senior State Department Official One] and [Senior State Department Official Two], can you respond to the criticism that's already coming in from Republicans that you're essentially making concessions to Iran while their bad behavior continues and that you're only rewarding bad Iranian behavior with these decisions? Thank you.

SENIOR STATE DEPARTMENT OFFICIAL ONE: So I'll let my colleague talk about those decisions. I would – as a general matter, I'd say these are not concessions to Iran. These are concessions for common sense, talking to Iran to try to resolve the nuclear issue. I think we've seen what four years of maximum pressure and not talking to Iran have yielded: an accelerated Iranian nuclear program and a more aggressive Iranian posture in the region. And removing gratuitous counterproductive obstacles to diplomacy are not in the U.S. interest either, but I'll let my colleague address those.

SENIOR STATE DEPARTMENT OFFICIAL TWO: Not much more to add other than, again, this is a common-sense shift that would allow us to effectively use the UN Security Council to address Iran's nuclear program. So this is about getting back to diplomacy, as my colleague was talking about, but also making sure that we can work effectively in the UN system. When we're outvoted 14 to 1, it's very hard for us to work effectively in the Security Council. This gets us back into a position where we can work within that framework and work with our closest allies in particular on addressing our concerns with Iran going forward.

MODERATOR: We'll go to Michele Kelemen, please.

QUESTION: Do you have me?

OPERATOR: Yes, ma'am.

QUESTION: Okay, great. So, one, are Russia and China playing any kind of positive role here? What have your consultations been like with them? And then the statement with the EU mentioned hostages. Has the U.S. reached out to Iran on that subject separately? Are you working together with the EU on that? And do you see the Iranian mission at the UN as a place to have those kinds of talks?

SENIOR STATE DEPARTMENT OFFICIAL ONE: So, Michele, on Russia and China, they are – they say that they want to see Iran come back into compliance and the U.S. come back into compliance. They have also – they said – so the general posture has been positive. I think in terms of seeing whether the sides could take steps that are more productive than what's occurred in the past, we'll have to wait to see when we get to the table how that unfolds. They have taken the position that they wanted the U.S. to take some steps in advance, and we've told them that's – they shouldn't – we – the U.S. shouldn't need to take steps simply to get back to the table. Once we're back at the table, all these issues will be up for discussion.

So in the past, Russia and China during the JCPOA negotiations played a productive, constructive role because they didn't – they didn't have an interest in seeing Iran acquire a nuclear weapon and they didn't have an interest in seeing the conflict in the region. One would expect that those same interests are at play and that despite other serious differences we may have with them on other files, that and on this one we could work together.

On the hostages, I mean, that is a absolute priority for the President and for everyone who works for him. It's obviously outrageous that Iran would be playing with the lives of innocent Americans simply for the sake of seeking to extract other concessions from the U.S. And so we're going to be very firm and resolute in getting them out. We will have our way of reaching out to Iran on that issue, and I'll leave it at that.

MODERATOR: Well, thanks very much. Just a reminder this call was on background to State Department officials. The embargo is now lifted. We look forward to additional opportunities to speak to all of you about this and other issues in the coming days. Thanks very much to our speakers, and operator, we can conclude the call.

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