



April 29, 2008

Presidential Candidates on Iran's Nuclear Program—April Update

Compiled by Jelena Avramovic and Andrea Scheel

Below is a collection of recent quotes on Iran's nuclear program by three presidential candidates, Senators Hillary Clinton, John McCain and Barack Obama. This is the third report by ISIS in a series of compilations of candidate remarks on this issue. A summary of statements covering the period from [February 2007 through September 2007](#) and from [October 2007 through February 2008](#) is available on the ISIS website. Because of the recent prominence of this issue, we are also including in this document a section containing remarks made by senior campaign officials.

(bold-faced text below added by ISIS)

Senator Hillary Clinton:

[Interview on Good Morning America with Chris Cuomo:](#)

April 22, 2008

Well, the question was **if Iran were to launch a nuclear attack on Israel, what would our response be? And I want the Iranians to know that if I'm the president, we will attack Iran.** And I want them to understand that. Because it does mean that they have to look very carefully at their society, because whatever stage of development they might be in their nuclear weapons program **in the next 10 years during which they might foolishly consider launching an attack on Israel, we would be able to totally obliterate them.** That's a terrible thing to say, but those people who run Iran need to understand that, because that perhaps will deter them from doing something that would be reckless, foolish, and tragic.

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[Interview on Countdown with Keith Olbermann of MSNBC:](#)

April 21, 2008

If Iran does achieve what appears to be its continuing goal of obtaining nuclear weapons — and I think deterrence has not been effectively used in recent times... what I think the president should do and what our policy should be is to make it very clear to the Iranians that **they would be risking massive retaliation were they to launch a nuclear attack on Israel.**

In addition, if Iran were to become a nuclear power it could set off an arms race that would be incredibly dangerous and destabilizing because the countries in the region are not going to want Iran to be the only nuclear power so I could imagine that they would be rushing to obtain nuclear weapons themselves.

In order to forestall that, creating some kind of a security agreement where we said, no, you do not need to acquire nuclear weapons if you were the subject of an unprovoked nuclear attack by Iran, the United States and hopefully our NATO allies would respond to that as well.

[Philadelphia Democratic Debate:](#)

April 16, 2008

I think that we should be looking to create an umbrella of deterrence that goes much further than just Israel. Of course I would make it clear to the Iranians that **an attack on Israel would incur massive retaliation from the United States**, but I would do the same with other countries in the region... Number one, we've got to begin diplomatic engagement with Iran... And I would begin those discussions at a low level. I certainly would not meet with Ahmadinejad... But I would have a diplomatic process that would engage him.

And secondly, **we've got to deter other countries from feeling that they have to acquire nuclear weapons.** You can't go to the Saudis or the Kuwaitis or UAE and others who have a legitimate concern about Iran and say: Well, don't acquire these weapons to defend yourself unless you're also willing to say we will provide a deterrent backup and we will let the Iranians know that, yes, an attack on Israel would trigger massive retaliation, but so would an attack on those countries that are willing to go under this security umbrella and forswear their own nuclear ambitions.

And finally we cannot permit Iran to become a nuclear weapons power. And this administration has failed in our efforts to convince the rest of the world that that is a danger, not only to us and not just to Israel but to the region and beyond.

Therefore we have got to have this process that reaches out, beyond even who we would put under the security umbrella, to get the rest of the world on our side to try to impose the kind of sanctions and diplomatic efforts that might prevent this from occurring.

Senator Barack Obama:

[Interview on *Good Morning America* with Robin Roberts:](#) (responding to Senator Clinton's comment on nuclear deterrence and Iran)
April 22, 2008

I was absolutely clear about the fact that if Iran used nuclear weapons on Israel, or any of our allies, we would respond forcefully and swiftly. But, in some ways, this hypothetical presupposes a failure to begin with. We shouldn't allow Iran to have nuclear weapons, period. I have consistently said that I will do everything in my power to prevent them from having it and I have not ruled out military force as an option.

Talk using words like obliterate doesn't actually produce good results. I think the **Iranians can be confident that I will respond forcefully**, and it will be completely unacceptable if they attacked Israel, or any other of our allies in the region, with conventional weapons or nuclear weapons.

[Philadelphia Democratic Debate:](#)
April 16, 2008

I have said I will do whatever is required to prevent the Iranians from obtaining nuclear weapons. I believe that that **includes direct talks with the Iranians** where we are laying out very clearly for them, here are the issues that we find unacceptable, not only development of nuclear weapons but also funding terrorist organizations like Hamas and Hezbollah, as well as their anti-Israel rhetoric and threats towards Israel.

I believe that we can offer them carrots and sticks, but we've got to directly engage and make absolutely clear to them what our posture is. Now, my belief is that they should also know that **I will take no options off the table when it comes to preventing them from using nuclear weapons or obtaining nuclear weapons, and that would include any threats directed at Israel or any of our allies in the region.**

[Speech at Congregation Rodeph Shalom in Philadelphia:](#)
April 16, 2008

My interest in meeting with Iran is practical; it is not based on my assessment of who they are or my judgment about their values, but rather it is a practical assessment **in terms of how we can best achieve our ultimate goal, which is an Iran that is not threatening its neighbors, is not threatening Israel, does not possess nuclear weapons, is not funding organizations like Hezbollah and Hamas...** They may not agree to any one or all of those demands. But, by having made them directly, it becomes much more difficult for them, I think, to posture on the international stage and it then positions us to be able to obtain the kinds of assistance from potential allies that we need.

Senator John McCain:

[Interview with Andrea Mitchell of MSNBC:](#) (link to video at right)

April 16, 2008

MITCHELL: Let me ask you about foreign policy on Iran. You said that you not let Iran get a nuclear weapon. What would you do to stop Iran from getting a nuclear weapon if diplomacy did not solve the problem?

MCCAIN: **I will certainly not telegraph my punches. I will - I certainly will not tell the Iranians exactly what I would do.** First, I would exhaust all of the means that we have at our disposal, which are many; which are economic, trade, diplomatic and many other ways to put enormous pressure upon the Iranians through a league of democracies, democracies that share our common values, our common goals and our common perception of the threat to the region and the world that an Iranian nuclear weaponized nation would pose.

[...]

I'm confident that we can effectively to deter Iran from acquiring nuclear weapons without having to go to war. But, I will repeat: at the end of the day, we can not allow Iran to have a nuclear weapon.

[Interview with Newsweek's Michael Hirsh:](#)

April 7, 2008

HIRSH: On Iran, if all diplomatic options are exhausted, and economic pressure fails to force a halt to its nuclear program, would you consider going to war?

MCCAIN: I think we have to exhaust every possible option. I think there are many options that are viable, including those in conversations I had with [French President Nicolas] Sarkozy and [British Prime Minister Gordon] Brown on my recent trip to Europe, on a meaningful path to sanctions. But I will also state unequivocally that **we cannot afford to have Iran ... acquire nuclear weapons because of the obvious consequences--proliferation in the region, the threat to the existence of Israel, etc.**

[Interview with Hugh Hewitt on the *Hugh Hewitt Show*:](#)

March 17, 2008

The day I meet with the president of Iran will be the day after he announces his country no longer is dedicated to the extinction of the state of Israel, the day after they stop exporting these most lethal explosives into Iraq... I agree with the President of the United States that at the end of the day, Iran cannot be allowed to acquire nuclear weapons. So I don't want to elaborate that much more, but a country that is dedicated to the extinction of its neighbor, or a country in the region, i.e. Israel,

and acquires the capability to do so, this certainly poses a threat that has to be addressed.

...And **the military option is certainly the last option** that anyone, any reasonable president would want to pursue. But at the end of the day, I don't think that we can say that it's okay if Iran acquires a nuclear weapon, not only because of the threat [to] Israel, but every other nation in the region, as you know, will then acquire nuclear weapons. And the situation in the region does not lend itself to stability, as you well know.

[Interview with ABC News *This Week* anchor George Stephanopoulos](#)

February 17, 2008

STEPHANOPOULOS: How about Iran? You said many, many times the only thing worse than war with Iran is a nuclear Iran. **Would President McCain come to Congress before taking military action against Iran?**

MCCAIN: Unless it was some dire emergency that required -- you know, I mean, they were about to launch or something like that. But **under most -- almost all reasonable scenarios.**

Of course, George, I really believe that, having been a member of Congress all these years, that we have to have more of a partnership with the Congress. We have to have more consultation. We have to do those things. But there still is only one title of commander-in-chief, one person with that title.

Commentary by Campaign Advisers:

(Remarks shortened; see transcript for full text)

Dialogue between Senator Obama's foreign policy adviser, Susan E. Rice, and Senator Clinton's foreign policy adviser, James Rubin, on the candidates' stances on Iran [CNN Late Edition with Wolf Blitzer](#), April 1, 2008:

On negotiating with or without preconditions with Iran:

BLITZER: All right. The issue is whether President Obama, if he becomes president, would go ahead and meet with leaders of Iran or North Korea or Venezuela without preconditions. He says there's nothing wrong with that. She says there is something wrong with that.

RICE: Well, first of all, without preconditions doesn't mean without preparation, and that has been a point that Senator Clinton has chosen to distort. What Senator Obama has said is this, that it has long been in the United States' interests to deal directly with our

adversaries in order to make progress on critical issues that threaten our national security. That's how we dealt with the former Soviet Union. That's how we dealt with communist China. That was the policy that John F. Kennedy and Ronald Reagan, and Richard Nixon pursued to some success.

When it comes to the countries you listed, Senator Obama's view was as and when we think it is appropriate, after due preparation for direct negotiations at a senior level to proceed, he's willing to lead those negotiations without preconditions.

RUBIN: The difference between us is relatively small compared to the Bush administration's overall failure. Hillary Clinton, Senator Clinton, has made what I think is a pretty compelling point, that when you're dealing with people like Chavez, you're dealing with Ahmadinejad, you're dealing with crazy dictators like the Kim Jong-il in North Korea, that you want to be really, really careful that you don't have a meeting with the president that ends up giving advantages to those people.

Imagine Hugo Chavez -- please let me finish. Imagine Hugo Chavez taking such a meeting and using it to his advantage. But the idea of negotiating with Iran, yes, we have to negotiate with Iran. It would be sensible to get them at the table so that their leaders can't use the fact that the United States is avoiding them to their advantage.

It's a question of what level the meetings happen and how that meeting process is brought up the chain. And that's a relatively small difference compared to McCain and Bush and the failed foreign policy of the Bush administration.

On Senator Clinton's recent comments claiming that the United States would be in a position to "obliterate" Iran should it attack Israel with nuclear weapons:

RICE: There are differences also, Wolf, in judgment and temperament. We heard Senator Clinton say just a couple of weeks ago that we ought to obliterate Iran. That's the kind of cowboy language that we've heard in the past from George Bush and indeed John McCain, who talked about bomb, bomb, bomb Iran.

BLITZER: But before you respond, I want to read -- she raises that quote, and I heard Senator Clinton on "Good Morning America" say it this week, and I want you to explain what she was talking about.

"I want the Iranians to know that if I am the president, we will attack Iran in the next 10 years, during which they might foolishly consider launching an attack on Israel. We would be able to totally obliterate them."

What is she suggesting?

RUBIN: Wolf, she said a statement of fact. If you read the quote, she said the United States has the capability to obliterate Iran. That's what the quote says.

RICE: We will attack them?

RUBIN: She would be able -- we would be able to obliterate. That is a statement of fact, Wolf. Deterrence is a very, very important thing, and what Senator Clinton has done in this case, as Senator Obama has, is answer some questions about what would happen if a nuclear Iran -- Iran has nuclear weapons we're talking about -- and attacks Israel with nuclear weapons. In the debate, Senator Obama answered...

BLITZER: In that circumstance, the U.S. would obliterate Iran?

RUBIN: Under that circumstance, Hillary Clinton spoke very carefully. She said we would respond, and we have very, very strong capabilities. And she went further than that, and she explained, in a way that Senator Obama hasn't yet, how is the world going to deal with the situation like that? And I think to try to pick a word out and say that she said, as Susan said earlier, she was going to obliterate -- that's not what she said. She said that we were able to obliterate, which is technically a true statement of fact, and she said it was appropriate for the United States to be very serious in showing its commitment to Israel's security.

BLITZER: If Iran launched a nuclear attack against Israel, how would an Obama administration attack?

RICE: Well, of course, we would do anything necessary to defend and protect Israel. And we would extend -- we would treat an attack on Israel as an attack on the United States. There is no question about that.

On Senator Clinton's related comment stipulating that the United States would extend its nuclear deterrent to the Middle East:

RUBIN: In the region, we have a serious problem, and that is the possibility that Saudi Arabia would go nuclear in response to Iran, and Senator Clinton has thought this issue through in a serious way and she understands...

RICE: So who would she extend the shield to?

RUBIN: I'm just explaining to you that in the Gulf states, we need to have a discussion with them. The Gulf states like Saudi Arabia and Kuwait, we don't want them to get nuclear weapons. What we want to do is the responsible thing, is start talking to them about what we would all do as Iran becomes more and more dangerous. That's a responsible, wise commander in chief planning for the future.

RICE: Wolf, the real challenge here is to prevent Iran from getting nuclear weapons. Senator Obama has said repeatedly that when he's president, he will do everything possible to prevent that eventuality from happening.