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Briefing With Senior State Department Official On the Seventh Round of the JCPOA Talks

SPECIAL BRIEFING

**OFFICE OF THE SPOKESPERSON
VIA TELECONFERENCE**

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MODERATOR: Good morning, everyone, and thanks very much for joining us, and especially so on a Saturday morning. We thought it important to have a timely opportunity to hear – for you to hear from a senior State Department official who has recently returned from Vienna, where the seventh round of talks in the – with our P5+1 in the JCPOA context recently concluded. For your awareness only, the senior State Department official today is [Senior State Department Official]. This call is on background, so you can refer to what we hear from [Senior State Department Official] as emanating from a senior State Department Official, and this call is embargoed until the conclusion of the call.

So with that, I'll turn it over to our senior State Department official, and then we'll take your questions.

SENIOR STATE DEPARTMENT OFFICIAL: Hi, and thank you. Thank you, [Moderator]. So, as you all know, we've been waiting patiently for five and a half months. The Iranian Government said that it needed time to get ready to resume the talks on a mutual return to compliance with the JCPOA, and I think what we've seen over the last week or so is what getting ready meant for

them. And more importantly, not only did we see it, I think our partners and others – Russia, China, others – have seen – have witnessed what Iran meant by getting ready.

It meant continuing to accelerate their nuclear program in particularly provocative ways, and their latest provocation as reported by the IAEA only on Wednesday, i.e. while we were still in the middle of talks, was to prepare for the doubling of their production capacity of 20 percent enriched uranium at Fordow. What getting ready meant was to continue to stonewall the IAEA despite efforts – again, by all of the P5+1 – constructive efforts to find a way forward between Director General Grossi and Iran.

And, of course, most importantly or most visibly while we were in Vienna, what getting ready meant was to come with proposals that walked back anything – any of the compromises that Iran had floated during the sixth round of talks, pocket all of the compromises that others and the U.S. in particular had made, and then ask for more; in other words, not come back with a serious proposal about how we could resume mutual compliance with the JCPOA, but raising issues that go beyond the JCPOA, and on their side not being prepared to take the steps that, again, I think not just the U.S., not just the U.S. and E3, but all of the P5+1 thought was a reasonable basis to resume talks. And so I think you've heard from other of our colleagues – as I said, not just the Europeans, but the Russians and Chinese – some impatience that after all this time what Iran came back with was to walk back anything that they had floated and to assume that they could pocket all of the compromises that others had made.

Iran's justification for continuing its nuclear advances has been that they will continue them as long as the United States is not back in compliance, which was – is a justification that doesn't hold water when the U.S. has said and the world has witnessed that we are prepared to come back into compliance if Iran agrees to reasonable agreement for a mutual return, which they have not done. And so they're the reason why there's not a return, mutual return to compliance, and therefore that can't serve as a justification for them continuing to accelerate their nuclear steps.

Secretary Blinken has said we can't accept a situation in which Iran accelerates its nuclear program and slow-walks its nuclear diplomacy. That's not a situation with which we or others can live. So – and I – in terms of the next steps, I think what's clear is that – again, and we've heard this not just from our traditional partners, we've heard this from the Russians, we've heard this from the Chinese, we certainly have heard it from the GCC countries when a U.S. delegation

visited there not long ago – the world is prepared to support a mutual return to compliance by

both sides. The world is prepared even to engage economically with Iran and diplomatically with Iran. But for that, Iran has to show seriousness at the table and be prepared to come back in short order in compliance with the deal, as the U.S. has said that it is prepared to do and as President Biden has said he prepared to do and to stay in compliance with the deal as long as Iran is.

So we are still – that is still our goal, that is still our mindset, and that's what we're prepared to return to Vienna to do. We don't know when the EU coordinator will reconvene talks, but frankly, the date of those talks, the date of that resumption matters far less to us than whether Iran will come back with a serious attitude, prepared to negotiate seriously. And if they are, they will find a very serious counterpart on the other side, which is the United States. But we'll have to wait and see if they take that position, because so far what we've seen both in Vienna, at their – in their nuclear program, and in their dealings with the IAEA, unfortunately suggests the opposite.

With that, happy to take your questions.

MODERATOR: Great. Operator, would you mind just repeating the instructions for asking a question?

OPERATOR: Ladies and gentlemen, if you wish to ask a question, please press 1 then 0 on your phone. And as a caution reminder here, if you press the 1 then 0 twice, you will remove yourself from the queue. Press 1 then 0 only once.

MODERATOR: Okay. We will turn to —

OPERATOR: One moment for our first question.

MODERATOR: We'll turn to Jennifer Hansler of CNN.

QUESTION: Hey, can you hear me?

OPERATOR: Your line is open.

QUESTION: Hi. Thank you, [Senior State Department Official], for doing this. It is appreciated. Given that you said that it matters less when the talks reconvene than whether Iran comes back

with a serious proposal on the table, are you prepared to walk away from the talks after the next round if they continue to show this lack of seriousness in negotiating? And I know Russia and China have voiced concerns about Iran's continued lack of compliance, but do you feel that they are prepared to apply the same amount of pressure that the United States and its European allies are prepared to do? Thank you.

SENIOR STATE DEPARTMENT OFFICIAL: So thanks. First, I'm not going to speak for Russia and China; you'll have to – obviously, you'll have to ask them. But I do think what has been manifest is that they have said, even though they don't have – they don't share our views (inaudible) when it comes to the negotiations, I think it's fair to say that they also were quite taken aback by the degree to which Iran had walked back its own compromises and then doubled down on the request that it made of the – of us and of others. I think that – I'm not saying that they would share our view entirely, but I think they do think they do share a sense of disappointment, to put it diplomatically, at what the last several months – what Iran has chosen to do with the last several months of preparation.

As for whether we would walk away from the table or not, again, I don't – we'll decide what we do. I think the point is not so much whether we walk away from the table, it's whether the JCPOA, which was a deal that was laboriously negotiated, that was designed to serve the mutual interests of all of the parties in the P5+1, whether it can still survive. And we've long said, Secretary Blinken has said for some time that it won't go on forever. And I would say that the time that we have for – the time that the JCPOA has for still remaining a viable deal is inversely proportional to the speed with which Iran advances its nuclear program. If they choose to accelerate their nuclear program, as they seem to have done of late, then there'd be less time left for the JCPOA to be resurrected.

So we'll have to see. Again, I've always said it's less a chronological clock than it's a technological clock, and Iran has chosen to accelerate that technological clock, which carries very troubling implications for whether the JCPOA can be revived. Our view is it still can be today; that's President Biden's view. That's why we were in Vienna trying to work to get – to make sure that we could return to mutual compliance, but that can't last forever.

MODERATOR: We'll get to Nick Wadhams of Bloomberg. Do we have Nick Wadhams?

QUESTION: I'm here. Can you guys hear me?

MODERATOR: Yes, go ahead.

SENIOR STATE DEPARTMENT OFFICIAL: Yes.

QUESTION: Hey. Thanks, [Senior State Department Official]. Just two questions. One is: Can you give us a sense for what new demands that Iran put on the table? You said that they had put forward demands that fell outside the terms of the JCPOA, so what new things are they asking for? And then second, just to follow up, a couple days ago in Stockholm Secretary Blinken said, "We will not accept the status quo of Iran building its program on the one hand and dragging its feet...on the other. That's not going to last." Also he said that we would know in the next day or two whether Iran is serious, so it appears from your comments that you think Iran is not serious and that the status quo only continues. So at what point do you just say okay, forget it, we're done?

SENIOR STATE DEPARTMENT OFFICIAL: So thanks, Nick. On your first point, we've made it a principle not to get into the details of the negotiations. Not everyone else follows that principle, but we have sought to be careful because we want to protect the talks. So suffice it to say that they have put on the table when it comes to sanctions relief demands that go well beyond the scope of the JCPOA. And it's pretty clear what the JCPOA entailed in terms of sanctions relief. We've made clear that we're prepared to lift all of the sanctions that are in consistency with the deal, but if Iran wants us to go beyond that, then, of course, we're talking about a different deal, and Iran would have to go beyond what it did at the time of the JCPOA. So that's after that question.

I'll repeat what I said earlier. Clearly the days – the day that we were in Vienna, Iran did not show seriousness, it did not adopt a posture – I'm sorry – sorry if you hear barking. Iran did not show the posture of a country that is seriously thinking of a rapid return to mutual compliance. That was not the stance that it took. And I think it was evident, again, to everyone, including countries that have closer relationships to Iran. We are looking at that and we are – we're not standing still, even now; we're making our decision. We're obviously preparing for a world in which there is no return to the JCPOA. It is not our preference.

There will be another – we assume that there'll be a resumption of talks. But every day that goes by is a day that Iran is denying its own people and itself the benefits of sanction relief, and every

day that goes by is a day where we come closer to the conclusion that they don't have in mind a

return to the JCPOA in short order. What they have in mind is what I'd – what we'd call their own plan B, which is to use the talks as a cover, as a front for continued build-up of their nuclear program to serve as leverage for a better deal for them. And that's what Secretary Blinken has said clearly we will not accept, and therefore if that's – if Iran continues with this approach, we will adjust in ways that I think are pretty self-evident to all.

MODERATOR: Right. Before we go onto the next question, operator, if you could just mute anyone who's not speaking. We're getting some background noise.

We will go to David Sanger of *The New York Times*. Do we have David Sanger?

OPERATOR: Pardon me. Just a moment.

QUESTION: Can you hear me now?

OPERATOR: Your line is open.

QUESTION: Okay.

MODERATOR: Yes, go ahead, David.

QUESTION: Great. Thanks, [Senior State Department Official], for doing this. You mentioned that the Iranians are moving ahead with their program as demonstrated by the IAEA report last week, or I guess on Wednesday. There were two elements of that. One was the beginning of that – of 20 percent enrichment at Fordow, which of course is the facility they built deep underground. And then the second was the progression in the 60 percent enrichment. Can you tell us how you analyze these two? Do we believe at this point that these are negotiating – this is all for negotiating leverage? Or is your analysis on this that after dragging this out they want to be at a threshold weapons capability? They certainly, it sounded like from the readouts, from the discussions that the Europeans gave, it sounded like they had set no timetable for shipping out or downscaling that 60 percent enrichment.

SENIOR STATE DEPARTMENT OFFICIAL: So David, obviously that's a very good question. I think, at a minimum, they believe that they could accumulate more enriched uranium at higher levels and use more advanced centrifuges as leverage for a deal that they think they could extract more

from us and give less their part. And that's – and that's not a negotiating tactic that's going to work. I'd argue it's a negotiating tactic that's going to backfire because I think the world, which for a long time during the period of maximum – the maximum pressure campaign – was more sympathetic to Tehran's position. I think we're seeing very clearly that countries around the world are now more and more aware of the fact that Iran is taking a position which is inconsistent with their stated goal of a return to the JCPOA, and their accelerated nuclear program is Exhibit A in that.

So whether it's for negotiating tactics or because they want to become a threshold state, we're not going to try to divine their motivations. What we know is that it's simply not acceptable because they're doing it precisely at a time when they have within reach, if they wanted to, the sanctions relief entailed by the JCPOA. The fact that they are skirting that and continuing to accelerate their program could only lead to the conclusion that they are trying to – they're trying to build a nuclear program for tactical reasons or for more nefarious purposes. But both of those are things that we can't – we can't allow.

MODERATOR: We'll go to Andrea Mitchell from NBC News.

OPERATOR: Please press 1 then 0, Ms. Mitchell.

MODERATOR: It may be Kendra Mitchell in the system. It looks like it was mistyped.

OPERATOR: I apologize. Just a moment. Your line is open, Ms. Mitchell.

QUESTION: You want me to press 1 and – thank you.

MODERATOR: Go ahead, Andrea.

QUESTION: Can you hear me now? Okay, thank you [Senior State Department Official]. Thank you, [Moderator].

Just to follow up on David's question, if you cannot determine whether this is for leverage or to achieve threshold status, how long can you afford to wait before you take some of the steps – leaving the talks and take some of the steps? I mean, what is your timeframe here? Because certainly, the Secretary in Sweden was not indicating a long timeframe, but if you don't have enough information to know what is really going on at Fordow, and if the IAEA does not have

clear visibility there,

SENIOR STATE DEPARTMENT OFFICIAL: So —

QUESTION: What kind of (inaudible) can you afford to take?

SENIOR STATE DEPARTMENT OFFICIAL: I mean, they do have access to —

QUESTION: Yeah.

SENIOR STATE DEPARTMENT OFFICIAL: So they do have access to Fordow. That's — I mean, obviously they have restricted the — their cooperation with the IAEA in ways that are unacceptable, but they have — the IAEA was able to report on what's going on at Fordow.

I think the question which you and others are asking is how much time we're giving this. I think we have to be clear on one point. Even as we are at the table in Vienna, President Biden has not lifted any of the sanctions because he has made clear he will lift all of the sanctions incompatible with the — inconsistent with the JCPOA if Iran is prepared to come back into compliance with the deal. But if not, he is not. And so as I said earlier, every day that goes by is a day that Iran is depriving itself, its people, of the benefits of the sanctions relief that they would get. So that's not sitting idly by as Iran develops its program.

There are other steps that we have taken, that we've announced, that you're all aware of, even as the negotiations have occurred. But of course, we will judge based on their approach if they seem to evince a seriousness that we will adjust our policy, and as they don't, we will adjust it in a different direction. But it's not as if it's an on-and-off switch. The fact that we're sitting in Vienna doesn't mean that we can't take steps to make clear to Iran that they have a price to pay if it continues to stonewall.

So even as we speak today, it's not as if Iran is moving and we are sitting back and waiting. But of course, as I said, our strong preference — and it's — I want to make clear that it's something that is quite striking when our delegation traveled to the Gulf. You have countries in the GCC that had been opposed to the JCPOA not long ago who now unanimously, in a statement that we issued with them, said they are in favor and are urging the U.S. and Iran to come back into mutual compliance. They're also saying to Iran that they are prepared to develop a regional — their economic ties and diplomatic ties with Iran, that that's their goal, but that they can't do it unless Iran is back into compliance with the deal because they can't do it as long as there are sanctions

that's been enforced.

So all of that are messages to Iran that there is a price to pay if it continues down this path. And what it won't be able to do, which their new government seems to think that it can, is to improve its ties to the rest of the world even as it snubs the P5+1 when it comes to the terms of the JCPOA. That can't happen, and I think they need to understand it and also understand that if they do come back into compliance then they will get the sanctions relief that we'll offer and the stronger economic ties with the region and others that they say that they want.

MODERATOR: We'll go to Arshad Mohammed of Reuters.

QUESTION: Thank you. Can you hear me?

MODERATOR: Yes, go ahead.

QUESTION: It's Arshad Mohammed of Reuters. Two things. One, as you well know, the United States has not rigorously enforced its sanctions against China purchasing Iranian oil. They are still purchasing about a half a million barrels a day. Are you at a point where either you are ready to start enforcing those sanctions, or are you at a point where you think the Chinese themselves might start reducing their purchases of Iranian crude?

And secondly, you said in October that the demise of the JCPOA didn't mean the death of diplomacy. Can you sketch out for us whether the diplomacy that you – that might succeed your inability to revive the JCPOA, is that going to include countries in the region? What is going to be different about your diplomatic efforts, assuming you have them, once the JCPOA is going to be gone that's going to make it more likely Iran will restrict its nuclear compliance to some degree even if it doesn't return to full compliance with the 2015 agreement?

SENIOR STATE DEPARTMENT OFFICIAL: So thanks, Arshad. So first, as you know, we're well aware of the purchases that Chinese companies are making of Iranian oil in contravention of our sanctions, and we've used our sanctions authorities to respond to the sanctions evasion, including against entities doing business with China, and we'll continue to do so if necessary.

Again, as you know, as we've discussed, we think the best way to approach this is diplomatically with the Chinese – part of our overall dialogue, part of the dialogue that Presidents Biden and Xi had not long ago on Iran policy. And we think that's a more effective way to do it, but we'll see how those conversations ensure. But as I said, we'd never – we've never said we would not

impose sanctions, and we have imposed sanctions on entities involved in the purchase of Iranian oil.

On your other question, what we mean is at the end of the day we believe the best outcome to this problem is a diplomatic one. If the JCPOA cannot be revived because of Iran's nuclear advances, which makes it impossible to come back to that deal, then there'll have to be other diplomatic outcomes that we'd be prepared to pursue. Of course, as I said in response to the prior question, we will have to use other tools, tools that you could imagine, to try to increase the pressure on Iran to come back to a reasonable stance at the diplomatic table. But at that point, the diplomatic outcome they would be pursuing, it will have to be different from the JCPOA simply because, technically, we could not come back to it even if we wanted to because of the advances – irreversible advances that Iran will have made.

So I don't want to get into what format that might take. The point is at the end of the day we believe diplomacy is the best way to resolve this. We believe that it's going to have to be – if Iran does not – does not show a good faith effort to come back into compliance, then we're going to have to use more of the other tools. But we believe that diplomacy is the best way to resolve this problem.

MODERATOR: We'll go to Barak Ravid of Axios.

QUESTION: (Inaudible) doing this. I was wondering if now, after it is clear that – and as you say, that the Iranians were not serious in this round of talks, and after the failed visit of Grossi in Tehran, are you going to pursue any emergency session of the Board of Governors of the IAEA to try and pass a censure resolution against Iran?

SENIOR STATE DEPARTMENT OFFICIAL: So Barak, we made it clear in that statement that we issued at the Board of Governors meeting not long ago that if there was no progress between the director general and the Iranian authorities that we would convene a special meeting with the Board of Governors, extraordinary meeting of the Board of Governors, before the end of the year. And that still stands.

MODERATOR: We'll go to Robin Wright of *The New Yorker*.

QUESTION: (Inaudible) very much. [Senior State Department Official]. let me ask you about your

– the price to pay. American sanctions have not succeeded in getting Iran to make the compromises necessary. Do you have any confidence that the other parties may also invoke sanctions if you don't get some kind of agreement?

And when it comes to deciding when the Iranians – when it's too late or when you're not going to get there, is this something that all six nations, all P5+1 will be party to?

And finally, just to be clear, when you say other tools and other options, does that include kinetic operations to ensure that Iran doesn't develop a nuclear program?

SENIOR STATE DEPARTMENT OFFICIAL: So quickly, answer to your third question – as you know, I'm not going to get into details here about what steps might be taken to prevent Iran from acquiring a nuclear weapon. I think the President and Secretary of State have spoken to that, and their word is more authoritative than mine.

When it comes to your first two questions, when it comes to sanctions, I assume that many countries that share the same concerns that we have, if they were to conclude, if we were to conclude of the JCPOA that Iran had killed the JCPOA – not we had killed it, but Iran had killed it because of its inability, unwillingness to come back into compliance in a reasonable way and at a reasonable pace – then I assume that yes, there would be other sanctions that would come in, that would be triggered. But that's – that would be if Iran itself takes the steps to kill the deal. Then the sanctions that had been lifted as a result of the deal would likely come back into place, and those are more than U.S. sanctions.

Listen, I don't know whether we'll have to wait, whether there will be a consensus determination. Obviously, every country has its sovereign assessment of where we are. I think we've worked very well with the P5+1, including with Russia and China and including in this latest round. But at the end of day, each country will have to make its own determination about whether they think that the time has come to say that the JCPOA no longer is viable.

Again, I want to emphasize we did not reach that point. We still think there's an opportunity to come back and that it's the best course and it's the quickest course. And it's a course that I think most countries around the world – and I think we're seeing this every day – expressing that desire and urging everyone – and this week will be really urging Iran to agree to come back into compliance under terms that are viewed by all as entailing serious, difficult compromises both by

the U.S. and by Iran. But again, if that's not the path that Iran chooses, then we, and I assume many of our partners, will reach the same conclusion.

MODERATOR: Time for a few final questions. Jason Rezaian of *The Washington Post*.

QUESTION: Can you hear me?

MODERATOR: Go ahead, Jason. Yes.

QUESTION: Okay. So much has changed since the JCPOA was implemented, I guess almost six years ago now. But one thing we don't talk much about are the internal dynamics within Iranian society. Those of us who watch it closely see a much more volatile situation than at any point in recent memory right now. How much do those developments figure into your calculations in these negotiations?

And also, with that anniversary of the implementation, it also marks the freedom of me and other Americans who were being held hostage during those original talks. I completely understand the logic behind wanting to keep nuclear and hostage negotiations separate, but at the moment there are four Americans, three British, two German, two French citizens all being held hostage in Iran, additionally two more Austrian citizens, the host country of the talks right now.

At what point do you collectively say enough is enough and make this a sticking point?

SENIOR STATE DEPARTMENT OFFICIAL: So let me focus on that question, Jason. I'm glad you asked it. We – there's not a time when this engagement with Iran by our partners who deal with these detainee issues, hostage issues, or when we're in Vienna where we don't seek to convey to Iran our interest and the urgency in finding a solution that brings them all back home. And that's been – that was true again in Vienna. I can't say – I don't want to say more about it. And of course, the Iranians, you know better than anyone on this call, are – take a posture on this which is simply unconscionable – I don't think there's another word – to hold people hostage.

Whether – I mean, maybe – I'm not sure I understood the tenor of your question. We want to hold them separate because we don't want to hold the release of the hostages – we don't want to condition it on reaching a deal on the JCPOA. Our view is the release of the hostages should

occur no matter what, and we'll continue to press it whether the JCPOA is ongoing or not. We think the JCPOA on its merits – we need to reach a deal because of the threat that would be posed by an unconstrained Iranian nuclear program, but that doesn't change the priority that we give to securing the release of the four Americans who are still being unjustly held in Iran.

MODERATOR: We'll go to Nick Schifrin of PBS.

QUESTION: (Inaudible) asked before, but just to try and combine it: In response to what is clearly an unserious Iranian approach, will you try to increase diplomatic isolation, increase economic pressure, and censure Iran at the IAEA?

And connected to that, pro-dialogue experts believe that this is an opening gambit, that Iranian requests will change. Do you agree with that assessment?

SENIOR STATE DEPARTMENT OFFICIAL: Well, I'm not going to agree or disagree. Again, I mean, we'll have to see. There's no indication, but we hope. We hope because if Iran wants the outcome that it says it wants, then there's one path forward, which is not a path that entails more compromise on the part of Iran. It's simply return to the JCPOA, so it shouldn't be that difficult. There are difficult issues still remaining that remained open after the sixth round, but we think that if everyone is serious, it should be able – we should be able to get there in short order.

Now, as I – I want to repeat what I said. And even as of now, we – there's pressure exerted on Iran because the sanctions have not been lifted. And that's something – the opportunity cost to Iran and to its government and to its people, unfortunately, their government is the one that's denying their people what they could achieve if they were to return to compliance with the JCPOA. But that still is present every day. The kinds of pressures that would be – that would have to be ramped up if Iran were to persist in its current path are not – they're not mysterious, and you've mentioned the categories.

Of course, I think that – I think you'd see diplomatically more and more countries would be – would define their relationship with Iran through the lens of a nonproliferation crisis, which again, we've seen that movie before. We've seen it during the period of President Ahmadinejad. And countries would have to take steps to – as sanctions remain in place and as we would seek to tighten those, then other countries will also adjust their own policies. So I think Iran would find that the outcome is not one that serves its interest if it wants to go down that path.

And again, we would like to avoid it, and we think that – we know that all the P5+1 would like to avoid. And in that sense, it's really the choice that Iran has to make. It has – it still has a little time to make it and to understand that they're not going to get a better deal than the JCPOA out of these talks. If they want a different deal, then that's what they should say. They should say we want a different deal, let's negotiate a different deal, and then we'll have to see what we do to make sure that they don't continue to grow their nuclear program during that time. But if what they say they want is really what they mean they want, which is a return to the JCPOA, it's pretty easy to figure out how to achieve that and pretty easy for Iran to give an indication that that's what they are seeking to achieve.

MODERATOR: We'll turn to Nadia Bilbassy of Arabiya.

QUESTION: (Inaudible) all my questions have been asked, but let me try with this one, [Senior State Department Official]. With everything that you said that the Iranians did not come with any new proposals, they were not serious, they haven't reversed the previous progress, would you say or you're willing to go to say that they are actually negotiating in bad faith?

SENIOR STATE DEPARTMENT OFFICIAL: I'm not going to – again, I don't want to talk about the motivations. I think clearly they are not negotiating with the intent of quickly reaching a mutual return to the JCPOA under terms that any ordinary human being would believe is consistent with the deal. I think that was clear. And as I said, I think it was not just clear to us; it was clear even to those who historically have shown greater understanding or sympathy for Iran's position.

I think one could hope that Iran will figure out that if it wants a return to the deal with all the benefits that that entails, they're going to have to change the posture they take and they're going to have to come back with something that is more in line with the JCPOA and more in line with all of the discussions that have taken place during six rounds.

And I want to make something clear. I assume it's clear to all of you, but those six rounds, where we had landed after them is not where we would have preferred to land. It wasn't our ideal. We had to make some compromises and Iran had to make some compromises. But for Iran to take that as a starting point and then say now what we're going to do is try to improve on everything to our benefit without any – and asking for more and giving less – sorry – in terms of our nuclear program, that's not a serious way to negotiate. If it's an opening position and then they say now

let's get down to real business, that would be something else, but we'll have to see what happens in the coming days and weeks.

MODERATOR: Jacob Magid, *Times of Israel*.

QUESTION: Hi, can you hear me?

MODERATOR: Yes, go ahead.

QUESTION: Hello? Hi, thanks.

MODERATOR: Go ahead, we hear you.

QUESTION: Thanks, [Senior State Department Official], for doing this. Secretary Blinken had a conversation with Prime Minister Netanyahu – sorry – Prime Minister Bennett earlier this week where the Israeli prime minister used this phrase “nuclear blackmail,” that he thought this is – it’s what Iran is trying to do in Vienna. Obviously, because you guys are returning to the talks as he said you guys shouldn’t do, that you don’t see it that way, but Israeli media interpreted this as an escalation in the relationship between the U.S. and Israel. Are things in a bad place because of that kind of conversation, the approach Israel is taking, or how do you see that relationship right now?

SENIOR STATE DEPARTMENT OFFICIAL: No, I wouldn’t say that they’re in a bad place. I think everyone is concerned and alarmed by Iran’s nuclear advances. It’s something that we’ve discussed at length and consistently with Israel. Our delegation was in Israel not long ago and met – had three days of intensive meetings. There will be more visits this week by Israeli officials to the U.S.

And I think we may have some differences – well, that’s natural and we understand that we are situated differently, we have different ways sometimes of approaching it. But our goal remains the same, and our goal is absolutely resolute that we will not allow Iran to acquire a nuclear weapon, and that is something where we are fully aligned with Israel.

I’ll also say I think this comes – the conversation comes at an interesting time where we’re seeing – I don’t know if I want to call it soul searching or interesting reflections in Israel by former senior

officials about the decision to withdraw from the JCPOA and what it has meant. What it has meant is it has opened the door for an unconstrained, uncontrolled Iranian nuclear program, which obviously was not the case while the U.S. and Iran were both in compliance with the deal.

And so I think the conversations we're having with Israel are always interesting, always important, and we strive to remain as transparent and as well-coordinated with Israel as possible. But it is taking place against a backdrop that I think we all need to take into account, which is to learn the lessons of the preceding three years, what it has meant for Iran's program, and how it has put us in this very difficult situation where Iran is continuing to accelerate its nuclear program and we have to face difficult decisions if Iran is not prepared to come back into compliance with the deal.

So it's – I think the conversation between Secretary Blinken and the prime minister was a very good conversation. I think there – I've had many, and I will again this week – but I think it's important to have these conversations with that context in mind.

MODERATOR: And we'll take one final question from Vivian Salama of *The Wall Street Journal*. Do we have Vivian?

OPERATOR: Pardon me. If you could press 1 then 0 again.

MODERATOR: If you don't see Vivian, let's go to Ellen Knickmeyer of the AP.

OPERATOR: I apologize. Ms. Salama is now available. Ms. Salama, your line is open.

QUESTION: Sorry, I'm not sure what's going on. Thank you all for doing this. Most of my questions have been answered, but I do want to just kind of follow up on two questions, the previous one right away about Israel. But specifically, I'm wondering, [Senior State Department Official], if there are going to be conversations with the Israeli in the next couple of weeks if the Israelis feel that essentially that your negotiations are not going to yield any results, whether or not they feel that they can take actions on their own, and whether or not the U.S. might be trying to at least calm the Israelis from trying to take any actions, trying to take matters into their own hands. Any discussions about sort of preventative measures to try to avoid any conflict between the Israelis and the Iranians would be interesting.

And also, I wanted to just go back to an earlier question about China. You kind of touched upon this – I think it was Arshad's question – where you talked about – you've said a lot about the fact

that the Chinese have mutual concerns with regard to the stakes of these negotiations, and so I was just wondering if you can kind of flesh your answer out a little bit more in terms of perhaps trying to persuade the Chinese to reduce their energy imports or maybe withholding foreign currency oil payments to Iran and keeping them in Chinese-held accounts. I mean, what are those conversations like between you and – between the U.S. and the Chinese right now, and whether or not there's going to be some sort of effort to jointly try to get Iran into compliance or at least pressure them, increase pressure on them together? Thanks.

SENIOR STATE DEPARTMENT OFFICIAL: Thanks. So let me focus on your first question. We don't view our job as trying to calm Israel down. I mean, we share the same sense of urgency, the same alarm at what we're seeing. Our job is not to stop them; our job is to work together towards our common objective. And Israel is a sovereign country and will make its own decisions, but we think we're stronger when we act together. And that's why you've seen and you will continue to see an intensification of our interactions with our Israeli counterparts with – and I think you'll see more this week, and you've seen quite a bit over the last weeks.

But again, our job, our goal is to try to align our policies as much as possible because we think we share a – we know we share a common objective, and we think that we could be more effective when we work together. But at the end of the day, Israel has its national interests that it will defend.

MODERATOR: And a quick (inaudible) if we still have Ellen Knickmeyer, we'll take her as the final question.

QUESTION: Hi there. Yes. You can hear me?

MODERATOR: We can. Go ahead.

QUESTION: Okay, thank you. Because there is such an emphasis on the clock and the U.S. won't wait around forever, it's not indefinite, what are we talking about in terms of how many more rounds of talks or would it take one more session to conclude that Iran's not going to come back to the table any more seriously than it seemed to in this current – in this week's talks? One round? Indefinite rounds?

SENIOR STATE DEPARTMENT OFFICIAL: So – and I've tried to answer this before, and I realize that you want a more definitive answer. One could be – Iran is at the table and developing its

nuclear program. We could be at the table and using other tools to make sure that we are advancing our own objectives. So I wouldn't focus so much on is there going to be a dramatic exit from Vienna – that may be; I'm not excluding it – but at this point, we want to negotiate with Iran. We want to see whether we could reach an understanding. But it doesn't mean that because we're at the table that we can't do other things at the same time. Again, it certainly hasn't prevented Iran from doing other things at the same time. There's no reason why we should be constrained for our part.

So I'd say focus less on that, and you'll see that we are prepared to both engage in diplomacy but also use other tools when necessary if Iran is not prepared to come back to a mutual return to compliance, which, again, is our objective, is our priority. And I think if they are serious in getting there, they'll see that we are serious as well.

MODERATOR: Great. I just want to remind everyone this call was on background. You can attribute what you heard today to a senior State Department official. I want to thank our speaker today, thank everyone for joining, and the embargo is now lifted. Thanks very much, everyone.

SENIOR STATE DEPARTMENT OFFICIAL: Thank you. Bye.

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