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Presidential Candidates on Iran's Nuclear Program

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The following is a summary of statements made or initiatives proposed by the four leading presidential candidates: Hillary Clinton, Barack Obama, Mike Huckabee, and John McCain, between October 2007 and February 2008. A summary of statements covering the period from February through September 2007 is available on the ISIS website [here](#).

Hillary Clinton

February 21, 2008 University of Texas Democratic Debate:

“I’ve been a strong advocate of opening up such a diplomatic process with Iran, for a number of years. Because I think we should look for ways that we can possibly move countries that are adversarial to us, you know, toward the world community. It’s in our interests. It’s in the interests of the people in countries that, frankly, are oppressed, like Cuba, like Iran.

But there has been this difference between [Obama and I] over when and whether the president should offer a meeting, without preconditions, with those with whom we do not have diplomatic relations. And it should be part of a process, but I don’t think it should be offered in the beginning. Because I think that undermines the capacity for us to actually take the measure of somebody like Raul Castro or Ahmadinejad and others.”

December 4, 2007 NRP Democratic Debate:

Question: Senator Clinton, in September you voted on a resolution involving the Iranian Revolutionary Guards, which, among other things, called them proliferators of mass destruction. In view of this latest intelligence estimate, which says Iran's nuclear program was stopped in 2003, do you believe that's still true?

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Answer: “Well, there were other purposes for that resolution. It does label the Iranian Revolutionary Guard as a terrorist organization, and there is evidence that they do support Hamas and Hezbollah, as Senator Obama just said, and in addition have, until recently, been supplying weapons and technical advisers to various factions within Iraq. Since that resolution passed — which was non-binding and did not in any way authorize the president to take any action that would lead to war — our commanders on the ground in Iraq have announced that we've seen some progress from the Iranians backing off, no longer sending in weapons and materiel, and beginning to withdraw their technical advisers.”

Follow up question: “Forgive me, are the Revolutionary Guards proliferators of mass destruction?” **Answer:** “Well, many of us believe that... there was a very broadly based belief that they were pursuing a nuclear weapon.”

November/December 2007 Foreign Policy Magazine:

“Iran must conform to its nonproliferation obligations and must not be permitted to build or acquire nuclear weapons. If Iran does not comply with its own commitments and the will of the international community, all options must remain on the table. On the other hand, if Iran is in fact willing to end its nuclear weapons program, renounce sponsorship of terrorism, support Middle East peace, and play a constructive role in stabilizing Iraq, the United States should be prepared to offer Iran a carefully calibrated package of incentives.

Neither North Korea nor Iran will change course as a result of what we do with our own nuclear weapons, but taking dramatic steps to reduce our nuclear arsenal would build support for the coalitions we need to address the threat of nuclear proliferation and help the United States regain the moral high ground.”

October 30, 2007 Philadelphia Democratic Debate: “I believe we should be engaged in diplomacy right now with the Iranians. Everything should be on the table, not just their nuclear program. I've been advocating this for several years. I believe it strongly. But I also think when you go to the table to negotiate with an adversarial regime, you need both carrots and sticks. The Revolutionary Guard is deeply involved in the commercial activities of Iran. Having those economic sanctions hanging over their heads gives our negotiators one of the set of sticks that we need to try to make progress in dealing with a very complicated situation.”

Barack Obama

January 31, 2008 Los Angeles Democratic Debate: “I have disagreed with Senator Clinton on, for example, meeting with Iran. I think, and the national intelligence estimate, the last report suggested that if we are meeting with them, talking to them, and offering them both carrots and sticks, they are more likely to change their behavior. And we can do so in a way that does not ultimately cost billions of dollars, thousands of lives, and hurt our reputation around the world.”

December 4, 2007, NPR Debate: “I have said consistently since the beginning of this campaign that it is important for the president to lead diplomatic efforts, to try to

offer to Iran the prospect of joining the World Trade Organization, potential normalized relations over time, in exchange for changes in behavior. That's something that has to be pursued.”

November 1, 2007 Obama submits Senate Resolution 23: “Clarifying that the use of force against Iran is not authorized by the Authorization for the Use of Military Force Against Iraq, any resolution previously adopted, or any other provision of law.”

October 30, 2007 Philadelphia Democratic Debate: “I don't think we should be talking about attacking Iran at this point....what we should be doing is reaching out aggressively to our allies but also talking to our enemies and focusing on those areas where we do not accept their actions, whether it be terrorism or developing nuclear weapons, but also talking to Iran directly about the potential carrots that we can provide, in terms of them being involved in the World Trade Organization, or beginning to look at the possibilities of diplomatic relations being normalized... We have not made those serious attempts.... Now, there may come a point where those measures have been exhausted and Iran is on the verge of obtaining a nuclear weapon, where we have to consider other options, but we shouldn't talk about those options now when we haven't tried what would be a much more effective approach.”

Mike Huckabee

January 2008 Foreign Affairs Magazine: “The Bush administration has properly said that it will not take the military option for dealing with Iran off the table. Neither will I. But if we do not put other options on the table, eventually a military strike will become the only viable one... In order to contain Iran, it is essential to win in Iraq... Another way to contain Iran is through diplomacy... I welcome the Bush administration's new sanctions against Iran and its decision to designate Iran's Revolutionary Guards as a proliferator of weapons of mass destruction and its al Quds force as a supporter of terrorism. (The Democrats who claim that such measures are a step toward war are deluded: these moves are an attempt to use economic power instead of, not as a prelude to, using military power.)”

December 4, 2007 interview with David Paul Kuhn:

Kuhn: The NIE report, the National Intelligence Estimate on Iran. Have you been briefed or been able to take a look at it?

Huckabee: No.

Kuhn: Have you heard of the finding?

Huckabee: No.

(Kuhn then summarized the finding that Iran had stopped work on a clandestine nuclear program in 2003 and asked if it “adjusts your view on Iran in any sense.”)

Kuhn: What is your concern on Iran as of now?

Huckabee: I've a serious concern if they were to be able to weaponize nuclear material, and I think we all should, mainly because the statements of Ahmadinejad are certainly not conducive to a peaceful purpose for his having it and the fear that he would in fact weaponize it and use it. (After a pause) I don't know where the intelligence is coming from that says they have suspended the program or how

credible that is versus the view that they actually are expanding it. ... And I've heard, the last two weeks, supposed reports that they are accelerating it and it could be having a reactor in a much shorter period of time than originally been thought.

October 9, 2007 Michigan Republican Debate:

Question: Do you believe the president needs authorization of Congress to attack strategic targets in Iran, nuclear facilities?

Answer: A president has to do whatever is necessary to protect the American people. If we think Iran is building nuclear capacity that could be used against us in any way, including selling some of the nuclear capacity to some other terrorist group, then, yes, we have a right. I would do it in a heartbeat... if it's necessary to get it done because it's actionable right now, yes. If you have the time and the luxury of going to Congress, that's always better.

John McCain

February 7, 2008, Speech at the Conservative Political Action Conference (CPAC):

“I intend to make unmistakably clear to Iran we will not permit a government that espouses the destruction of the State of Israel as its fondest wish and pledges undying enmity to the United States to possess the weapons to advance their malevolent ambitions. Senator Clinton and Senator Obama will concede to our critics that our own actions to defend against its threats are responsible for fomenting the terrible evil of radical Islamic extremism, and their resolve to combat it will be as flawed as their judgment. I intend to defeat that threat by staying on offense and by marshaling every relevant agency of our government, and our allies, in the urgent necessity of defending the values, virtues and security of free people against those who despise all that is good about us.”

November/December 2007 Foreign Affairs Magazine:

“Iran, the world's chief state sponsor of terrorism, continues its deadly quest for nuclear weapons and the means to deliver them. Protected by a nuclear arsenal, Iran would be even more willing and able to sponsor terrorist attacks against any perceived enemy, including the United States and Israel, or even to pass nuclear materials to one of its allied terrorist networks. The next president must confront this threat directly, and that effort must begin with tougher political and economic sanctions. If the United Nations is unwilling to act, the United States must lead a group of like-minded countries to impose effective multilateral sanctions, such as restrictions on exports of refined gasoline, outside the UN framework. America and its partners should also privatize the sanctions effort by supporting a disinvestment campaign to isolate and delegitimize the regime in Tehran, whose policies are already opposed by many Iranian citizens. And military action, although not the preferred option, must remain on the table: Tehran must understand that it cannot win a showdown with the world.”

November 19, 2007 speech at Franklin Pierce University: “As we deal with the threat of a nuclear armed Iran there are many things we can do short of war to prevent Iranians from making that fateful decision. We can strengthen our diplomacy, stand up to the Russians and Chinese, and organize our allies and Iran's neighbors to impose tough economic sanctions that could undermine Iran's economy and unleash popular resentment of the regime that should cause them to reconsider their dangerous ambitions.”

October 9, 2007 Michigan Republican Debate:

Question: Do you believe the president needs authorization of Congress to attack strategic targets in Iran, nuclear facilities?

Answer: We're dealing, of course, with hypotheticals. If the situation is that it requires immediate action to ensure the security of the United States of America, that's what you take your oath to do, when you're inaugurated as president of the United States... But I would, at minimum consult with the leaders of Congress because there may come a time when you need the approval of Congress. And I believe that this is a possibility that is, maybe, closer to reality than we are discussing tonight.