U.S. says Iran rocket test breaches U.N. resolution

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Iran successfully tested a rocket that can deliver satellites into orbit, state television reported on Thursday, an action the United States said breaches a U.N. Security Council resolution because of its potential use in ballistic missile development.

Iranian state television showed footage of the firing of the rocket, mounted on a launchpad carrying pictures of Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini, founder of the Islamic Republic, and Supreme leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei.

The rocket launch violated United Nations Security Council Resolution 2231, State Department spokeswoman Heather Nauert said on Thursday.

That resolution, which endorsed a 2015 nuclear deal between Iran and world powers, calls upon Iran not to undertake activities related to ballistic missiles capable of delivering nuclear weapons, including launches using such technology. It stops short of explicitly barring such activity.

"We would consider that a violation of UNSCR 2231," Nauert said at a briefing with reporters when asked about the launch. "We consider that to be continued ballistic missile development. ... We believe that what happened overnight, in the early morning hours here in Washington, is inconsistent with the Security Council resolutions."

Tehran denies it has missiles designed to carry nuclear warheads.

"The Imam Khomeini Space Centre was officially opened with the successful test of the Simorgh (Phoenix) space launch vehicle," state television said. "The Simorgh can place a satellite weighing up to 250 kg (550 pounds) in an orbit of 500 km (311 miles)."

"The Imam Khomeini Space Centre ... is a large complex that includes all stages of the preparation, launch, control and guidance of satellites," state television added.

The United States this month slapped new economic sanctions on Iran over its ballistic missile program, and said Tehran's "malign activities" in the Middle East had undercut any "positive contributions" from the 2015 accord curbing its nuclear program.

President Donald Trump, who this month reluctantly recertified Iran's compliance with the nuclear deal, told the Wall Street Journal in an interview published this week that the United States had been "extremely nice" to Iran by saying it was complying with the terms of the deal.

Trump said he thinks the United States will declare Iran to be noncompliant at the next deadline, which is in October. "They don't comply," he told the Journal. "I would be surprised if they were in compliance."

Nauert on Thursday called Iran's rocket launch a "provocative action" that violated the "spirit" of the nuclear deal.

Iran says its space program is peaceful, but Western experts suspect it may be a cover for developing military missile technologies.

On Monday, Scott Kripowicz of the directorate for international affairs at the Pentagon's Missile Defense Agency told a conference in Israel: "Space-launch activities which involve multi-stage systems that further the development of technologies for intercontinental ballistic missiles (ICBM) are becoming a more realistic threat.

"In this region, Iran has successfully orbited small satellites and announced plans to orbit a larger satellite using the Simorgh space-launch vehicle, which could be configured to be an ICBM," Kripowicz said.

"Progress in Iran's space program could shorten the pathway to an ICBM, as space-launch vehicles use similar technologies, with the exception of their payloads," he added.