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John Kerry

Opening Statement to Congress on Iran Nuclear Accord

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Well, Chairman Royce, Ranking Member Engel, and all the members of the committee, thank you very, very much. We genuinely appreciate the opportunity to be here to frankly clear up a lot of misinterpretation, some element of public distortion that exists out there. I know there's one ad I've seen on TV has at least three or four major absolutely, totally incorrect facts on which it bases the ad. And with all respect to both the chairman and the ranking member, there are conclusions that have been drawn that just don't, in fact, match with the reality of what this deal sets forth. And we happily, happily look forward to clarifying that in the course of this hearing. That's what it's all about, and we welcome the opportunity.

We are convinced that the plan that we have developed with five other nations accomplishes the task that President Obama set out, which is to close off the four pathways to a bomb. And I think as you listened to Ernie Moniz particularly on the technical components and see the whole deal, I really believe that that is a conclusion that everybody can come to. I'm not saying they will, but can.

I'm joined by, obviously, two cabinet secretaries. Both Ernie and Jack were absolutely critical to our ability to do this. The Treasury Department's knowledge of the sanctions and application of the sanctions has been exemplary, and they helped us understand the implications of all of these sanctions. And as Jack will let you know, we're not talking about 150 billion, we're not talking about 100 billion; we're actually talking about about 55 billion dollars that will go to Iran, and we'll go into that later.



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But from the day that our negotiations began, Mr. Chairman, we were crystal clear that we would not accept anything less than a good deal, one that would shut off all of those pathways towards fissile material for a nuclear weapon. And after 18 months of very intensive talks, the facts are pretty clear that the plan announced this month by six nations, in fact, accomplishes that. I might remind everybody, all of those other nations have nuclear power or nuclear weapons, and all of them are extremely knowledgeable in this challenge of proliferation.

So under the terms of this agreement, Iran has agreed to remove 98 percent of its stockpile of enriched uranium, dismantle two-thirds of its installed centrifuges, and destroy -- by filling it with concrete -- the existing core of its heavy water plutonium reactor.

Iran has agreed to refrain from producing or acquiring highly enriched uranium and weapons-grade plutonium for nuclear weapons forever. Now, how do we enforce or verify so that that is more than words, and particularly to speak to the ranking member's question what happens after 15 years, what happens is forever we have an extremely rigorous inspection verification regime, because Iran has agreed to accept and will ratify prior to the conclusion of the agreement and with -- if they don't it's a material breach of the agreement -- to ratify the Additional Protocol, which requires extensive access as well as significant additional transparency measures, including cradle-to-grave accountability for the country's uranium, from mining to milling through the centrifuge production to the waste for 25 years. Bottom line: If Iran fails to comply with the terms of our agreement, our intel community, our Energy Department which is responsible for nuclear weaponry, are absolutely clear that we will quickly know it and we will be able to respond accordingly with every option available to us today.

And when it comes to verification and monitoring, there is absolutely no sunset in this agreement -- not in 10 years, not in 15 years, not in 20 years, not in 25 years. No sunset ever.

Now remember, two years ago when we began these negotiations -- and a lot of people are kind of forgetting conveniently sort of where we are today. People are sitting there saying, "Oh, my gosh, in 15 years this is going to happen," or whatever, Iran's going to have the ability to be a capable nuclear power. Folks, when we began our negotiations, we faced an Iran that was already enriching uranium up to 20 percent. They already had a facility built in secret underground in a mountain that was rapidly stockpiling enriched uranium. When we began negotiations, they had enough enriched uranium for 10 to 12 bombs already. Already they had installed as many as 19,000 nuclear centrifuges, and they had nearly finished building a heavy water reactor that could produce weapons-grade plutonium at a rate of one to two bombs per year.

Experts put Iran's breakout time when we began -- which, remember, is not the old breakout time that we used to refer to in the context of arms control, which is the time to go have a weapon and be able to deploy it. Breakout time as we have applied it is extraordinarily conservative.



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It is the time it takes to have enough fissile material for one bomb, but for one potential bomb. It's not the amount of time to the bomb. So when we say they'll have one year to a certain amount of fissile material, they still have to go design the bomb, test, do a whole bunch of other things. And I think you would agree no nation is going to consider itself nuclear capable with one bomb.

So if this deal is rejected, folks -- by the way, we -- that -- the existing -- when we started negotiations, the existing breakout time was about two months. We're going to take it to one year and then it tails down slowly, and I'll explain how that provides us with guarantees. But if this deal is rejected, we immediately go back to the reality I just described without any viable alternative, except that the unified diplomatic support that produced this agreement will disappear overnight.

Let me underscore, the alternative to the deal that we have reached is not some kind of unicorn fantasy that contemplates Iran's complete capitulation. I've heard people talk about dismantling their program. That didn't happen under President Bush when they had a policy of no enrichment, and they had 163 centrifuges. They went up to the 19,000. Our intelligence community confirms -- and I ask you all to sit with them. They'll tell you that's not going to happen.

So in the real world we have two options: Either we move ahead with this agreement to ensure that Iran's nuclear program is limited, rigorously scrutinized, and wholly peaceful; or we have no agreement at all, no inspections, no restraints, no sanctions, no knowledge of what they're doing, and they start to enrich.

Now to be clear, if Congress rejects what was agreed to in Vienna, you will not only be rejecting every one of the restrictions that we put in place -- and by the way, nobody's counting the two years that Iran has already complied with the interim agreement, and by the way complied completely and totally, so that we've already rolled their program back. We've reduced their 20 percent enriched uranium to zero. That's already been accomplished. But if this is rejected, we go back to their ability to move down that road. You'll not only be giving Iran a free pass to double the pace of its uranium enrichment, to build a heavy water reactor, to install new and more efficient centrifuges, but they will do it all without the unprecedented inspection and transparency measures that we have secured. Everything that we have tried to prevent will now happen.

Now what's worse? If we walk away, we walk away alone. Our partners are not going to be with us. Instead, they'll walk away from the tough multilateral sanctions that brought Iran to the negotiating table in the first place, and we will have squandered the best chance that we have to solve this problem through peaceful means.



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Now make no mistake, from the very first day in office, President Obama has made it clear that he will never accept a nuclear-armed Iran, and he is the only president who has asked for and commissioned the design of a weapon that has the ability to take out the facilities and who has actually deployed that weapon. But the fact is Iran has already mastered the fuel cycle, they've mastered the ability to produce significant stockpiles of fissile material, and you have to have that to make a nuclear weapon. You can't bomb away that knowledge any more than you can sanction it away.

Now I was chair of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee when we -- a lot of us joined together and put many -- most of the Iran sanctions in place, and I know well, as you do, that the whole point was to bring Iran to the negotiating table. Even the toughest sanctions previously did not stop Iran's program from growing from a hundred and -- a hundred and what, sixty-three, to 300, to 5,000, to more than 19,000 now. And it didn't stop Iran from accumulating a stockpile of enriched uranium.

Now, sanctions are not an end to themselves. They're a diplomatic tool that has enabled us to actually do what sanctions could not without the negotiation, and that is to rein in a nuclear program that was headed in a very dangerous direction and to put limits on it, to shine a spotlight on it, to watch it like no other nuclear program has ever been watched before. We have secured the ability to do things that exist in no other agreement.

Now, to those who are thinking about opposing this deal because of what might happen in year 15 or year 20, I ask you to simply focus on this: If you walk away, year 15 or 20 starts tomorrow and without any of the long-term access and verification safeguards that we have put in place. What is the alternative? What are you going to do when Iran does start to enrich, which they will feel they have a right to if we walk away from the deal? What are you going to do when the sanctions aren't in place and can't be reconstituted because we walked away from a deal that our five fellow nations accepted?

I've heard critics suggest that the Vienna agreement would somehow legitimize Iran's nuclear program. That is nonsense. Under the agreement, Iran's leaders are permanently barred from pursuing a nuclear weapon and there are permanent restraints and access provisions and inspection provisions to guarantee that. And I underscore: If they try to evade that obligation, we will know it because a civil nuclear program requires full access 24/7, requires full documentation, and we will have the ability to track that as no other program before.

The IAEA will be continuously monitoring their centrifuge production, as centrifuge -- so centrifuges cannot be diverted to a covert facility. For the next 25 years, the IAEA will be continuously monitoring uranium from the point that it's produced all the way through production so that it cannot be diverted to another facility. For the life of this agreement, however long Iran stays in the NPT and is living up to its obligations, they must live up to the Additional Protocol, and that Additional Protocol, as we can get into today, greatly expands the IAEA's capacity to have accountability.



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So this agreement -- and I'll close by saying this agreement gives us a far stronger detection capability, more time to respond to any attempt to break out toward a bomb, and much more international support in stopping it than we would have without the deal. If we walk away from this deal and then we decide to use military force, we're not going to have the United Nations or the other five nations that negotiated with us because they will feel we walked away. And make no mistake: President Obama is committed to staying with a policy of stopping this bomb.

So in the 28 years, a little more, that I was privileged to represent Massachusetts, I had a 100 percent voting record on every issue for Israel. I first traveled there in 1986. I have great friends there, members of my family, others, who care enormously about Israel. I understand the fear. I understand the concerns that our friends in Israel have. But we believe that what we have laid out here is a way of making Israel and the region, in fact, safer. And I emphasize: We do not lose any option in 15 years, 10 years, 20 years, 5 years that we have available to us today.

We will push back against Iran's other activities. We've laid out a very detailed policy for working with the Gulf states and others, and we look forward to working with Israel in the effort to do that. Our current security cooperation with Israel is at an unprecedented level, and it's why we have a robust military presence in the region and it's why we're working so closely with the Gulf states.

So Mr. Chairman, we will continue to push back against Iran on every front available, but the fact is it's a lot easier to push back against an Iran that doesn't have a nuclear weapon rather than one that does. That's been our principal strategic objective: Deal with the nuclear weapon, and then you have an easier time dealing with the other issues too.

The outcome here is critical. We believe this deal makes our country and our allies safer; it will guarantee that Iran's program is under intense scrutiny; it will ensure that the world community is unified in backing this up; and in the end it will guarantee Iran's program has to be peaceful and therefore is a good deal for the world, a good deal for America, a good deal for our allies and our friends, and we believe it richly deserves your support.