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Iran's uranium stockpile breach will shorten its breakout time to a nuclear weapon

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Iran's announcement that it has exceeded limits on its uranium stockpile puts it one step closer to becoming a nuclear state, shortening its breakout time to producing a nuclear weapon.

Iranian Foreign Minister Javad Zarif said Monday that Iran's stockpile of highly enriched uranium had breached the 300-kilogram (661-pound) limit set by the 2015 nuclear agreement. Zarif said the decision was "reversible," pending negotiations with the deal's remaining signatories. President Trump withdrew the United States from the agreement in May 2018.

Iran warned in May that it would no longer abide by the deal's limitations on its uranium enrichment and gave Europe 60 days to come up with a plan to help it avoid U.S. sanctions before it would start breaching other aspects.

"Our next step will be enriching uranium beyond the 3.67% allowed under the deal," Zarif said Monday. "The Europeans have failed to fulfill their promises of protecting Iran's interests under the deal."

Producing a nuclear weapon requires approximately 25 kilograms (55 pounds) of uranium enriched to 90 percent, according to the International Atomic Energy Agency. It would not take Iranian scientists long to increase the enrichment of their stockpile, says Matthew Kroenig, deputy director for strategy at the Atlantic Council's Scowcroft Center. He compared enrichment to riding a bike: the hardest part is just getting started.

"But if they want to pedal a little bit harder and go up to 90%, that's not very hard for them to do, they can do that pretty quickly," Kroenig told the *Washington Examiner*.

The cap on Iran's uranium stockpile was designed to extend the country's breakout capacity, the amount of time it would take for the regime to produce a nuclear weapon. Experts estimated Iran's breakout time was four to six weeks before the 2015 agreement, while the Obama administration claimed it was extended to one year afterward. As Iran continues to acquire more nuclear material, it could take other steps to increase highly enriched uranium production, such as installing better centrifuges used to enrich uranium, Kroenig says.

But Iran's announcement may serve as more of a political move than an earnest turn toward developing a weapon, says John Glaser, director of foreign policy studies at the Cato Institute.

"I think this is intended to be a signal that so long as the other parties to the agreements are not going to comply, neither will we," Glaser told the *Washington Examiner*.

In response to U.S. sanctions on Iran, Europe created the Instrument in Support of Trade Exchanges, a sort of bartering system that allows for trade with Iran by bypassing the U.S. financial system. INSTEX is supposed to help alleviate Iranian economic concerns, but it hasn't yet been used to trade anything subject to sanctions. Deputy Iranian foreign minister Abbas Araghchi said Europe needs to do more.

"I can say one step forward compared to the previous meetings we had. But it is still not enough, and it is still not meeting Iran's expectations," Araghchi told reporters Saturday, after a meeting with European partners in Austria.

Direct trade with Iran would put European companies at risk of being sanctioned by the United States, jeopardizing their access to the U.S. financial system. The Trump administration warned Friday that European companies will have to choose between doing business with the United States or Iran.

"I think the Europeans are stuck between a rock and a hard place, since they can't provide Iran with what Iran is asking for," Glaser said.

The Trump administration responded to Zarif's announcement by calling on Iran to halt all uranium enrichment activities.

"It was a mistake under the Iran nuclear deal to allow Iran to enrich uranium at any level," White House press secretary Stephanie Grisham said in a statement Monday. "There is little doubt that even before the deal's existence, Iran was violating its terms. We must restore the longstanding nonproliferation standard of no enrichment for Iran. The United States and its allies will never allow Iran to develop nuclear weapons."