Beirut (Reuters) - Iran will begin uranium enrichment at its Fordow plant and will install new nuclear equipment at its Natanz facility if it withdraws from a nuclear deal with major powers, said the spokesman for the Atomic Energy Organisation of Iran (AEOI).

The fate of the 2015 nuclear deal is unclear after the United States withdrew from it. The other signatory nations - Russia, China, Germany, Britain and France - are trying to salvage the accord, which imposed curbs on Iran’s nuclear program in return for a lifting of some economic sanctions.

Iran has two vast enrichment sites, at Natanz and Fordow. Much of Natanz is deep underground and Fordow is buried inside a mountain, which is widely believed to protect them from aerial bombardment.

AEOI spokesman Behrouz Kamalvandi said in an interview published on Wednesday that new work would begin on the nuclear program on the orders of Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei. He did not specify what kind of new equipment might be installed at Natanz.

“Currently the Supreme Leader has ordered that the programs be carried out within the parameters of the nuclear deal,” Kamalvandi told the Young Journalists’ Club (YJC) in an interview.

“And when he gives the order we will announce the programs for operating outside of the nuclear deal for reviving Fordow,” he added.

Ali Akbar Salehi, the head of the AEOI, announced last week that Iran had begun work on a facility to construct advanced centrifuges at Natanz.

The announcement appeared at least in part to be an effort to pressure the remaining signatories to preserve the 2015 deal.

Kamalvandi accused the United States and other Western countries of applying double standards by opposing Iran’s nuclear program, which he said was purely peaceful, while accepting the nuclear arms program of Tehran’s foe Israel.

“The West doesn’t criticize the Zionist regime and have even helped them,” the YJC quoted Kamalvandi as saying. “Without the help of the West and America this regime could never have obtained nuclear weapons.”

Israel is widely believed to be the Middle East’s only nuclear power. Israel has never confirmed or denied that it has a nuclear arsenal.

Reporting By Babak Dehghanpisheh; Editing by Gareth Jones
In 2015, Iran agreed a long-term deal on its nuclear programme with the P5+1 group of world powers - the US, UK, France, China, Russia and Germany. It came after years of tension over Iran’s alleged efforts to develop a nuclear weapon. Iran insisted that its nuclear programme was entirely peaceful, but the international community did not believe that.

Under the accord, Iran agreed to limit its sensitive nuclear activities and allow in international inspectors in return for the lifting of crippling economic sanctions. Here are the commitments set out in the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action.

### Uranium enrichment

Iran’s uranium stockpile will be reduced by 98% to 300kg for 15 years.

Enriched uranium is used to make reactor fuel, but also nuclear weapons.

Iran had two facilities - Natanz and Fordo - where uranium hexafluoride gas was fed into centrifuges to separate out the most fissile isotope, U-235. Low-enriched uranium, which has a 3%-4% concentration of U-235, can be used to produce fuel for nuclear power plants. "Weapons-grade" uranium is 90% enriched.

In July 2015, Iran had almost 20,000 centrifuges. Under the JCPOA, it was limited to installing no more than 5,060 of the oldest and least efficient centrifuges at Natanz until 2026 - 15 years after the deal's "implementation day" in January 2016.
Iran's uranium stockpile was reduced by 98% to 300kg (660lbs), a figure that must not be exceeded until 2031. It must also keep the stockpile's level of enrichment at 3.67%.

By January 2016, Iran had drastically reduced the number of centrifuges installed at Natanz and Fordo, and shipped tonnes of low-enriched uranium to Russia. In addition, research and development must take place only at Natanz and be limited until 2024. No enrichment will be permitted at Fordo until 2031, and the underground facility will be converted into a nuclear, physics and technology centre. The 1,044 centrifuges at the site will produce radioisotopes for use in medicine, agriculture, industry and science.

Plutonium pathway

Iran had been building a heavy-water nuclear facility near the town of Arak. Spent fuel from a heavy-water reactor contains plutonium suitable for a nuclear bomb. World powers had originally wanted Arak dismantled because of the proliferation risk. Under an interim nuclear deal agreed in 2013, Iran agreed not to commission or fuel the reactor.

Under the JCPOA, Iran said it would redesign the reactor so it could not produce any weapons-grade plutonium, and that all spent fuel would be sent out of the country as long as the modified reactor exists. Iran will not be permitted to build additional heavy-water reactors or accumulate any excess heavy water until 2031.

Covert activity

Iran is redesigning the Arak reactor so it cannot produce any weapons-grade plutonium.
Iran is required to allow IAEA inspectors to access any site they deem suspicious.

At the time of the agreement, then-US President Barack Obama's administration expressed confidence that the JCPOA would prevent Iran from building a nuclear programme in secret. Iran, it said, had committed to "extraordinary and robust monitoring, verification, and inspection".

Inspectors from the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA), the global nuclear watchdog, continuously monitor Iran's declared nuclear sites and also verify that no fissile material is moved covertly to a secret location to build a bomb.

Iran also agreed to implement the Additional Protocol to their IAEA Safeguards Agreement, which allows inspectors to access any site anywhere in the country they deem suspicious.

Until 2031, Iran will have 24 days to comply with any IAEA access request. If it refuses, an eight-member Joint Commission - including Iran - will rule on the issue. It can decide on punitive steps, including the reimposition of sanctions. A majority vote by the commission suffices.

'Break-out time'

Before July 2015, Iran had a large stockpile of enriched uranium and almost 20,000 centrifuges, enough to create eight to 10 bombs, according to the Obama administration.

US experts estimated then that if Iran had decided to rush to make a bomb, it would take two to three months until it had enough 90%-enriched uranium to build a nuclear weapon - the so-called "break-out time".

The Obama administration said the JCPOA would remove the key elements Iran would need to create a bomb and increase its break-out time to one year or more.

Iran also agreed not to engage in activities, including research and development, which could contribute to the development of a nuclear bomb.

In December 2015, the IAEA's board of governors voted to end its decade-long investigation into the possible military dimensions of Iran's nuclear programme. The agency's director-general, Yukiya Amano, said the report concluded that until 2003 Iran had conducted "a co-ordinated effort" on "a range of activities relevant to the development of a nuclear explosive device". Iran continued with some activities until 2009, but after that there were "no credible indications" of weapons development, he added.

Lifting sanctions

Sanctions previously imposed by the UN, US and EU in an attempt to force Iran to halt uranium enrichment crippled its economy, costing the country more than $160bn (£118bn) in oil revenue from 2012 to 2016 alone.

Under the deal, Iran gained access to more than $100bn in assets frozen overseas, and was able to resume selling oil on international markets and using the global financial system for trade.

Should Iran violate any aspect of the deal, the UN sanctions will automatically "snap back" into place for 10 years, with the possibility of a five-year extension.

If the Joint Commission cannot resolve a dispute, it will be referred to the UN Security Council.

Iran also agreed to the continuation of the UN arms embargo on the country for up to five years, although it could end earlier if the IAEA is satisfied that its nuclear programme is entirely peaceful. A UN ban on the import of ballistic missile technology will also remain in place for up to eight years.

Trump withdraws from Iran nuclear deal, isolating him further from world
President Donald Trump announced Tuesday he is quitting the Iran nuclear deal, pitting him against the United States’ closest allies and leaving the future of Tehran’s nuclear ambitions in question.

"It is clear to me that we cannot prevent an Iranian nuclear bomb under the decaying and rotten structure of the current agreement," Trump said from the White House Diplomatic Room. "The Iran deal is defective at its core. If we do nothing we know exactly what will happen."

In announcing his long-telegraphed decision, Trump said he would initiate new sanctions on the regime, crippling the touchstone agreement negotiated by his predecessor. Trump said any country that helps Iran obtain nuclear weapons would also be "strongly sanctioned."

Fact-checking Trump’s Iran speech

*This was a horrible one-sided deal that should have never, ever been made,* the President said in remarks that, at times, misrepresented the international agreement’s provisions. "It didn’t bring calm, it didn’t bring peace, and it never will."

Trump’s decision could have explosive consequences, straining longstanding US alliances, disrupting oil markets and boosting tensions in the Middle East, even if the US reversal doesn’t lead Iran to restart its atomic program.

While Trump supporters praised the move, analysts and critics said it undermines Washington’s credibility in future negotiations -- particularly with North Korea -- and potentially empowers the very hardliners in Iran that Trump vilified in his remarks.

It also further isolates Trump on the global stage, where he has angered even the staunchest US allies by reneging on US commitments to the Paris climate accord and pulling out of the Trans-Pacific Partnership trade agreement.

Reaction was swift

Former President Barack Obama, who rarely comments on his successor, issued a statement describing Trump’s move as a "serious mistake" that could leave the US with a "losing choice between a nuclear-armed Iran or another war in the Middle East."

Some of the US’ closest allies, the UK, France and Germany, issued a statement expressing "regret and concern" about the decision, emphasizing Iran’s compliance with the deal and their "continuing commitment" to the Joint Commission Plan of Action, as the deal is formally known.

Iran’s President, Hassan Rouhani, said he had ordered the country’s atomic industry to be ready to restart industrial uranium enrichment, while the country’s foreign minister said he would work with the pact’s remaining partners -- France, the UK, Germany, China and Russia -- to see whether they could ensure "full benefits for Iran. Outcome will determine our response," Javad Zarif tweeted.

Tensions in the region are high, with US officials citing "concerns" that Iran might attack Israel, without citing their evidence for the claim, while Israel called up reserves and the State Department issued a security alert for US citizens in the Golan Heights.

Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan told CNN that he fears that "new crises" will break out in the Middle East as a result of the US decision. "We don’t need new crises in the region,” Erdogan told CNN’s Becky Anderson.

US foes used the decision to portray the US as an international outlier, underscoring that the US, not Iran, is now technically in violation of the deal.
European leaders ‘disappointed’ in Trump’s withdrawal from Iran deal

"The position promulgated by Washington represents a significant violation of the JCPOA," the Russian foreign ministry said in a statement, describing Trump’s decision as "new confirmation of Washington's incompetence."

The Russians also said that US *claims regarding Iran’s absolutely legitimate nuclear activities are just a cover for keeping political scores with the country."

Indeed, senior Trump administration officials -- including Secretary of State Mike Pompeo and the Director of National Intelligence Daniel Coats -- have said Iran is adhering to its commitments under the deal.

But Trump has argued while they may be sticking to the letter of the accord, they have violated its spirit by fostering discord in the region, supporting groups like Hezbollah, Houthi rebels in Yemen, and the Syrian regime.

Trump derided the deal as an embarrassment that gave the regime dollars at the same time it sponsored terrorism.

"At the point when the US had maximum leverage, this disastrous deal gave this regime -- and it's a regime of great terror -- many billions of dollars, some of it in actually cash -- a great embarrassment to me as a citizen," Trump said.

Lawmakers, such as Pennsylvania Republican Sen. Pat Toomey, backed the decision.

"I support US withdrawal from the flawed, dangerous Iran nuclear deal," Toomey said, calling for the US to develop harsh new sanctions to punish Iran for "its grotesque human rights abuses, openly hostile aggression in the Middle East, extensive ballistic missile testing, and support for terrorism."

**Sanctions don't go into effect for months**

Trump’s Iran decision raises the stakes on North Korea

The sanctions could take months to go into effect as the US government develops guidance for companies and banks. But reapplying the sanctions -- which were lifted in exchange for Iran’s commitment to curb its nuclear program -- will effectively cripple the 2015 accord that Trump
has deemed a disaster.

The grace period could allow for further negotiations between US allies on a side agreement that addresses Trump’s concerns about the missile program and Tehran’s support for terror groups. Trump said Tuesday he was open to finding diplomatic means to address his concerns. But even if a deal is struck, it’s not clear how they would convince Iran to sign on, or whether Russia and China -- two other partners to the deal -- would agree.

New US sanctions will undoubtedly cause companies to reconsider investments in Iran and European firms may have no choice but to scale back or risk running afoul of US rules.

Questions surrounding the announcement also highlighted a seeming lack of strategic planning by the Trump administration.

US officials admit that during negotiations with European officials about a side deal to address Trump’s concerns about missiles and Iran’s regional activities, they did not discuss what they would do if the US walked away from the deal.

No Plan B

"We did not talk about a Plan B because we were focused on negotiating a supplemental agreement," a senior State Department official said Tuesday, "so we did not -- we did not talk about Plan B."

That official said the US is prepared to sanction Europeans with the end goal of creating a "global coalition" to work toward a comprehensive agreement that addresses all US concerns about Iran using the leverage of economic isolation.

It’s a plan that has former officials scratching their heads.

"It’s very difficult to see how we get a better deal given that Iran would have no reason to go back to the negotiating table and no reason to trust us," said Andrew Keller, a former deputy assistant secretary of state for sanctions and counter threat finance.

"Even if we were to get the Europeans to agree to something, what is the administration’s plan to get the Russians on board, the Chinese on board, not to mention the Iranians," Keller said. "And if there’s not a plan for a new and better deal, how can we possibly be safer outside of this one?"

The State Department official said the administration doesn’t know whether or to what degree Europeans will be on board -- discussions with European allies began this afternoon, the official said -- nor how Iran will react.

National security adviser John Bolton, an Iran hawk who nonetheless told people he was committed to providing all options to Trump, offered a variety of paths, including reimposing all sanctions, applying new sanctions, or allowing for more time to negotiate with the Europeans.

Trump determined that more time would not bridge disagreements, most pointedly his demand that Iran’s nuclear program be curbed past the current deal’s sunset in 2030.

Some White House officials were caught off guard when Trump announced on Twitter Monday that he was planning to make the announcement. Most aides expected him to wait until closer to Saturday, when the deadline for issuing a sanctions waiver landed.

One US official suggested the timing was moved up so as not to impede next week’s opening of the US embassy in Jerusalem, another move that could cause jitters in the Middle East.