

# Iran Announces It Will Ramp Up Nuclear Activities

Iran has announced its intention to begin withdrawing from parts of a 2015 nuclear agreement in 60 days. The decision could reduce the time needed to develop a nuclear weapon — if Iran chose to do so.

AILSA CHANG, HOST:

Iran announced today it would ramp up nuclear activities, activities that it had suspended under a landmark agreement it reached with the U.S. and other countries in 2015. The news comes a year to the day after President Trump pulled the U.S. out of the deal, which he has described as one of the worst deals in history.

(SOUNDBITE OF ARCHIVED RECORDING)

PRESIDENT DONALD TRUMP: The fact is this was a horrible, one-sided deal that should have never, ever been made.

CHANG: Joining me now to discuss what Iran's announcement means is NPR's Geoff Brumfiel. He covers science and security. Welcome.

GEOFF BRUMFIEL, BYLINE: Hi.

CHANG: All right. What has Iran said it is going to do at this point?

BRUMFIEL: Well, it's not pulling out of the deal. It's made that clear. What it said it's going to do is suspend participation in key parts of it. Specifically, it's going to start stockpiling some nuclear material, like uranium, above limits set by the deal. And it's going to suspend some of its commitments around enriching uranium and a nuclear reactor it's building. It's given 60 days for European nations and other partners to come up with some sort of economic benefit for it. And if that happens, it's going to reconsider.

CHANG: OK. So just remind us again, what is at the heart of this nuclear deal?

BRUMFIEL: Well, this nuclear deal is about limiting Iran's access to nuclear

materials. So in the run-up to the deal, Iran was enriching uranium using these machines called centrifuges. And it got really, really close to having the material it needed for a nuclear weapon. Within a matter of weeks, it could have sort of sprinted ahead and made a bomb if it wanted to. So the idea was to slow it down and to put safeguards in place like nuclear inspectors. Richard Johnson was at the State Department overseeing the implementation of this deal. He's now at the Nuclear Threat Initiative. And this is the way he sums it up.

RICHARD JOHNSON: The basic bargain was Iran restricts and rolls back its nuclear program under strict verification. And the United States, the European Union, rolls back sanctions pressure.

BRUMFIEL: And it worked. Iran currently needs about a year to make a nuclear bomb if it decided it wanted to. That was sort of the limit that the deal set, but that sanctions relief never really came through. President Trump got elected. He reimposed sanctions on oil, which was really hard on Iran. To date, they even imposed more sanctions on steel and other metals. So Iran's feeling frustrated.

CHANG: So it seemed like the deal was working. Why did President Trump think it was such a rotten deal?

BRUMFIEL: Basically, it comes down to what wasn't in the deal, so things like ballistic missiles that Iran's developing, its behavior throughout the region, you know, the Revolutionary Guards' activities in places like Yemen, Hezbollah, stuff like that.

CHANG: OK. So if Iran starts ramping up some of its nuclear activities as it's threatening to do, what kind of arsenal are we potentially looking at?

BRUMFIEL: Well, we're not looking at anything just yet. I mean, Iran has said its nuclear program is peaceful. It isn't, you know, trying to make a bomb. But what this is about is kind of narrowing that window back down so that if it decided it wanted to go to a bomb it could. Presumably, it'll stay at a year and it'll start to slide back to months and then maybe weeks again. But anything that happens, we're going to know because there are international inspectors on the ground in Iran. They even have remote monitoring set up in the facilities that Iran uses to enrich uranium. So they know right away if something's going on. So I think that, you know, we're looking at a shortening of that timeline. That's the real concern here.

CHANG: Is it fair to say, then, that the Iran nuclear deal is basically dead now, or could it be salvaged?

BRUMFIEL: No, it's definitely not dead. We have to see what the other partners in the deal, the European Union, China and Russia, decide to do if they can offer anything to Iran. Of course, it's a very tough situation for them because any companies that do business with Iran could face sanctions from the United States at this point. And we have to see what happens in Iran. There are some people who may want to wait this administration out, see what happens after the election in 2020. But there are definitely other hard-liners who feel that they've already given up too much.

CHANG: That's NPR's Geoff Brumfiel. Thanks, Geoff.

BRUMFIEL: Thank you.

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