

Press Releases: Briefing on the Creation of the Iran Action Group

Special Briefing

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MR HOOK: I'd like to thank the Secretary. In May, the Secretary announced our new Iran strategy to protect America's national security, the security of our allies and partners, and to promote a brighter future for the Iranian people. And we have taken a comprehensive approach to Iran because the scope of Iranian malign activity is so wide-ranging, from its aspirations of nuclear weapons, its support for terrorism, its cyber activity, its proliferation of ballistic missiles, and much more. The Iran regime has been a force for instability and violence.

Our new strategy addresses all manifestations of the Iranian threat and the new Iran Action Group will be focused on implementing that strategy. We have an elite team of foreign affairs professionals here at the State Department and across the administration. The Iran Action Group will play a critical role in leading our efforts within the department and executing the President's Iran strategy across the interagency.

The administration will also build – continue to build the broadest level of international support for our strategy. Just yesterday, I was in London, meeting with senior officials from Germany, France, and the United Kingdom for productive discussions on Iran. We will continue to build on those areas where we are in agreement with our allies and partners around the world and we will work to find consensus on those areas where we are not.

I've worked on Iran throughout my career in foreign policy, beginning in 2006 on the UN Security Council, serving as an advisor to UN Ambassador Bolton. I thank Secretary Pompeo for this opportunity and the confidence he has placed in me and my colleagues to execute the strategy.

And I'm glad to answer a few questions.

QUESTION: So Brian –

MR GREENAN: Matt.

QUESTION: Yeah. This is three, but they're so brief it'll seem like just one. (Laughter.) You talk about an elite team. Can you tell us who else is part – or at least some of who else is going to be joining you? That's number one.

Two is what exactly is this – you envision this doing? Is it – does it have any resemblance to the Future of Iraq Project that was initiated many years ago with respect to a neighbor of Iran? And then lastly, it has been not – it has not gone unnoticed that this announcement is coming right at the 65th anniversary of the 1953 coup in Iran and has prompted lots of speculation about this being the formal group that is going to oversee some kind of – or try to oversee some kind of regime change. Can you dispel or confirm that speculation?

MR HOOK: Yes. Three questions, three brief answers. On number one: The Iran Action Group will launch with a core staff of several permanent personnel, and additional experts will be detailed from the department. The Secretary is committed to ensuring that the team has all necessary resources to do its job and to drive implementation of the new strategy. We want to be very closely synchronized with our allies and partners around the world. This team is committed to a strong, global effort to change the Iranian regime's behavior.

On the second question about –

QUESTION: But you don't have any specific names that you can offer us at the moment?

MR HOOK: Not yet.

QUESTION: Okay.

MR HOOK: For now we have a team that's assembled, and in time we'll be happy to talk about it.

QUESTION: (Inaudible) just a follow-up?

MR HOOK: He's got two more questions I've got to answer.

QUESTION: Okay.

MR HOOK: Number two: No connection. Number three: Pure coincidence.

QUESTION: That's it? Okay.

QUESTION: Thank you. Hi, Brian.

MR HOOK: Hi.

QUESTION: Do you believe that the U.S. should be talking to Iran right now? Is it the time? And is that going to be part of your brief, to try to get some kind of negotiation going and some direct talks with Tehran?

MR HOOK: Well, if the Iranian regime demonstrates a commitment to make fundamental changes in its behavior, then the President is prepared to engage in dialogue in order to find solutions. But the sanctions relief, the reestablishment of full diplomatic and commercial relations with the United States, and economic cooperation with the United States can only begin after we see that the Iranian regime is serious about changing its behavior.

And in the Secretary's speech in May, he outlined 12 requirements. These are the kinds of things that we would expect any normal nation to do. And a lot of our work is going to be built around advancing those 12 areas – mostly around nukes, terrorism, and the detention of American citizens arbitrarily detained.

MR GREENAN: We'll go to the back here. Michele Kelemen, NPR.

QUESTION: Hi. I'm wondering how you intend to make this a multilateral effort, given the fact that this administration has imposed tariffs on many of the countries that you need as partners and is re-imposing sanctions on companies that are doing business that's allowed under the JCPOA.

MR HOOK: No. Well, the purpose of the sanctions is simply to deny the Iranian regime revenues to finance terrorism. That's the purpose of maximum economic pressure. The point is not to create any rifts with other nations. But when you look at the kind of money that Iran provides to Assad and to Shia militias, to Lebanese Hizballah, it's billions and billions of dollars. And we need to get at drying up those revenue streams. And so that is the purpose of our maximum economic pressure campaign.

We have had teams from the State Department and the Treasury Department who've now visited, I want to say, 24 countries in most regions of the world. That work will continue in the coming months. And we have very good discussions with allies around the world, because when you look at the range of Iranian threats, especially around missiles and cyber, maritime aggression, terrorism, these are concerns of other nations. The United States is not alone in that regard. And I find that when we sit down and talk with other nations there are shared interests that we're able to pursue and we'll continue doing it.

MR GREENAN: Andrea.

QUESTION: Can you explain how you work with the quote "regime" when it's evidenced this week by the Ayatollah's speech criticizing Rouhani for even dealing with the United States and negotiating the nuclear deal? This is obviously not the same as dealing with North Korea, dealing with Moscow. This is a divided political system, and the repercussions of whatever may happen have to be dealt with accordingly.

MR HOOK: And?

QUESTION: And so how does – how do you expect, quote, "the regime" to change when there's so many disparate political forces, especially to –

MR HOOK: Well, the burden is – yeah. The burden is on the Iranian regime to change its behavior. The President has made clear that he is prepared to engage in dialogue with the regime. We have made it very clear about the kind of normal behavior that we would like to see from Iran. But as for the internal divisions within the regime and whether they want to talk to us, that's up to them. You'd have to ask them.

QUESTION: But don't you think that the policy – the withdrawal from the

nuclear deal and other policies – are actually making it more difficult to deal with President Rouhani because of criticism that he dealt with you in the first place – not you, but the previous administration?

MR HOOK: Yeah. I – the President decided to leave the Iran deal because it was a bad deal, and it didn't address the totality of Iranian threats – the sunset provisions, the weak inspections regime, the absence of ICBMs in the deal. And so the President makes decisions based on advancing America's national security interest. The Iran deal, as we inherited it, did not do that sufficiently. It did not address the broad range of Iranian threats. And now that we are out of the deal, we have a great – a lot more diplomatic freedom to pursue the entire range of Iran's threats.

MR GREENAN: Michelle Kosinski.

QUESTION: Thanks. Just a couple of weeks ago there was all this talk about meeting with Iran without preconditions, being willing to do so. So can you just clarify this now? You mention that Iran first needs to show that it's serious. Is that right? Before you will engage Iran they need to do something to show that they're serious? Like, what is the precondition, if any?

MR HOOK: Well, the President has spoken on this and so has the Secretary.

QUESTION: But it's never clear.

MR HOOK: Well, it's – we don't think it's unclear.

QUESTION: Okay. So –

MR HOOK: The Secretary has presented 12 areas where Iran needs to change its behavior. That is our strategy. And we have launched a campaign of maximum economic pressure and diplomatic isolation of Iran in order to advance those 12 requirements. The President has also said that he is prepared to talk with the Iranian regime, and those two things occur in a parallel track.

QUESTION: So do they need – but before that happens, Iran needs to show that they are serious about –

MR HOOK: I've said everything I can on the subject. These proceed in parallel tracks.

MR GREENAN: (Inaudible.)

QUESTION: So China has said that they don't plan to cut oil imports. In fact, they might even increase them. So I was wondering, what is your strategy as part of this group towards China?

MR HOOK: On China?

QUESTION: What kind of measures could you take to get China to comply? Or will you address – will you do anything to sanction them, I guess, if they continue to import oil from Iran or increase imports?

MR HOOK: Well, our goal is to reduce every country's import of Iranian oil to zero by November 4th, and we are prepared to work with countries that are reducing their imports on a case-by-case basis. As you know, those sanctions will come into effect on November 5th. Those will include sanctions on Iran's energy sector, transactions by foreign financial institutions with the Central Bank of Iran, Iran's shipping and shipbuilding sectors, among others. And the United States certainly hopes for full compliance by all nations in terms of not risking the threat of U.S. secondary sanctions if they continue with those transactions.

QUESTION: Thank you very much.

QUESTION: Is it clear –

MR HOOK: We can do one more.

QUESTION: Do you see other countries are in risk of violating U.S. financial sanctions?

MR HOOK: No, I'm saying that we then –

QUESTION: Third party –

MR HOOK: In our sanctions regime, yes, we will – we are prepared to impose secondary sanctions on regimes – I'm sorry, on other governments that continue this sort of trade with Iran.

QUESTION: So this is like the North Korea strategy?

MR HOOK: I'm only speaking about the Iran strategy.

Okay. Thank you.

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