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Wendy Sherman

Iran Nuclear Deal Press Briefing

delivered 16 July 2015, Washington, D.C.



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Assistant Secretary Kirby: Good afternoon, everybody. As you all know, we have a special guest at our briefing today, Under Secretary Wendy Sherman. Before I introduce her, I want to note that Under Secretary Sherman just came from a briefing with Secretary Kerry for the diplomatic corps. We had over 200 D.C.-based ambassadors, deputy chiefs of mission, and other diplomats to join us for this briefing today, one of the highest attendance levels we've ever had for such a briefing. It lasted about an hour and was focused, obviously, on the Iran deal.

The international community came together to bring Iran to the negotiating table, so we want to make sure to keep all of our international partners informed as we move towards the implementation phase of the agreement. Under Secretary Sherman has been a key player throughout the nuclear talks with the EU, the P5+1, and Iran over the past 18 months, and there are few people in the U.S. Government, frankly the world, that have a better grasp of all the various technical nuclear sanctions-related and political issues that came together to get this deal.



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So we're lucky to have her with us today to talk through the outlines of the deal and to take your questions. She'll be with us for about 20 minutes. We'll try to get to as many questions as we can. I will be moderating and calling on you as we work through that. After that, after the under secretary leaves, I'll stay behind and finish up the daily briefing as we normally would.

With that, ma'am, I'll turn it over to you.

Under Secretary Sherman: Good to see you all. For some of you, I've missed you. It's been two days away from Vienna. I'm not quite sure what to do with myself. No more Coburg turkey schnitzel, Wiener schnitzel, chicken schnitzel, every kind of schnitzel you can imagine. They were very generous to us, but I am very glad to be home.

Though some of you spent 19 days in Vienna with us, I myself got to spend 27 days in Vienna, but our team of really extraordinary folks -- experts, diplomats, scientists -- who were part of the American negotiating team, many of them were there for well over a month. It's a group of the smartest, most committed, hardworking public servants I've ever seen. That we didn't kill each other living so closely with each other and stayed focused on the task at hand is really a comment on their professionalism and their understanding of the gravity of the task that we were undertaking.

They have spent the last 18 months and many, many months before that as well traveling the globe for these talks, to places like Baghdad, Almaty, Muscat, Moscow, Geneva, Vienna. They've missed birthdays, anniversaries, lived out of suitcases for weeks on end, given Woolite a new life. But more importantly, they spent every waking moment of the last several years poring over every single detail in what eventually became the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action. There is not a more impressive group of people or a better group of people I can imagine having taken this long journey with, and I hope that some of you will find out who they are and write about them, because they really are the unsung heroes of this undertaking. They just put their heads down and go about doing the work that brought us here.

We know there's already been much heated debate about the agreement we just concluded with Iran. As the President of the United States said yesterday, this debate should be robust.



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This is consequential what we have done. This issue is too important to do otherwise. But as we have in these debates, it is crucial that they are grounded in facts. That's why I'm happy to be speaking with you today and to take your questions about exactly what is in this agreement.

Put simply, we have always said that no deal is better than a bad deal and that we had to get a good deal and the right deal, and we believe that this is a very good deal. It fulfills the framework for a comprehensive deal that was reached in Lausanne and goes beyond that framework in several areas. It cuts off all of Iran's pathways to fissile material for a nuclear weapon; it ensures the vigorous inspections and transparency necessary to verify that Iran cannot pursue a nuclear weapon; it ensures that sanctions will snap back into place if Iran violates the deal; and it is a long-term deal, including elements that are permanent.

Going forward, we're going to continue to have robust conversations with United States Congress and our partners in Israel and the Gulf. Just today, Secretary Kerry had a lengthy conversation with Israeli Prime Minister Netanyahu about this agreement. And I spoke by secure phone yesterday with Israeli National Security Advisor Yossi Cohen and Minister Yuval Steinitz. I'm sure you all saw that Saudi Foreign Minister Adel Al-Jubeir was here meeting with the Secretary today as well. And finally, as John just mentioned, I came from a briefing that Secretary Kerry and I just did with the full diplomatic corps here in Washington. We had to hold it on the eighth floor in the Ben Franklin Room because it was the only place large enough to accommodate everybody who wanted to come.

This is an issue that was created by the world. It was created by the United Nations Security Council resolutions. It was solved by the world in the P5+1 and the European Union facilitating, and now will be endorsed in a UN Security Council resolution that was introduced by Ambassador Power yesterday and joined by the P5 and, we hope, by every member of the Security Council for passage -- we hope early next week. The world has worked hard to resolve this peacefully, and as we come to the 70th anniversary of the United Nations, it is fitting that, in fact, multilateral diplomacy can be shown to work.

So let me stop there and take your questions, and I'll bet you have one or two.

Question: Welcome home.



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Under Secretary Sherman: Thank you.

Question: Among the problems on the Hill for this deal potentially, Congressman McCaul today called on the Administration to not pursue the UN resolution until Congress has had its say some 60 days or approximately 60 days from now. Are you willing to hold off at the UN on the resolution that encompasses this agreement until Congress has had its vote? What would be the impact if you were to?

Under Secretary Sherman: Well, the way that the UN Security Council resolution is structured, there is an interim period of 60 to 90 days that I think will accommodate the congressional review. And it would have been a little difficult when all of the members of the P5+1 wanted to go to the United Nations to get an endorsement of this since it is a product of the United Nations process, for us to say, "Well, excuse me, the world, you should wait for the United States Congress."

So what we worked out is a process that allows this time and space for the congressional review before it takes effect. And there may be other legislatures who also want to look at this. So it anticipates that there is a period of review, while at the same time allowing the international community to speak.

Question: And could I follow to just ask you to give us a little bit of the tick-tock -- which has been reported, but if you could describe it being there -- of the final decisions that were being made on the UN resolution? What was in it, what was not in it, the midnight call to the President, just how that evolved -- in particular, regarding some of the sanctions on particular individuals such as General Soleimani being involved or not involved.

Under Secretary Sherman: Well, let me take that first. The Ghasem Soleimani who comes off in the first phase once, in fact, we get to it, was head of a uranium mine company. It is not Qasem Soleimani of the IRGC.

Question: But the IRGC Qasem Soleimani is involved at the latter end of the --

Under Secretary Sherman: He is on -- he is on the UN designations list at Phase 2, which is some years away. He would, in fact, if everybody complied, come off the UN's designation list,



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but he remains on the U.S. list and he remains on the U.S. list because of our counterterrorism sanctions, not just because of our nuclear-related sanctions. So from a U.S. perspective, Qasem Soleimani, the IRGC commander, will remain a designated individual. The UN list some years from now -- indeed he is on that designated list, and the UN designations at some point in the future will go away.

But the Ghasem Soleimani that comes off in Phase 1 is not that Qasem Soleimani, and as I'm told by the Iranians, is a very common name in Iran.

Question: But just to follow, is it a good thing for the General Soleimani to be taken off at any point given the allegations?

Under Secretary Sherman: Well, as I said, the United States has sanctions that designate him for his acts of state sponsorship of terrorism as we believe it to be. And so he remain -- will remain a designated individual. And the UN process is a separate one and is, in this situation, focused on nuclear-related activities.

Assistant Secretary Kirby: Next question.

Question: Thank you. I wanted to ask about --

Under Secretary Sherman: And I didn't finish the rest of Andrea's question, but I'll come back to it.

Question: Okay.

Under Secretary Sherman: Go ahead.

Question: I wanted to ask about the arms embargo issue --

Under Secretary Sherman: See, we'll come right back to it.

Question: -- because it seems to have come in -- under a lot of criticism. What was the reason for the United States agreeing to that given it's not really -- some would say it's not really a nuclear issue? And what was the point of putting a time frame on that?



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Under Secretary Sherman: So when 1929 was done, the arms embargo -- so it's called; it's not a true embargo -- but the arms restrictions sanctions and the missile restrictions, but particularly the arms, were really a consequence of Iran's behavior on the nuclear file and was meant as a further consequence to what it had done. But if you read 1929 carefully, it basically says that once Iran enters into a negotiated solution to show that its program is exclusively peaceful, one could read 1929 to mean that those sanctions should then come off.

However, we are all very concerned about Iran's activities in the region and around the world in terms of the import and export of arms. We are very concerned about the potential transfer of missile technology that might be designed for having the capability of being a delivery system for nuclear weapons. And even though Iran, China, Russia thought that these sanctions, these restrictions, should come off immediately, the rest of the P5+1 did not think they should come off immediately.

And so at the end of the day, we were able to negotiate that these restrictions would stay in place even though one could read 1929 to read that they should have technically come off. We kept them on. We kept them on under Article 41 of Chapter 7 of the UN Security Council resolutions, and we kept them on for some years -- the arms for five and missiles for eight.

Now, there are many other resolutions at the UN that cover Hizballah, that cover Syria, that cover Yemen, that impose continuing restrictions on Iran. We have our own unilateral sanctions that continue to impose restrictions because of their activities around the world that are connected to terrorism or human rights or other missile-related activity. So we think we actually negotiated a very tough consequence in this situation, given that not all of our partners were together. We also knew, because the partners were not together on this issue, that it would be an issue that would happen at the end and would not be resolved until the end, and that's what happened.

Question: Can I maybe just follow up? I mean, given those concerns you mentioned, obviously, in the region, when Secretary Kerry goes to talk to the GCC next month, what sort of assurances is he going to be able to offer them? What sort of practical support for their security?



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Under Secretary Sherman: Well, I think you all are well aware of the agenda of Camp David that was held some weeks ago that covered not only this agreement, but also how we can work together to deal with acts of terrorism in the region, to the instability in the region, to try to end the conflicts that are ongoing in the region. And there were a number of steps that came out of Camp David that were announced to all of you. The meeting at the beginning of August will be a follow-up to that.

There is a commitment, as the President said yesterday, as Secretary Kerry has said, as was mentioned in his meeting with Foreign Minister al-Jubeir today, that we are going to work as we always have in strong coalition to try to resolve the issues that are taking place in the Middle East; to resolve the ongoing conflict and state sponsorship of terrorism. These have not gone away. But the President, as he explained yesterday, made a very strategic decision that it was critical to take the threat of Iran having a nuclear weapon off the table so that we could focus all of our time, attention, resources, and coalition building to deal with the other issues in the region.

If Iran had a nuclear weapon, then its ability to have a deterrent, its ability to project power into the region would be more profound than anything we are facing today. Now, hopefully, that is off the table. We have a comprehensive, long-term, verifiable agreement that ensures that Iran's program will be exclusively peaceful. They will not obtain a nuclear weapon, and now we can focus our resources, our relationships on solving the other problems in the region. We always have; now it'll be easier to do so.

Question: Hi. Thank you so much for taking the time to do this.

Under Secretary Sherman: Sure.

Question: I want to clarify Andrea's first question about what the UN is doing. It's my understanding that that affects only UN sanctions and has no bearing on the independent U.S. sanctions having to do -- okay.

Under Secretary Sherman: Sure. Correct. Correct. The UN doesn't tell any sovereign state what that sovereign state can do in terms of under its own laws, so the U.S. sanctions are U.S. sanctions and the UN sanctions are UN sanctions.



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Assistant Secretary Kirby: Yes.

Question: The President said yesterday, essentially, that the American hostages did not come up because it would give the Iranians leverage on the nuclear issue and possibly lead to more concessions on the U.S. part. Who made that decision, and when was that made? Were the hostages -- did they ever come up in the talks directly, or was it only a sideline issue?

Under Secretary Sherman: Well, the Americans -- we probably legally would not call them hostages. Detainees.

Question: Sorry. Americans detained in Iran.

Under Secretary Sherman: Americans detained in Iran. And of course, Robert Levinson, who's been missing for some years, that we think the Iranians have some knowledge of. A decision was made a very long time ago that trying to get our Americans home should be a separate matter. And as I think most of you know, every time I see the Iranians, every time that Secretary Kerry sees the Iranians on the margins of the talks, we have a separate, independent conversation about the detained Americans. We also use our Swiss protecting power to help to look after the welfare of the Americans until we can get them home.

As the President said and said with all the force that I certainly would say, our focus of attention has always been, will continue to be, to do everything we possibly can to bring those Americans home. We have all talked to every family more than once. We are in constant touch with the families. They have a general sense of what we do in each of these conversations to try to move this forward and to bring them home. And for me personally, until they come home I don't believe the job is finished.

Question: One more question. What happens to the snapback policy on year 11? Does that expire after 10 years? And then how would you go about -- is it basically starting over? If you had to put sanctions back in place, would you be starting from square one?

Under Secretary Sherman: The P5 members have made a political decision and conveyed to the secretary-general of the United Nations that at the end of the termination of the 10-year UNSCR that they will introduce an additional resolution to put in place the same mechanism for an additional five years.



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Assistant Secretary Kirby: Said.

Question: Thank you. Thank you, John. Thank you for doing this. Today Foreign Secretary Philip Hammond in Israel said that, quote, "Israel wants a permanent state of standoff [and] I don't believe that's in the interest[s] of the region." Do you agree with that assessment?

Under Secretary Sherman: Well, I don't know what the quote was specifically and in what context. So read it to me again?

Question: He said that -- he was standing next to the Israeli prime minister and he said what Israel wanted, instead of negotiations in essence, is a permanent state of standoff, negotiating forever. Do you agree that's the Israeli position?

Under Secretary Sherman: Well, I don't know the context in which the foreign secretary said that. Let me talk about what we as Americans believe.

I completely understand and I spoke on the record to Israeli press today -- that's one of the many things I've done today -- and said that I certainly respect the prime minister's right as the head of his government to define what he believes is necessary for Israel's security.

At the same time, the United States and the President of the United States fundamentally believes that we will not do anything that would undermine Israel's security. President Obama has provided support for Israel beyond what any President has ever done, and we will continue to not only provide the support we currently do but to enhance that support to ensure Israel's security. It is something we feel is a solemn obligation to this really extraordinary democracy in the Middle East.

So we do hope that all Israelis read this agreement, that we have this debate based on facts, because the facts matter here. And we believe that the agreement we have reached will ensure the security not only for the United States and the world, but will also secure Israel's security.

Assistant Secretary Kirby: We have time for just one more.



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Question: Thank you. In the Iran nuclear talks, what's the impact on North Korean nuclear negotiations with these? Secondly, do you think the United States is still Six-Party Talk is necessary for the nuclear talks with North Korea?

Under Secretary Sherman: Well, you know as well as I do that every one of these situations *sui generis*; every one has its own characteristics and its own history. And so I think trying to make comparisons isn't terribly valuable.

The one thing I will say, and I would say to the North Koreans, is that this agreement demonstrates that one can come out of isolation, one can come out from under sanctions, one can become part of the world community or have the potential to become part of the world community and end isolation, and do so in a peaceful way. And I would hope that as this agreement goes forward and it is shown that all parties will comply, that Iran will keep its commitments and that sanctions lifting will then take place, that it perhaps might give North Korea second thoughts about the very dangerous path that it is currently pursuing.

Question: But the Six-Party Talks, you need to -- still need it for the region?

Under Secretary Sherman: Yes, I still think that the work that we are doing with partners in the region to try to move forward in a united front is critical. And I do think that the Iran agreement, the Iran Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action -- lawyers don't like us to call it an agreement -- is demonstration that multilateral diplomacy can work, and that United Nations actions have meaning if done in the right way and pursued in the right way and used as leverage in the right way. And now we have to implement this complicated, but I think really strong and durable agreement.

Thank you.

Assistant Secretary Kirby: Thank you, ma'am. Thanks, everybody.