

U.S. won't like results if deal dies, Iran warns

The reaction of the international community would “not be pleasant” for the United States if President Donald Trump decides to withdraw from the Iran nuclear deal and reimpose sanctions on Tehran, Iranian Foreign Minister Mohammad Javad Zarif said Sunday.

In addition to U.S. isolation from the rest of the world, “Iran has many options and those options are not pleasant,” including “resuming at much greater speed our nuclear activities,” he said on CBS News’ *Face the Nation*.

A resumption, Zarif said, does not include developing nuclear weapons, because Iran “has never wanted to produce a bomb.” In recent weeks, Iranian officials have said that in the absence of the deal, they would feel free to install and operate thousands of new uranium centrifuges that could, in theory, produce weapons-grade material.

Mike Pompeo, Trump’s nominee for secretary of state, said in his confirmation hearing last week that Iran was not “racing to build a bomb” before the deal and that he did not expect it to do so if the agreement was terminated.

“So, they put sanctions on Iran at that time because we were not racing for a bomb, and now they want to reimpose sanctions on Iran because we are not racing for a bomb,” Zarif said. “It’s interesting.”

He added: “Obviously, the rest of the world cannot ask us to unilaterally and one-sidedly implement a deal that has already been broken.”

He repeated charges that it is the United States, not Iran, that has already violated the agreement, by using its dominant presence in the international financial community to “dissuade our economic partners from engaging with Iran.”

The nuclear deal, signed by France, Britain, Germany, Russia and China, in addition to the United States and Iran, restricts the quantity and quality of nuclear facilities Iran can have for use in a strictly peaceful power-production and

research program for a number of years, and imposes strict international monitoring.

Trump has said those restrictions are insufficient and that unless the deal can be “fixed,” he will refuse to sign an upcoming sanctions waiver that was part of the original agreement.

Trump also wants it to include new restrictions on Iranian development of ballistic missiles and on Iran’s expansionist activities in the region — issues that were not part of the nuclear deal. All six other signatories have rejected any changes in the document, although Britain, France and Germany have said they share U.S. concerns and are negotiating separate agreements with Washington that they hope will address Trump’s demands.

Zarif said side agreements would not resolve Iran’s complaints about U.S. failure to comply with its own obligations to facilitate foreign investment in Iran.

U.S. failure to stay in the agreement, he said, would send a message to North Korea and other countries engaged in negotiations with the United States “that you cannot reach an agreement with the United States ... and expect it to be observed.”

German Chancellor Angela Merkel defended the Iran nuclear deal in an interview with an Israeli TV channel, saying an imperfect deal is better than no deal and that her country will “watch very closely” to ensure it is being fulfilled.

Her comments were broadcast Sunday, ahead of a meeting in Washington this week with Trump. Separately, French President Emmanuel Macron, a fellow defender of the Iran deal, begins a state visit in the U.S. today.

Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu has vehemently opposed the agreement, saying it falls short of containing the nuclear ambitions of Iran, a declared foe of Israel.

Merkel told Israel TV’s Channel 10 that she can understand the “great worries in Israel, concerning what is emanating from Iran.”

“The issue on which we disagree is how we can best contain this,” she said. “Prime Minister Netanyahu believes that the nuclear deal with Iran does not provide the security Israel desires. We believe it’s better to have this agreement,

even if it is not perfect, than to have no agreement. We will continue to discuss this, but Germany will watch very closely to ensure that this agreement will be fulfilled.”

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Macron also urged Trump to stick with the Iranian nuclear accord, arguing there’s no “Plan B.”

Macron said on *Fox News Sunday* that he thinks the 2015 deal is imperfect, but asked, “What do you have as a better option?”

Zarif is on a visit to New York, where Iran maintains diplomatic representation to the United Nations, in advance of the May 12 deadline Trump has set for his decision on whether to reimpose economic sanctions that were lifted as part of the 2015 nuclear agreement.

TENSION OVER SYRIA

His trip also comes at a time of rising tensions in the Middle East, where Iran has expanded its activities in support of Syrian President Bashar Assad and of Hezbollah, the Lebanese militia whose fighters are aiding Assad in Syria’s civil war. Israeli warplanes have bombed Hezbollah and Syrian military installations, while Saudi Arabia and the United States claim Iran is aiding Houthi rebels in Yemen, leading many experts to warn of an escalating risk of regional war.

Asked about Assad’s use of chemical weapons, which led to a second U.S. airstrike in Syria earlier this month, Zarif countered that U.S. troops are illegally in Syria, while both Iran and Russia were invited there by the Assad government. While not directly addressing the question of chemical warfare, he switched the subject to U.S. weapons in Saudi Arabia that are “bombing Yemeni children to smithereens.”

The United States is “engaged actively in what amounts to war crimes. As far as chemical weapons are concerned, Iran has been a victim,” he said, referring to the Iran-Iraq war in the 1980s, in which then Iraqi leader Saddam Hussein, who received U.S. support, used chemicals against Iranians.

In the wide-ranging interview, Zarif also said his government is willing to meet

with the United States to discuss the fate of U.S. citizens imprisoned in Iran, provided Washington showed respect and treated Iran as a sovereign nation, rather than making “demands.”

“And if that approach led to change, then the United States would see a difference,” he said.

Three American-Iranian dual citizens are imprisoned there on what the United States has said are bogus charges. Another American, Robert Levinson, disappeared on a trip to Iran a decade ago. Iran has denied it is holding him and says it has no information about his fate.

Zarif said his country also wants the release of several Iranian citizens who have been convicted and imprisoned, largely for financial crimes and sanctions violations, in the United States.

A prisoner swap, he said, “is a possibility, certainly, from a humanitarian perspective, but it requires a change of attitude. ... You do not engage in negotiations by exercising disrespect for a country, for its people, for its government, by openly making claims, including this illusion about regime change. Then you do not leave much room for a genuine dialogue.”

In addition to an overall change of U.S. attitude, Zarif said, Iran is looking for “a change of language” from Trump, who has frequently denounced Iran’s religious leadership.

Other members of the administration and some lawmakers have called for regime change and military action against Iran.

Information for this article was contributed by Karen DeYoung of The Washington Post, and by Karin Laub and staff members of The Associated Press.

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