Netanyahu tells Macron to take Trump seriously, fix Iran deal

French President Emmanuel Macron welcomes Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu in Paris. (photo credit: PHILIPPE WOJAZER / REUTERS)

PARIS – A day after President Donald Trump set an ultimatum to fix "disastrous flaws" in a deal curbing Iran's nuclear program, Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu told French President Emmanuel Macron in a phone call that "Trump's remarks should be taken seriously, and whoever wants to keep the nuclear deal would be wise to fix it."

According to a statement from Netanyahu's office, he also told Macron the free world should "strongly condemn the five crimes of the Iranian regime," listing "efforts to obtain nuclear weapons, developing ballistic missiles against UN Security Council resolutions, supporting terror, regional aggression," and "the cruel repression of Iranian citizens."

A senior US administration official said that Trump would not sign any more such waivers going forward – starting a 120-day clock for negotiations over what the White House describes as a supplemental accord with Europe that will impose new terms on Iran over its future nuclear work.

Russia – one of the parties to the Iran pact alongside the United States, China, France, Britain, Germany and the European Union – called Trump's comments "extremely negative."

While approving the waiver on US sanctions related to the nuclear deal, Washington announced other sanctions against 14 Iranian entities and people, including judiciary head Ayatollah Sadeq Larijani, a close ally of Iran's Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei.

Iran said on Saturday it would retaliate against new sanctions imposed by the United States Describing sanctions against Larijani as "hostile action," Iran's Foreign Ministry said the move "crossed all red lines of conduct in the international community and is a violation of international law and will surely be answered by a serious reaction of the Islamic Republic," state media reported.

It did not specify what any retaliation might involve.

Iran's Foreign Minister Mohammad Javad Zarif had earlier said on Twitter that the deal was "not renegotiable" and that Trump's move "amounts to desperate attempts to undermine a solid multilateral agreement."

Trump's move creates a deadline on talks over a nuclear deal the European Union says is working, and that it will not touch. Should Trump fail to issue future waivers, European entities and businesses will bear the brunt of secondary sanctions, creating a crisis in US-EU relations, in addition to whatever actions Tehran might take in response.

The senior official said that Trump seeks a multilateral deal negotiated without Iran at the table, but with European nations willing to set "triggers" for additional sanctions on Tehran upon the expiration of critical provisions of the 2015 accord.

The president is seeking an agreement that "never expires," and that "denies Iran all paths to a nuclear weapon forever – not for 10 years or any other shorter period of time," the senior official said, referring to controversial "sunset" clauses within the nuclear accord.

"I do want to stress also that this would not entail direct negotiations with the Iranians, this would be something the United States works out with our European partners only," the official added. "It would be an agreement amongst the United States and our European partners to reimpose multilateral sanctions should the Iranians surpass the new triggers that we would lay out."

Trump had come under heavy pressure from European allies to issue the sanctions waiver.

The US administration also said it hopes for an amendment to congressional legislation that imposes triggers on Iran of its own – and that for the first time characterizes Tehran's ballistic missile program as "inseparable" from its nuclear work, bringing with it harsh sanctions. The nuclear deal does not address Iran's ballistic missile program.

The US Treasury Department also announced 14 new sanctions designations on Iran, including against entities in its aviation sector, the Revolutionary Guards Corps cyber units and the head of Iran's judiciary.

Trump in October chose not to certify the country's compliance and warned he might ultimately terminate the accord. He accused Iran of "not living up to the spirit" of the agreement even though the International Atomic Energy Agency says Tehran is complying.

In a written statement, Trump said the following: "Today, I am waiving the application of certain nuclear sanctions, but only in order to secure our European allies' agreement to fix the terrible flaws of the Iran nuclear deal. This is a last chance. In the absence of such an agreement, the United States will not again waive sanctions in order to stay in the Iran nuclear deal. And if at any time I judge that such an agreement is not within reach, I will withdraw from the deal immediately.

"No one should doubt my word. I said I would not certify the nuclear deal – and I did not. I will also follow through on this pledge. I hereby call on key European countries to join with the United States in fixing significant flaws in the deal, countering Iranian aggression, and supporting the Iranian people. If other nations fail to act during this time, I will terminate our deal with Iran. Those who, for whatever reason, choose not to work with us will be siding with the Iranian regime's nuclear ambitions, and against the people of Iran and the peaceful nations of the world."

Reuters contributed to this report.

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