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White House defends Iran deal as Israel, Saudi Arabia soften their positions

By Hannah Allam and Joel Greenberg

April 4, 2015

The White House on Monday redoubled efforts to tout a proposed nuclear deal with Iran as a “forever agreement” that comes with unprecedented transparency, a pledge that remains a hard sale to Israel and Saudi Arabia, the two closest U.S. allies in the Middle East.

Those two countries, the regional powers most preoccupied with Iran’s nuclear ambitions, offered reactions Monday that suggested lingering skepticism, but neither called for torpedoing the deal.

On the heels of an extensive weekend interview with The New York Times, President Barack Obama taped an interview with NPR in which he hammered home the administration’s message that the deal is unmatched in the scope of inspections, is built on real-life restrictions rather than trust, and that any sanctions relief could be reversed if Tehran doesn’t uphold its end of the agreement.

He also said requiring Iran to recognize Israel as part of the deal would be a “fundamental misjudgment.”

“We want Iran not to have nuclear weapons precisely because we can’t bank on the nature of the regime changing,” he told NPR. “If suddenly Iran transformed itself to Germany or Sweden or France then there would be a different set of conversations about their nuclear infrastructure.”

Energy Secretary Ernest Moniz, who was among the chief negotiators of the nuclear framework last week in the Swiss city of Lausanne, appeared Monday at the White House briefing to address criticism – from home and abroad – that the framework is long on trust and short on details, specifically about whether international inspectors can examine any Iranian nuclear facility at any time.

“This is not built upon trust. This is built upon hard-nosed requirements in terms of limitations on what they do at various timescales and on the access and transparency,” Moniz said.

Israel on Monday listed a set of changes it seeks in a final agreement, including ending research and development work on advanced centrifuges, closing the underground facility at Fordow, disclosing past nuclear developments that could have military dimensions, and allowing inspectors to go anywhere, anytime in Iran to verify the accord.

Yuval Steinitz, Israel’s minister for intelligence and strategic affairs, said that the changes would fill gaps in the proposed deal that would make it “more reasonable.”

But the list of change was especially notable because it fell well short of Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu’s previous demand that Iran’s nuclear program be completely dismantled as an existential threat to Israel. Instead, they appeared designed to counter accusations from Washington that Israel has offered no alternative to the preliminary agreement.

Steinitz said that Israel would try to persuade the United States and other world powers “not to sign this bad deal or at least to dramatically change or fix it.”

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Saudi Arabia Welcomes Iran Nuclear Deal, Seeks Region Free of WMD: Statement

Saudi Arabia's cabinet said on Monday it welcomed an interim deal between Iran and world powers over Iran's disputed nuclear program and that it hoped a final deal would rid the region of weapons of mass destruction. Iran and six world powers -- the United States, Britain, France, Germany, China and Russia -- reached a framework agreement on Thursday that would curb Tehran's nuclear research for at least a decade and gradually lift Western sanctions. For 11 days, it has led fellow Sunni Gulf Arab in air strikes against Houthi militiamen allied to Tehran in neighboring Yemen, just one of the region's war zones where the two powers back opposing sides.

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Iran’s neighbor and archenemy, Saudi Arabia, also took a publicly more conciliatory view toward the agreement on Monday, with the Saudi Cabinet issuing a statement that “expressed

hope that a final, binding and definitive agreement would be reached leading to the strengthening of security and stability” in the region and globally.

The statement seemed to adopt the position that Iran can have a nuclear program, saying the kingdom supports the right of states to pursue the peaceful use of nuclear energy, though it prefers the Arab League goal of a Middle East free from weapons of mass destruction – a repetition of the perennial jab at Israel’s undeclared nuclear arsenal.

The Saudi statement also held implicit messages for Iran about the ongoing sectarian-tinged conflicts in Syria, Iraq and Yemen, calling for a commitment “to the principles of good neighborliness and non-interference in the internal affairs of the Arab countries and respect of their sovereignty.” Saudi Arabia and Iran back opposing factions in all three wars.

In Washington, Saudi Ambassador Adel al Jubeir sounded more hesitant about the accord, saying that the Saudis want to “see what happens in terms of the details.” A top Saudi priority, al Jubeir said, is ensuring that inspections are “strict, intrusive and unprecedented.” That’s one area he cited as needing “more clarification.”

“There’s still a lot of work to be done, as American officials have said, in a number of areas, and it is not a foregone conclusion that there will be a deal in the end,” the ambassador told a small group of reporters at a briefing at Saudi Arabia’s embassy in Washington. “We hope that there will be a deal based on principles that the U.S. government has articulated to us.”

The tentative agreement reached with Iran by the United States and five other world powers requires Iran to reduce by about two-thirds the number of its installed centrifuges for enriching uranium. Iran also is supposed to stop enriching uranium at the Fordow facility for at least 15 years and convert it into a research center for peaceful purposes, redesign its heavy water research reactor at Arak so that it won’t produce weapons-grade plutonium, and allow international inspectors access to its nuclear facilities and supply chain.

In return, the United States and other nations would lift economic sanctions that have crippled the Iranian economy. The parties have agreed to a June 30 deadline for a final accord.