

**Analysis:****Iran Sanctions, UN Security Council Resolution 2231, and the Path to Snapback****Gabriel Noronha***Fellow, Gemunder Center for Defense and Strategy*

On March 7, President Donald Trump disclosed he had written to Supreme Leader of the Islamic Republic of Iran Ali Khamenei, offering negotiations to eliminate Iran's nuclear program. Khamenei has publicly rejected these overtures, but Iran's supreme leader has a track record of publicly prohibiting talks while passively permitting quiet negotiations. Yet, international diplomacy in 2025 involving Iran is highly interrelated with the fate of United Nations Security Council Resolution (UNSCR) 2231, as any deal would most likely require the United Nations Security Council (UNSC) to rescind and/or replace this resolution. UNSCR 2231, passed by the United Nations (UN) in July 2015, enshrines a parallel process to the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) negotiated by the Obama administration. While the JCPOA was a non-binding set of political commitments between Iran and the United States, France, the United Kingdom, Germany, the European Union, China, and Russia that is now dead for all practical purposes, UNSCR 2231 and its restrictions on Iran remain legally binding on all UN Member States under international law.

However, according to the terms set forth in UNSCR 2231, all remaining UN sanctions on Iran are set to expire on October 18, 2025, unless, prior to that date, the original JCPOA participants choose to exercise the "snapback" mechanism created by the resolution or supersede the resolution with a replacement. Invoking the snapback option in advance of that deadline would reimpose the full panoply of UN sanctions previously levied on Iran. Once snapback occurs, Europe is expected to then cease its formal participation in the JCPOA and move to re-impose full banking and energy sanctions against Iran. Since the default outcome, if no action is taken, will be the expiration of UN sanctions, a pre-emptive snapback is necessary to flip the negotiating table and force Iran and its allies to barter for the relief of these sanctions.

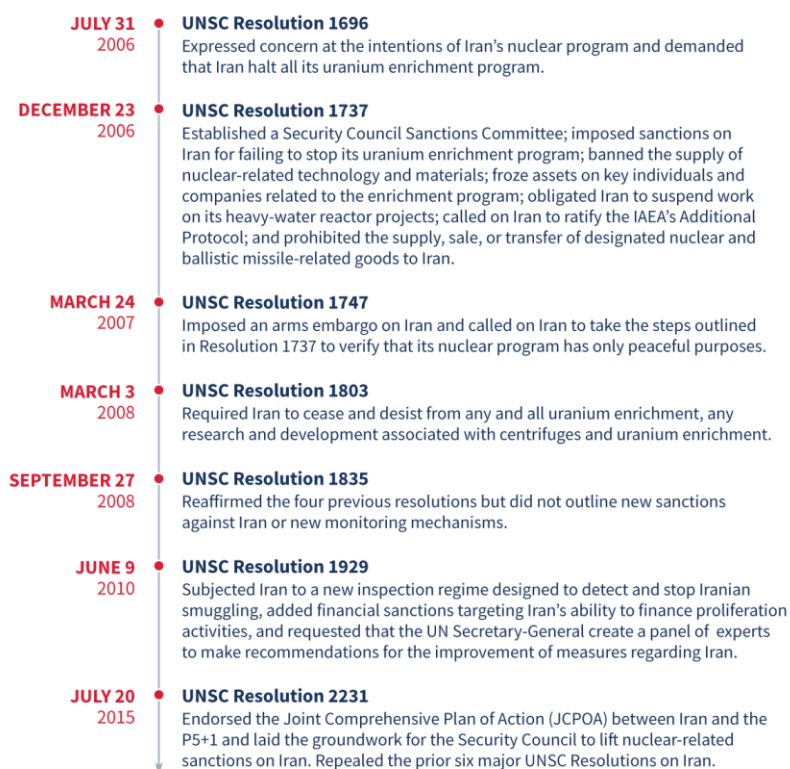
To successfully invoke snapback, timing will be everything. For tactical reasons and to maximize future leverage, the United States should encourage our European partners to exercise the snapback option around April 2025 or May 2025 at the latest. Once snapback is imposed, the United States must ensure the old UN sanctions architecture is properly revived and should build and fund a sanctions technical support partnership program to develop the enforcement capabilities and expertise of allies and partners to do so.

## Background:

From 2006 to 2010, the UNSC passed six major resolutions regarding Iran: UNSCR [1696](#) (2006); [1737](#) (2006); [1747](#) (2007); [1803](#) (2008); [1835](#) (2008); and [1929](#) (2010). These UNSCRs collectively and permanently:

- Prohibited Iran from enriching uranium and conducting reprocessing and heavy water-related activities;
- Prohibited Iranian ballistic missile testing, development, and launches;
- Sanctioned the transfer of nuclear- and missile-related technologies to Iran;
- Sanctioned the transfer of conventional weapons, missiles, and drones to and from Iran; and
- Froze foreign assets of, and imposed international travel bans against, nearly 100 Iranian individuals and entities.

### UN Security Council Resolutions About Iran



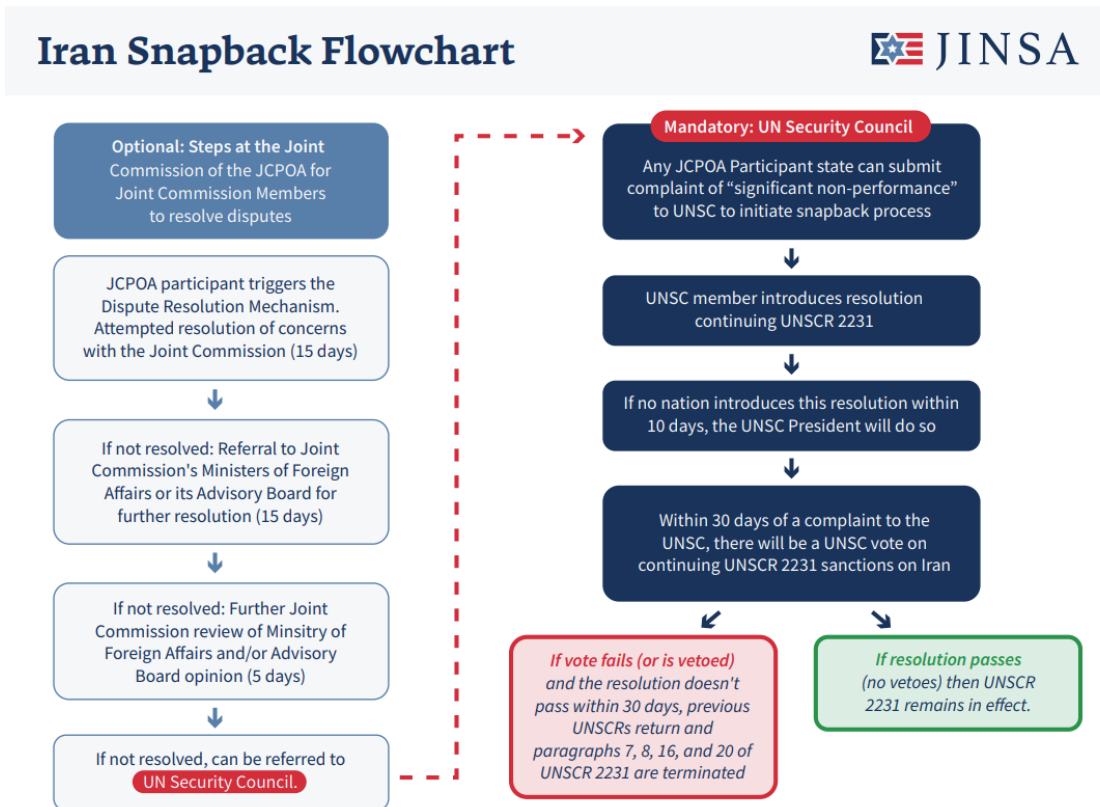
UNSCR 2231 repealed these prior six resolutions and consolidated some of their restrictions but included specific sunset dates at which each provision would expire. Thus, the conventional arms embargo and travel bans ended in October 2020 and the restrictions on transferring missiles and drones ended in October 2023. All other restrictions, as well as UNSCR 2231 itself and thus snapback, are scheduled to end on October 18, 2025.

# Major UN Security Council Resolution 2231 and JCPOA Sunsets

UNSCR 2231		JCPOA
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– U.N. arms embargo expired</li> <li>– Select visa bans expired</li> </ul>	<b>OCTOBER 18</b> 2020	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– Ballistic missile restrictions end</li> <li>– Ban on importing/exporting missile-related technology ends</li> <li>– Select visa bans expire</li> <li>– U.N. asset freezes expire</li> </ul>	<b>“Transition Day”</b> <b>OCTOBER 18</b> 2023	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– The EU pledges to terminate various regulations &amp; sanctions</li> <li>– The U.S. pledges to seek legislation to end various statutory sanctions</li> <li>– Iran pledges to ratify the IAEA’s Additional Protocol</li> </ul>
	<b>JULY 16</b> 2024	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– Limits on testing of advanced IR-6 and IR-8 centrifuges expire</li> <li>– Bans on production of IR-6 and IR-8 centrifuges (without rotors) expire</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– UNSC 2231 expires, terminating its provisions (including “snapback”)</li> <li>– The UNSC ends its formal consideration of Iran’s nuclear program</li> <li>– Remaining EU economic sanctions on Iran are lifted</li> </ul>	<b>“Termination Day”</b> <b>OCTOBER 18</b> 2025	
	<b>JANUARY 16</b> 2026	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– Restrictions on quantity of IR-1 centrifuges are lifted</li> <li>– Restrictions on testing of advanced IR-6 and IR-8 centrifuges are lifted</li> <li>– Restrictions on production of IR-6 and IR-8 centrifuges with rotors are lifted</li> <li>– Procurement channel for approving Iran’s nuclear-related imports is ended</li> </ul>
	<b>JANUARY 16</b> 2031	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– All caps on enrichment purity level expire</li> <li>– All caps on enriched uranium stockpile expire</li> <li>– New enrichment plants allowed</li> <li>– Plutonium reprocessing ban lifted</li> <li>– Heavy water reactors permitted</li> <li>– All caps on heavy water production/stockpiling expire</li> </ul>
	<b>JANUARY 16</b> 2036	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– IAEA monitoring of Iranian centrifuge production facilities ends</li> </ul>
	<b>JANUARY 16</b> 2041	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– IAEA monitoring of Iranian uranium mines and mills ends</li> </ul>

## How Does Snapback Work?

Any participant in the JCPOA that notifies the Security Council of an issue constituting “significant non-performance of commitments under the JCPOA” triggers a process that requires, within 30 days, the adoption of a new UN Security Council Resolution continuing UNSCR 2231 or else the notification leads to the automatic termination of UNSCR 2231 and the reimposition of all previous UN sanctions on Iran.



If “significant non-performance” is reported, a country supportive of the JCPOA would need to introduce a resolution to maintain UNSCR 2231. If no country introduces such a resolution, UNSCR 2231 directs the president of the Security Council to introduce a new resolution.

This resolution would then be voted on by the UN Security Council. It would have to pass in order for UNSCR 2231 and its eventual sanctions relief for Iran to continue. Otherwise, if the resolution fails, the operative portions of UNSCR 2231 are automatically terminated and the previous six UNSCRs are reactivated. The UN conventional arms embargo and missile/drone embargoes, which already expired in 2020 and 2023 respectively, would return.

Any permanent member of the UN Security Council (such as the United States) could veto a new resolution, thereby returning the original six permanent UN resolutions on Iran by themselves, without the support of a majority of Council members, or indeed of *any* other Council members.

## Can the United States Exercise Snapback?

The snapback mechanism in UNSCR 2231 outlines that JCPOA participants (defined as the United States, the United Kingdom, France, Germany, Russia, China, Iran, and the European Union) can exercise snapback, but does not specify any process by which these countries lose this right. The United States officially “ceased participation” in the JCPOA in May 2018. Nevertheless, in August 2020, then-Secretary of State Mike Pompeo asserted that since UNSCR 2231 did not expressly deny the right of snapback to countries that had ceased participation in the JCPOA, the United States still retained that right. Accordingly, the United States attempted to initiate snapback and notified the Security Council of Iran’s significant non-compliance with the JCPOA.

However, all other JCPOA participants (the United Kingdom, France, Germany, Russia, China, Iran, and the European Union) as well as all other UN Security Council members rejected this claim and asserted that U.S.-initiated snapback was invalid. With the Security Council split, UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres stated that the UN would not support the re-imposition of sanctions since the majority of its members did not believe that snapback had been legally imposed. Accordingly, no other UN member states took enforcement actions pursuant to snapback, rendering the move ineffective.

President Biden formally rescinded the attempt by the United States to unilaterally implement snapback in February 2021, withdrawing the Trump administration’s letters to the Security Council and expressing the view that snapback had no longer taken place.

So while the United States can assert a legal claim to initiate snapback, the reality that our allies and partners reject this claim and have already declared it invalid would deprive snapback of its intended effect—forcing UN member states to adhere to prior UN restrictions on Iran and preventing their expiration. A European-led snapback is therefore highly preferable to U.S.-led snapback.

## When Must Snapback be Used by?

Although UNSCR 2231, and the snapback mechanism it contains, does not expire until October 18, 2025, the real deadline for effectively invoking snapback is actually much sooner. This is a result of multiple factors: the length of time required for the snapback process to play out at the UN, the need to conduct the snapback process under favorable UN Security Council leadership, and the role of snapback in negotiations with Iran.

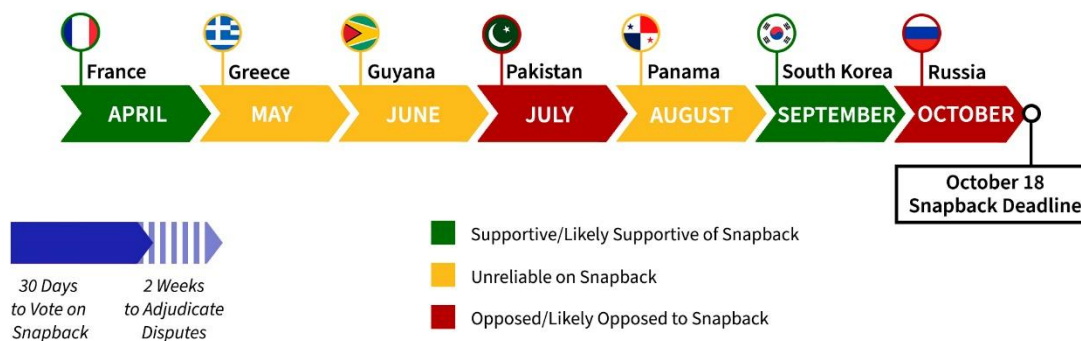
## UN Process Considerations for Snapback Timing

The process for invoking snapback and voting on a new resolution to continue UNSCR 2231 would take a maximum of 30 days. In the event that snapback is legally disputed (as Russia and China are likely to do), the determination over whether snapback has been imposed may take another one to two weeks. This means that, at the latest, snapback would have to be invoked six weeks prior to the October 18, 2025, deadline, or roughly by September 1, in order to be effective.

This drawn-out timeline and process leads to an important conclusion: snapback should be conducted during a period of two sequential Security Council presidencies whose leaders are favorable to snapback. The presidency of the UN Security Council rotates every month. Having a friendly president of the Security Council helps ensure that the procedure will be disposed of in a favorable manner, and that if the process is contested by Russia and China, that the president will rule that the snapback process is valid and that the previous UN Security Council Resolutions are back in place. Because the entire process could take up to six weeks, having back-to-back favorable Council presidents provides the most favorable environment to adjudicate snapback. Calibrating the ideal snapback window with these conditions moves the timeline back even further, based on the rotating schedule of Security Council Presidencies below.

While the United States, the United Kingdom, France, Russia, and China remain on the Council permanently, five other UN member states join the Council each year for two-year memberships. Currently, these are Algeria, Denmark, Ecuador, Greece, Guyana, Pakistan, Panama, Panama, Sierra Leone, Slovenia, and South Korea.

### 2025 Schedule of UNSC Presidencies



This schedule of Security Council presidencies points to the April 2025 window as the most ideal timing for snapback to occur with the minimal amount of pressure needed to convince the respective Presidents to act in the most effective way to ensure the success of snapback. May and June 2025 are the next best windows before the Security Council leadership and timing could both prove disastrous for snapback's success.

## Negotiations Considerations for Snapback Timing

The time needed to work through the UN process is not the only consideration for officials thinking about when to use the snapback tool.

Any future negotiations with Iran are best conducted when Iran's economy is under significant strain and their proxies are at their weakest. While the current situation—a degraded Hezbollah and the collapse of Iran's proxy state in Syria—is ideal on the political side, Iran's economy has not yet experienced the severe consequences that can be achieved through a more prolonged campaign of maximum economic pressure.

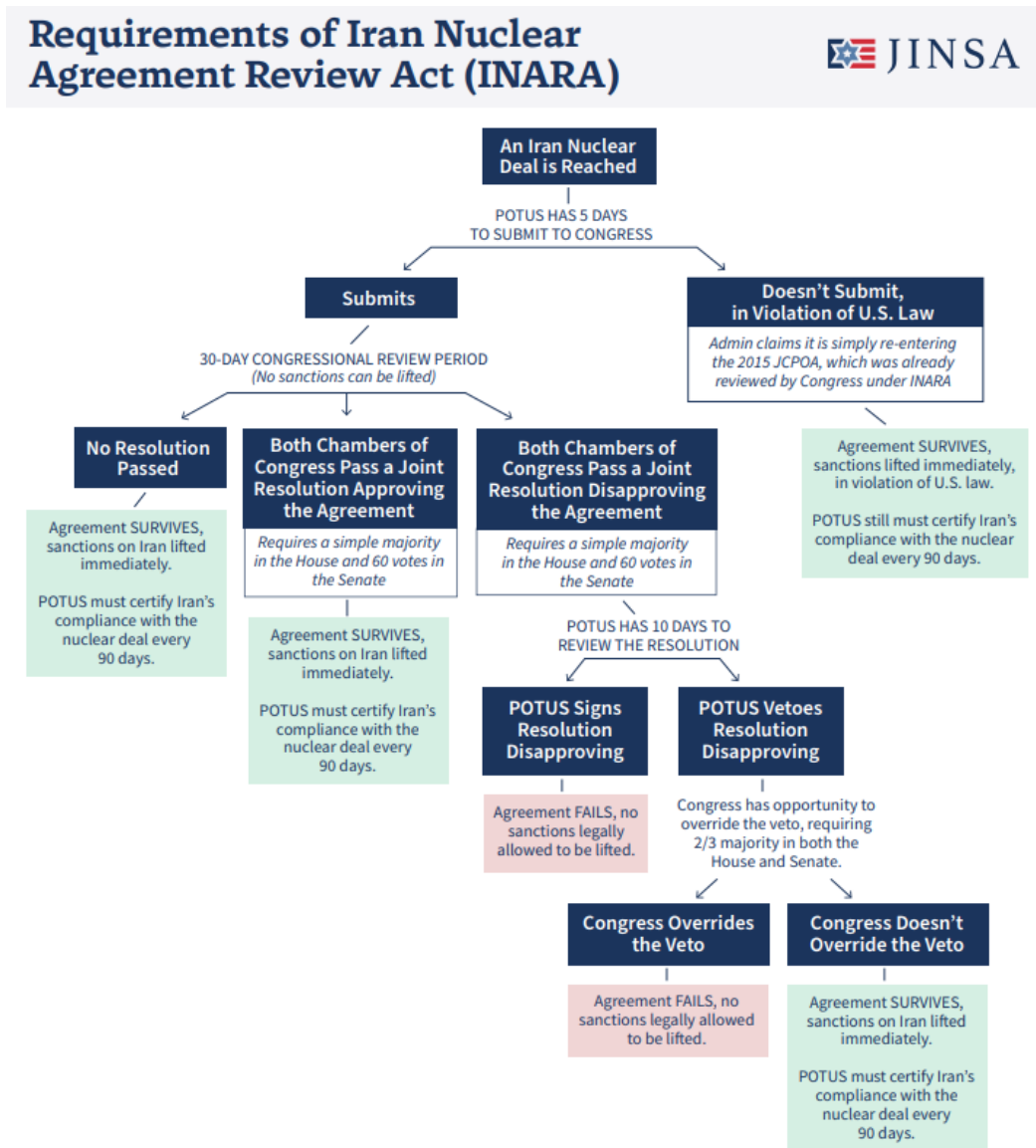
It will take several months for this pressure to be fully rebuilt, and around a year for the cumulative effects of “Maximum Pressure” to fully work their way through the Iranian economy and government budgets. Attempting to renegotiate and finalize a comprehensive nuclear deal prior to early summer 2025, the last possible time to reliably execute snapback, is unlikely to succeed and could even imperil the snapback if leaders falter at the finish line amid pressure and false promises of cooperation from Iranian and other foreign leaders. Accordingly, it is far better for the European governments to use snapback earlier than later, freeing diplomacy from the arbitrary timelines of UNSCR 2231's October expiration.

Unfortunately, European nations may attempt to leverage the pending expiration of UNSCR 2231 to force and conclude diplomatic negotiations or an agreement between the United States and Iran regarding its nuclear program in order to both avoid an expiration of UN measures and to prevent a situation where the resolution is snapped back and Iran retaliates through a promised withdrawal from the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT). According to this potential European logic, this would mean that any negotiations with Iran and conclusion of a deal must occur *before* the deadline for using snapback effectively expires in early summer 2025. Instead, the United States should officially request that Europe initiate snapback in the next two months, *ahead* of or during any negotiations.

Another wrinkle in timing considerations is that Congress must be provided with 30 days to review any potential new nuclear deal with Iran, as required by the Iran Nuclear Agreement Review Act of 2015 (INARA). Congress enacted the law in 2015 while the JCPOA was in the final stages of negotiations, anticipating chicanery from the Executive Branch. Once the Obama administration made clear its intent to circumvent Congress and not submit the agreement as a treaty, lawmakers of both parties demanded a say, noting the scale of U.S. commitments under the deal. An overwhelming majority of Congress—98 senators and 400 House members—ultimately voted to pass INARA, thereby ensuring their ability to review the agreement.

Crucially, Congress took pains to define the term “agreement” broadly to prevent the Obama administration from circumventing lawmakers. Under INARA, “agreement” means any agreement “related to the nuclear program of Iran that includes the United States, commits the United States to act, or in which the United States commits or otherwise agrees to act,

regardless of the form it takes.” The president must transmit that agreement regardless of what form it takes, even if it is just a political commitment.



Should Europe attempt to retain snapback as the backstop for getting a new deal completed, this need for a 30-day congressional review period would push the effective date for getting a deal or using snapback even earlier. Since they would want to preserve snapback as an option should the deal fail INARA review, this cuts the time left for negotiations (and the accompanying snapback backstop) back a month, even further limiting the window for successful negotiations. Simply put, under these constraints there is now an insufficient amount of time available to successfully execute such a diplomatic strategy. That is why it is preferable to convince Europe to enact snapback first and negotiate later.



## What are the Tangible Consequences of Snapback?

Snapback reinstates important and permanent international legal prohibitions against:

- All Iranian nuclear enrichment and reprocessing or heavy water-related activities, including research and development;
- All transfers to or from Iran of items, materials, equipment, goods and technology which could contribute to Iran's enrichment-related, reprocessing or heavy water-related activities;
- All transfers to or from Iran of items and technology that could contribute to the development of nuclear weapon delivery systems, such as ballistic missiles and long-range drones; and
- All transfers to or from Iran of conventional and advanced weapons.

Snapback further isolates Iran in the international community and raises the logistical and transactional costs for a wide range of activities, including by:

- Directing all UN member states to prevent Iran from conducting or advancing nuclear enrichment activities on their soil or by using their vessels and airplanes;
- Directing all UN member states to prevent Iran from violating the conventional & advanced weapons embargo on their soil or by using their vessels and airplanes;
- Calling on all UN member states to inspect all cargo to and from Iran in their territory, including at seaports and airports, if they have reasonable grounds to believe the supply, sale, or transfer of the cargo is prohibited under UNSCRs. Snapback would also permit and encourage states to inspect vessels on the high seas if there are similar suspicions that they are facilitating prohibited activities, and to deny such vessels fuel, supplies, and services;
- Calling on all UN member states to prohibit activities of Iranian banks and financial institutions that support Iran's nuclear activities or development of nuclear-delivery systems.
- Directing all UN member states to enforce the UN travel ban and asset freeze against 42 of Iran's most notorious terror operatives and nuclear officials. (Note: This includes the 21 remaining individuals on the UNSCR 2231 list, as well as 21 other individuals on the UNSCR 2231 Annex B list whose sanctions were lifted in the resolution); and
- Directing all UN member states to enforce an asset freeze against 76 Iranian entities involved in the regime's nuclear development and proliferation efforts. This asset freeze expired on October 18, 2023 but would be resurrected under snapback.

Additionally, the United Kingdom and European Union states have indicated they would cease their participation in the JCPOA once UNSCR 2231 is snapped back (they are unlikely to cease

participation beforehand in order not to jeopardize their ability to snapback UNSCR 2231). This will unlock the ability for the UK and EU states to implement full banking and energy sanctions that are inconsistent with the JCPOA.

Snapback would also formally resurrect UNSCR 1929's important Panel of Experts. The panel, in operation from 2010 to 2015, was tasked with gathering, examining, and analyzing information from UN member states about Iran's violations of other UNSCRs and with making recommendations to the UN Security Council on improvements to sanctions measures. The panel regularly [reported](#) to the UN Security Council on its findings, providing critical information about Iranian nuclear and terror activities. However, the panel's operations and funding require annual renewal by the UNSC. Russia is likely to veto further renewal, as they have recently done to the similar North Korea-focused Panel of Experts, particularly given Iranian military support for Russia. The United States should work with UN Secretary-General Guterres and other likeminded Security Council members on potential funding workarounds to continue the mission of the Panel.

## Recommendations

- The United States should formally request the United Kingdom, France, and Germany (E3) to invoke snapback before the end of May 2025, followed by a request that the United Kingdom and the European Union reimpose full financial, oil, and gas sanctions against the Iranian regime upon the reimposition of UN sanctions.
- In the aftermath of snapback, the U.S. Mission to the United Nations should push the Security Council and UN Secretary General to resume the full operation of UNSCR 1929's Panel of Experts. This should include strategizing on diplomatic pathways to ensure a non-veto of the Panel of Experts from Russia and China in a way that does not sacrifice other U.S. national security interests, such as support for Ukraine, Taiwan, or Israel.
- Congress and the Executive Branch should develop and fund a sanctions technical support program that would work with partner nations to identify and disrupt all instances of Iranian sanctions evasion. This partnership program would likely include the Departments of State, Treasury, and Commerce, and would train foreign sanctions and compliance officers, develop intelligence sharing processes, and support any UN efforts to expand enforcement of renewed Iran sanctions. This support would be particularly helpful for smaller non-EU member states that lack proper bureaucratic expertise and capacity to enforce complicated sanctions regimes. Israel may also be willing to partner with funding and/or intelligence support for this effort.
- Congress should ensure robust funding of the Treasury Department's sanctions enforcement teams, including expanding direct-hire authorities to onboard new sanctions professionals and ensure they are not caught up in ongoing hiring freeze initiatives.