Democratic candidates agree on expanded US military aggression in the Middle East

Patrick Martin
5 May 2008

In dueling television appearances Sunday morning, Democratic presidential candidates Barack Obama and Hillary Clinton declared their determination to escalate US military action in the Middle East, disagreeing mainly over which country should be targeted first.

Obama called for a "surge" of US troops into Afghanistan, while Clinton reaffirmed her bloodcurdling rhetoric about the "obliteration" of Iran.

Both candidates demonstrated that their criticism of the Bush administration's invasion and occupation of Iraq does not represent opposition to American militarism, but rather a concern—voiced even by significant sections of the military itself—that the war in Iraq has become a diversion from other, even more important, strategic objectives.

Obama was interviewed on the NBC News program "Meet the Press," while Clinton appeared on ABC's "This Week."

Tim Russert, host of "Meet the Press," cited an NBC News report that the Bush administration is drawing up plans for air strikes against Iranian weapons factories and military training facilities, on the pretext that these sites are helping insurgents kill US soldiers in Iraq. "If it could be demonstrated that was a fact, would you be in support of such limited attacks in Iran?" he asked Obama.

The Democratic candidate did not challenge the premise of the question, or recall that that Bush administration used similar propaganda before the invasion of Iraq, circulating claims of Iraqi links to terrorism and weapons of mass destruction that proved bogus. Instead, he said he would want to "take a look at the kind of evidence that the administration is putting forward, what these plans are exactly. I've always said that, you know, as commander in chief, I don't take military options off the table and I think it's appropriate for us to plan for a whole host of contingencies."

He went on to criticize the Bush administration because "Iran has been the biggest strategic beneficiary of our invasion of Iraq, they are stronger because of our decision to go in." It was necessary to begin redeploying US combat troops and disavow plans for a permanent occupation of Iraq in order to strengthen the US position in the region, he said.

When Russert asked him another loaded question—citing the suggestion of the US ambassador to Iraq, Ryan Crocker, that a quick withdrawal of US troops from Iraq could result in genocide—Obama again did not dispute the premise, let alone cite the estimates of more than one million Iraqi dead as a consequence of the US invasion and occupation. Instead, he reiterated his support for a "phased withdrawal" that would leave some US combat troops in Iraq at least until the end of 2010.

Asked about Hillary Clinton's statement that in the event of an Iranian nuclear attack on Israel, the United States military response would "obliterate" Iran, Obama criticized Clinton's choice of words, but not her avowed policy, which would amount to using US nuclear weapons to annihilate a country of 71 million people.

Comparing Clinton to George W. Bush, Obama said, "We have had a foreign policy of bluster and saber-rattling and tough talk, and, in the meantime, we make a series of strategic decisions that actually strengthen Iran."

When pressed by Russert, however, he said, "Israel is an ally of ours. It is the most important ally we have in the region, and there's no doubt that we would act forcefully and appropriately on any attack... nuclear or otherwise." Obama added that Clinton's threat of nuclear retaliation actually constituted acceptance of the idea that Iran might acquire nuclear weapons, when US foreign policy should directed at stopping such a development.

The final foreign policy question was on Afghanistan. Russert asked Obama directly, "Would you, as president, be willing to have a military surge in Afghanistan in order to, once and for all, eliminate the Taliban?"

Obama responded: "Yes. I think that's what we need. I think we need more troops there, I think we need to do a better job of reconstruction there. I think we have to be focused on Afghanistan. It is one of the reasons that I was opposed to the war in Iraq in the first place... And we're also going to have to address the situation in Pakistan, where we now have, in the federated areas, Al Qaeda and the Taliban

© World Socialist Web Site

setting up bases there."

The last response demonstrates most clearly that Obama is not an "antiwar" candidate in any genuine sense of the term. He wants (some) US troops out of Iraq, not to lessen the slaughter of the Iraqi people—as well as casualties among American soldiers—but to shift the scene of battle to Afghanistan, Pakistan, Syria or some other country, whose people will be targeted in the interests of American imperialism.

Clinton was interviewed for an hour by George Stephanopoulos of ABC News (a former top aide in the 1992 presidential campaign of her husband, and in the Clinton White House). She defended her comment about the "obliteration" of Iran, although the interviewer did not attempt to pin her down on the potential death toll of such a nuclear onslaught.

"Why would I have any regrets?" she said. "I'm asked a question about what I would do if Iran attacked our ally, a country that many of us have a great deal of, you know, connection with and feeling for, for all kinds of reasons. And, yes, we would have massive retaliation against Iran."

She also repeated her call for the United States to extend its nuclear "protection" to the Arab monarchies like Jordan, Saudi Arabia and the Persian Gulf sheikhdoms—countries which, except for Jordan, are still nominally at war with the state of Israel, and certainly more in danger from Israel's stockpile of 250 atomic bombs than from Iran's as-yet-nonexistent nuclear arsenal.

Clinton reiterated one of the standard pretexts used by the Bush administration to justify its aggression against Iraq, saying, "We have to prevent the proliferation of nuclear weapons throughout the region, because I'm not so concerned about them falling into the hands of states, which is bad enough, as I am about falling into the hands of terrorists."

She argued that a US offer of nuclear protection could forestall an effort by Saudi Arabia or some other Arab country to develop nuclear weapons on its own to offset the hypothetical Iranian bomb.

Clinton has repeatedly sought to position herself against Obama as the more hawkish and pro-Israeli of the Democratic candidates. Last week, she campaigned through North Carolina—home of one the biggest concentrations of US military personnel—with eight retired generals and admirals, including Gen. Hugh Shelton, former chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff.

Television footage of her campaign showed Clinton appearing at events in Fayetteville and Jacksonville (near the huge Ft. Bragg military base), in front of a podium backdrop decorated with the slogan "Solutions for a Strong Military."

Clinton's "obliteration" threat against Iran has produced a much bigger stir internationally than in the United States. Iranian diplomats filed a protest with the UN Security Council. A Saudi-based newspaper, the *Arab News*, described the threat as "the foreign politics of the madhouse," adding that "it demonstrates the same doltish ignorance that has distinguished Bush's foreign relations."

A British cabinet minister, Lord Mark Malloch-Brown, told the House of Lords, "it is probably not prudent in today's world to threaten to obliterate any other country and in many cases civilians resident in such a country."

The only significant exception to the predictable silence in the US media came from the *Boston Globe*, in an editorial headlined, "Hillary Strangelove," which concluded, "A presidential candidate who lightly commits to obliterating Iran—and, presumably, all the children, parents and grandparents in Iran—should not be answering the White House phone at any time of day or night."

It was notable that in their Sunday appearances, neither Obama nor Clinton made mention of the statement Friday by the Republican presidential nominee John McCain that oil was the reason for US military intervention in Iraq and the Persian Gulf, nor were they asked about it by their network interviewers.

McCain blurted out this remark at a town hall meeting at the Jewish Community Center in Denver, Colorado. According to press accounts, McCain told a crowd of 300, "My friends, I will have an energy policy that we will be talking about, which will eliminate our dependence on oil from the Middle East. That will prevent us from having ever to send our young men and women into conflict again in the Middle East."

The Republican candidate subsequently sought to back away from this too-frank admission. His campaign issued a "clarification" that in McCain's view, the US war with Iraq in 1991 was about oil, but the war launched by the Bush-Cheney administration in 2003 was not.

The Democratic candidates launched a whole series of largely demagogic sallies against McCain in the course of their hour-long interviews. But they declined to bring up his inadvertent admission of a central reason for the US invasion and occupation of Iraq, because they are equally committed to maintaining US control of the oil resources of the Middle East.

To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact

© World Socialist Web Site