Daily Press Briefing: Discussion on Iran

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February 22, 2013

Victoria Nuland, Spokesperson
Daily Press Briefing, Selections on Iran
Washington, DC

QUESTION: Is there any reason to think that the IAEA report that was described in the media yesterday about Iran introducing advanced centrifuges – I know we talked about this at some length yesterday – is there any reason to think that that report might jeopardize the holding of the Almaty talks?

MS. NULAND: Our expectation, standing here today, is that the Almaty talks will go forward. That is certainly our intention. Our team plans to travel this weekend. As we've said, unfortunately, it's not a new phenomenon to have some moves like we saw at Natanz in advance of these rounds. We continue to believe that with seriousness, there is a diplomatic solution to be had here. The question is whether the Iranian delegation will come to Almaty really ready to roll up their sleeves and help the international community be reassured with regard to their nuclear program.

QUESTION: And you just said "moves like we saw at Natanz." Yesterday, you described this as it would be a provocative action, but you didn't actually confirm that they have done this. So you actually do believe that they have installed the advanced centrifuges at Natanz?

MS. NULAND: Well, I think I won't go beyond what the IAEA has already said. They were pretty clear about this.

QUESTION: And is the United States seeking a bilateral meeting with the Iranians on the sidelines in Almaty?

MS. NULAND: Our position on this one hasn't changed either. We have said from the beginning of this in 2009 that we would be open if the Iranians wanted to in the context of being together for the P-5+1 to meet bilaterally with the Iranian side. They have never chosen to take us up on that, but we will renew the offer this time. They have met bilaterally with some of the others.

QUESTION: No, they took you up on it in October of 2009, right? In Geneva?

MS. NULAND: I can't recall. You're probably ahead of me on that. There might have been a -

QUESTION: I think they did.

MS. NULAND: Yeah, there was an initial meeting. Yes. Yes. Yes.

QUESTION: I'm certain they did. Okay. But never since then?

MS. NULAND: See? The press corps knows more than I do, as usual.

QUESTION: And there was a report that you were conveying your – I mean, you've obviously conveyed it at the podium a great many times, but there was a report that you were going to convey your openness to a bilateral meeting through High Representative Ashton's office. Have you done that in this case? Do you do that every time, or do you just say it from the podium?

MS. NULAND: The Iranians are well aware, both publicly and through private messages that others send, that we're open to this if they want it. I don't think it's a secret.

QUESTION: And have they yet said whether they're interested?

MS. NULAND: I haven't heard anything in particular about this particular upcoming Almaty meeting. We'll see what happens.

MS. NULAND: Let's go to the Iranian arrested in Nigeria, which I think came from Samir. Right?

The United States commends the Government of Nigeria for uncovering a planned attack against U.S. and Israeli targets reportedly by an Iranian-backed terror cell in Lagos. We are working with the Nigerians to learn more about this as their investigation continues, but we commend their law enforcement actions.

February 21, 2013

Victoria Nuland, Spokesperson
Daily Press Briefing, Selections on Iran
Washington, DC

QUESTION: Does the State Department have any response to the reports that Tehran has started installing high-tech machines at its main uranium enrichment site?

MS. NULAND: We've seen these reports that Iran has announced its intention to install advanced centrifuges in the production unit at Natanz. Frankly, this does not come as a surprise to us, given the IAEA reports on Iran's development of advanced centrifuges. But the fact remains that the installation of new advanced centrifuges would be a further escalation and a continuing violation of Iran's obligations under the relevant UN Security Council resolutions and IAEA board resolutions. So it would mark yet another provocative step.

But there is another path here. There is the diplomatic path, and as you know, we have P-5+1 talks with the Iranians next week. They have an opportunity to come to those talks ready to be serious, ready to allay the international community's concerns, and we hope they take that opportunity.

QUESTION: Still on Iran --

MS. NULAND: Yeah.

QUESTION: -- following up from Dana's question earlier, you mentioned that Iran has another path. But surely this rapid escalation in uranium enrichment doesn't auger well for the talks next week, does it? I mean, you're asking them to come seriously to the table --

MS. NULAND: You're talking about the – yeah.

QUESTION: -- next week in Almaty, and here they are with a massive escalation in their enrichment program.

MS. NULAND: Well, we're obviously concerned that Iran continues to flout its international obligations and has refused to halt its enrichment activities and, in fact, is taking steps to expand its capacity. It already has enough uranium to fuel the Tehran research reactor for at least a decade, and its recent actions would allow it to increase its stockpiles well beyond the civilian needs. So this will obviously be a subject that we have to talk about in Almaty, because it's very hard for the international community to understand what Iran is doing when it claims that all of this is peaceful.

QUESTION: All right. But does this raise doubt already on the seriousness of their attitude going into those talks, when just a few days before they make it clear that they can enrich five times as fast as previously?

MS. NULAND: I wish I could say, Brad, that this pattern was new, but it isn't. We've seen this before, that in advance of diplomatic rounds there are new announcements of activity. It doesn't make it any easier to get where we want to go, which is to have the diplomacy lead to a real process of Iran making it clear to the international community that it's prepared to meet its obligations. But it's not – unfortunately, we've seen this before.

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February 8, 2013

Victoria Nuland, Spokesperson
Daily Press Briefing
Washington, DC
February 8, 2013, Selections on Iran

QUESTION: Iran-U.S., my colleague Arshad had a report out today based on customs figures that showed that while U.S. exports to Iran increased over the last year, from 2011 to 2012, exports of medical supplies – pharmaceuticals, drugs, and related products – fell pretty sharply. And the question is: Is this a sign that the U.S. desire to keep sanctions from hurting ordinary Iranians is not being met? In other words, that your hope to focus the sanctions on other elements is not working as well?

MS. NULAND: Well, let me start by underscoring what was said in the background call when the new sanctions were imposed on Wednesday. We've worked very hard over the last year to ensure that the carve-outs that allow continued exports of agricultural commodities, food, medicine, medical devices, are clear, that they're well understood by exporters, and that they are understood by importers as well. It is not our intention to block those things from going to Iran. Humanitarian exports from the United States to Iran have, as an overall matter, remained relatively steady over the last few years. There has been a little bit of a change in the mix, as you've noted, Iran importing more wheat and less on the medical side. But that's not the result of any policy decision by the United States. It's a result of import decisions made by the Iranians.

QUESTION: In other words, it isn't you. If the Iranians had wanted to buy more or the same amount of medical equipment or whatever it is over the past year, they could have?

MS. NULAND: Correct.

QUESTION: And they – and is it not also a factor of people who are selling the stuff in the United States? I mean, if a company chooses not to sell medical supplies to Iran, you can't force them to, can you?

MS. NULAND: Of course not. Right. I mean, I don't have any metrics about whether we have American companies who have made their own corporate decisions not to trade with Iran. Right.

QUESTION: Right. I mean, some companies could decide not to sell --

MS. NULAND: Right.

QUESTION: -- or – and other – also Iran could decide not to buy, or not to seek to buy.

MS. NULAND: Right. My point is that we are engaged in constant outreach with both exporters and financial institutions about the sanctions regime to make absolutely clear that humanitarian exports to Iran are not targeted. And our understanding of this is that, as I said, overall the levels have been steady, but it's been a result of Iranian decisions.

QUESTION: Yeah, but you can't force them to sell or set the price?

MS. NULAND: Correct. We can't force people to sell, nor do we. This is a commercial transaction.

QUESTION: To follow up Arshad's findings, the customs data are just numbers; they don't offer an explanation of trends or anything. But Arshad's findings were that banks are getting scared off to finance some of this trade, so that as sanctions hit further Iran banks, the ability for third-country banks who would work with the U.S. to fund some of these exports is not happening because there's – Iran has become – Iranian banks have become toxic, essentially, and they don't want to be touched.

MS. NULAND: Well, again, refer you to Treasury, but on February 6th the Department of the Treasury did – their Office of Foreign Asset Controls did reissue public guidance which spells out that – the licenses and the related exemptions that exist for humanitarian trade. And we are making outreach efforts, as I said, both to exporters and to financial institutions so that they understand that this kind of humanitarian effort can go forward even as we seek to reduce Iran's oil trade, et cetera.

February 7, 2013

Victoria Nuland, Spokesperson
Daily Press Briefing
Washington, DC
February 7, 2013

Selections on Iran

MS. NULAND: Well, you know where we have been on this, that when Vice President Biden was in Munich he made clear that in the context of the P-5+1 process, including the upcoming talks in Almaty, that we would be open to consulting with the Iranians bilaterally. They've obviously got to make their own decisions how they want to proceed within the P-5+1 context. What I would certainly say is that we are, as I said yesterday, very much hoping that when we have this opportunity in a couple of weeks, that the Iranians will come prepared to discuss real substance. Whether they prefer to do that in the P-5 -- with all of us in the room, whether they prefer to do that with all of us in the room and an opportunity to see us bilaterally, we're open to whatever can take this forward. What's most important is that they come prepared to really engage on the substance.

QUESTION: The gist of his remarks, which I presume you saw, was that an offer to hold bilateral talks cannot logically coexist with the proponent of that offer simultaneously exerting greater and greater pressure on Iran through sanctions and other means. Is he wrong about that? Can those two things logically coexist?

MS. NULAND: Well, as the Iranians well know, the ball is in the Iranians' own court. The burden of these sanctions could be eased if they made a decision to engage with us substantively. We've always said that action on the Iranian side would be matched by action on our side. So it's really up to Iran to engage if it wants to see sanctions eased.

QUESTION: He actually said that talks cannot be held while you are threatening with the force of arms and holding a gun to their head. That's what he said. Do you have any reaction to that?

MS. NULAND: As you know, we have made an offer to engage. We have had three rounds of talks already; this will be the fourth one. We've been disappointed that those have not yet resulted in real, concrete progress. We've also said that in the absence of progress, in the absence of movement, we would continue to ratchet up the international pressure. So as long as Iran fails to address the concerns of the international community, we're going to have to continue to increase the pressure and isolate Iran internationally.

So again, this is really a choice that Iran's leaders can make. They can have a better path for their people, they can have a better path for their nation, but they've got to make the choice to come clean and answer the international community's concerns about their nuclear program. And that has yet to happen. We'll have another opportunity for them to do that in Almaty.

QUESTION: Okay. Just a quick follow-up: Do you see this as a split between the ayatollahs and the political leadership? Because Salehi is actually quite welcoming and conciliatory; in fact, he told Ahmadinejad, he said that they're open for talks. And so do you see, like, this may be the great divide?

MS. NULAND: Well, Said, that sounds like more of a question for the Iranians than for us. We've obviously seen reporting of ferment within the regime. But we are trying to make the case that if they really want sanctions relieved, if they really want a better relationship with the international community, they can come to Almaty and work with us to really explain what this nuclear program is about and to allay the concerns of the international community.

QUESTION: Yesterday, you used the expression "the clock is ticking" with respect to this effort.

MS. NULAND: I think I was channeling my inner Vice President Biden. I think he used a similar phrase. (Laughter.)

QUESTION: That raises the even more frightening prospect that all of us have some inner Joe Biden, but we'll come back to that. If the clock is truly ticking, it suggests that you know precisely the timelines you're dealing with, at least how the United States proceeds. I mean, can you share with us what those timelines are and how much time is left on this ticking clock?

MS. NULAND: James, I don't think that would be helpful to the diplomacy that we're trying to do. As we said yesterday, we're going to go to Almaty and we're going to hope that this round the Iranians come ready to make concrete progress. I think we won't be able to evaluate where we're going and what the clock looks like until after we see if they actually come with some concrete ideas.

QUESTION: So the clock changes from day to day based on developments?

MS. NULAND: Again, the President's been very clear that we're prepared to talk, but not infinitely and not for the purpose of stalling or evading the real issues.

Please.

QUESTION: The Iranians say that they have captured a U.S. drone and are parading it on television. Any confirmation, comment? I mean, is this something they're doing ahead of the talks to try to --

MS. NULAND: This is a new one today? We've had these stories on a --

QUESTION: No, this is the same drone. They say that they've downloaded the video from it and they're --

MS. NULAND: This is the same one. Yeah. I think our brothers and sisters at the Pentagon have spoken to that one in recent weeks and months.

Go ahead.

QUESTION: Toria, just a quick follow-up. You said yesterday that the sanctions culled out areas of nutrition and medicine and so on. Could you tell us how that is done in the sanctions regime?

MS. NULAND: As you probably know, Said, yesterday at around midday there was a backgrounding call led by the White House about these new sanctions where they talked extensively about the efforts that we've gone to to exempt from sanctions food, medicine, et cetera. The details, I would refer you to that transcript. They were pretty clear about how this works.

Please. Yeah. Still on Iran?

QUESTION: Yes.

MS. NULAND: Yeah.

QUESTION: Yesterday you took a question from Scott regarding the detention of journalists in Iran recently.

MS. NULAND: Yes, thank you.

QUESTION: I was wondering if you have anything else or --

MS. NULAND: Yeah. Thank you for coming back to that one. We are deeply troubled by the Iranian regime's arrest of more than a dozen journalists on spurious charges of spying and having contact with foreign news organizations. Such actions are clearly meant to stifle free expression, limit political debate, and close off the flow of information in advance of Iran's June presidential elections. Iran's attempts to suppress the ideas and the desires of their own people are not going to make those demands and desires disappear. So we call on the Iranian authorities to release those who have been arrested and to respect their country's own laws and their citizens' right to freedom of expression.

QUESTION: Are you doing anything internationally to put more pressure on them regarding this?

MS. NULAND: Well, as we've been clear about yesterday, there's plenty of pressure on Iran at the moment.

Please.

QUESTION: Just our Special Envoy to the OIC --

MS. NULAND: Yes.

QUESTION: -- who attended the meetings in Egypt.

MS. NULAND: Yes.

QUESTION: Can you tell us whether or not he had any contact with Iranian officials?

MS. NULAND: To my knowledge, he only left yesterday and he has not had contact with Iranian officials.

Please.

QUESTION: China?

MS. NULAND: Sorry, China?

QUESTION: China. Yeah.

MS. NULAND: Yeah, Goyal.

QUESTION: Still on the --

MS. NULAND: Sorry. Still on Iran? Yeah.

QUESTION: -- on the OIC.

MS. NULAND: Yeah.

QUESTION: Is he planning to have, like, any kind of an official appearance to speak or to address the conference?

MS. NULAND: I frankly don't know the answer to that one, Said. Was it not in the Media Note that we put out, how he would be --

QUESTION: I failed to see that.

MS. NULAND: Let me – yeah. We put out a long Media Note on what his plans were. If you don't find it there, we'll come back to you.

QUESTION: Okay. And their statement that is coming out calls for direct talks between the Government of Syria and the opposition without conditions. Are you aware of that?

MS. NULAND: I was not aware of that, but that would be in line with what Syrian Opposition Coalition President al-Khatib has been proposing, that the regime – that Assad authorize his Vice President to start engaging in talks.

QUESTION: And finally the Mufti of Al-Azhar, the major Islamic institution in Cairo, called on Mahmoud Ahmadinejad to stop meddling in the Gulf countries and to help stop the bloodshed in Syria. Do you have any comment on that?

MS. NULAND: Well, we would obviously share those concerns, as we've made clear in the last couple of days.

Please, Tolga.

February 5, 2013

Victoria Nuland, Spokesperson
Daily Press Briefing
Washington, DC
February 5, 2013

Selections on Iran

QUESTION: I have one on Iran. British Foreign Secretary William Hague, today, in that – confirms the date of the talks in Kazakhstan, but also said that the world powers are going to be making an updated and credible offer to Iran, and the onus was on them to respond seriously. Could you talk a bit to what – why he would mention an updated and especially credible offer which suggests that perhaps previous offers weren't seen as credible?

MS. NULAND: Well, let me start by reiterating what I said in the beginning in the context of the discussion that the Secretary had with Lady Ashton. We are pleased that the Iranian negotiating team has now confirmed that they will meet the P-5+1 in Almaty on February 26th. Our view is it's time for Iran to discuss substance, and we hope that the talks will make concrete progress regarding the international community's concerns about the nature of the program. I'm not here in a position to discuss what we will be bringing to Almaty, our – what we want though is to ensure and to see Iran take advantage of this opportunity and allay the international community's concerns.

QUESTION: But so within this new offer that you're making, there is going to be – there are going to be different things than were put on the table previously?

MS. NULAND: Again, I am not in a position here to discuss our thoughts about what the P-5+1 will want to discuss with Iran. If we have more to share on that as we get closer to the Almaty conversation, we will.

February 4, 2013

Victoria Nuland, Spokesperson
Daily Press Briefing
Washington, DC
February 4, 2013

Selections on Iran

QUESTION: The Iranian Foreign Minister today, though, is saying that he believes the U.S. is rethinking its approach to Iran and was saying that the Iranians are ready to resume talks. Is that a theme that you're getting from Tehran and are you rethinking your approach towards the whole issue of Iran and its nuclear program?

MS. NULAND: Well, the Vice President spoke to this both in Munich and I think he's just spoken to it again during his visit to Paris today. You know where we have been, but our focus remains on working with our P-5+1 partners to bring Iran back to the negotiating table. We have, for a number of months, been trying to schedule another round. You saw the public statements in Munich by Foreign Minister Salehi that he is finally confirming now that we may be able to meet February 25th in Kazakhstan. I would note that the P-5+1 still has not had an official response from Iran with regard to those proposed dates for the meeting.

With regard to our approach, our approach is to encourage Iran to come clean about what's going on with its nuclear program, and if it takes steps, we will take steps in response. That has not changed. But we have to get back to the table if we're going to be able to test it.

QUESTION: So if these talks go ahead in Kazakhstan on February the 25th, what will you be hoping, concretely, that the Iranians will come up with and will present to you?

MS. NULAND: We want them to show a real willingness to make clear what this nuclear program is all about and to take steps to reassure the international community that they will meet their international obligations.

MS. NULAND: That's an interesting choice that he's made. One thing I will note is that Kazakhstan is a country that had a nuclear weapons program and voluntarily gave it up in the '90s. So it sets a powerful example.

QUESTION: So the United States would have no problem with going to talks in Kazakhstan then?

MS. NULAND: Again, we had made that proposal. We have heard --

QUESTION: Is that why you chose Kazakhstan as a potential venue?

MS. NULAND: I would simply say that there were a number of venues under discussion, and again, we still don't have an affirmative response back to us directly from the Iranians that they're ready to go. All we have is these comments by Foreign Minister Salehi in public.