As Hillary Clinton ratchets up rhetoric against Iran

Obama-linked think tank calls for US “nuclear umbrella” in Middle East

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US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton ratcheted up bellicose US rhetoric against Iran Wednesday, accusing the country of funding "terrorism" and interfering in the internal affairs of states throughout the Middle East. Her statements coincided with the release of a report by a Washington think tank with ties to the Obama administration suggesting that the US should establish a "nuclear umbrella" over the region.

Clinton made her remarks to reporters while flying to a NATO foreign ministers meeting in Brussels, having just completed her tour of the Middle East. The rhetorical attack was delivered in the context of growing indications that the Obama administration is continuing the essential policy of the Bush White House--seeking to isolate Iran while preparing for a possible military confrontation.

Making it clear that the question of Iran had been central to her talks in Israel, the occupied West Bank and Egypt, Clinton declared, "It is clear that Iran intends to interfere with the internal affairs of all these people and try to continue their efforts to fund terrorism, whether it's Hezbollah or Hamas or other proxies."

Washington has branded as "foreign terrorist organizations" both Hamas, which is the elected government of the Palestinians in the Gaza Strip, and Hezbollah, which is one of the most powerful political organizations in Lebanon and part of the national unity government, because both have resisted Israeli occupations.

Turning to the focus of Washington's confrontation with Iran, Clinton accused Iran of pursuing nuclear weapons and defended the US plan to deploy a missile defense system on the soil of Poland and the Czech Republic as a necessary response to a supposed Iranian threat.

Russia has charged that the shield is directed at neutralizing its own nuclear force, giving the US impunity in waging a preemptive nuclear war. For its part, the Iranian government has insisted that is nuclear power program is for peaceful purposes only.

Clinton claimed that the Eastern European regimes and Washington were united in confronting a perceived Iranian threat. "Missiles not only with a nuclear warhead, but a conventional warhead, or some other chemical, biological weapon, could very well be in the hands of a regime like Iran's, which we know will use whatever advantage they have to intimidate as far as they think their voice can reach," she said.

She was questioned on the shield because of a reported secret letter sent last month by President Barack Obama to his Russian counterpart, Dmitry Medvedev, suggesting that if Moscow collaborated with Washington in suppressing the supposed Iranian nuclear threat, the US would consider scrapping the proposed missile shield installations in Eastern Europe. After accounts of the letter appeared in the media, both Obama and Medvedev denied that it offered a direct "quid pro quo" deal.

In another diplomatic initiative, Clinton announced the dispatch of American envoys to Damascus in a bid to revive US-Syrian diplomatic relations. The move is seen as a bid to drive a wedge between Syria and Iran. This was made explicit by Senator John Kerry, the Democratic chairman of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, who recently visited Syria. Supporting the opening of ties with Syria and loosening of sanctions, Kerry insisted in a speech Wednesday at the Brookings Institution that "Syria's long-term interests lie not with Iran but with its Sunni neighbors and the West."

In the midst of these diplomatic maneuvers against Iran, a Washington think tank with close ties to the Obama administration issued a report [here in pdf format] Wednesday advocating the extension of a Cold War-style "nuclear umbrella" over the Middle East, and warning that Israel is seriously considering unilateral military action against the Iranian nuclear program.

The report issued by the Washington Institute on Near East Policy (WINEP), a pro-Israeli think tank, was billed as the work of a "Presidential Task Force" and was titled, "Preventing a cascade of instability: US engagement to check Iranian nuclear progress."

The 15-member panel that prepared the document included former State Department and National Security Council officials, members of Congress and the former chief of the US

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Strategic Command.

Also listed as having endorsed an earlier draft of the report was Dennis Ross, who worked at WINEP for seven years before being recently appointed as the Obama administration's special envoy for the Persian Gulf.

The report frames the US confrontation with Iran over the nuclear question as part of a broader struggle for American hegemony throughout the region, including the ongoing wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. By taking strong measures against Iran, it argues, Washington can strengthen its position throughout the Middle East. "Vigorous steps to shore up regional stability could check unfounded perceptions by some that the US star is waning," the report states.

Clearly suggesting that the conflict has been deliberately sought as a means of furthering key strategic objectives, the authors write, "Confronting the Iran nuclear program also offers opportunities to advance US interests... to deepen US relationships with its Middle East friends."

Further on, the report presents a proposal that would not only "deepen US relations" with various countries in the Middle East, but place them under the direct protection of Washington's nuclear arsenal.

"One issue needing much more thought is how a US nuclear guarantee (or ‘umbrella') would work and whether it is appropriate in the Middle East. Many in the Gulf seem to think that the region already benefits from a de facto US guarantee; they may welcome its formalization."

During the course of the 2008 election campaign, then-Democratic Party presidential hopeful Hillary Clinton declared her support for just such an umbrella, vowing that as president she would "obliterate" Iran in the event it attacked Israel.

"An attack on Israel," she said in a Democratic candidates' debate last April, "would trigger massive retaliation. But so would an attack on those countries [she mentioned by name the monarchies of Saudi Arabia, the UAE, and Kuwait] that are willing to go under the security umbrella and forswear their own nuclear ambitions."

The WINEP report notes, "The Cold War experience suggests that deployments of weapons and troops are often necessary to make pledges [of deterrence] credible." It likewise indicates that such a nuclear umbrella should be formalized through a congressionally approved treaty.

Obviously, such proposals encompass far more than the US confrontation with Iran. They would have the effect of turning the other oil-rich countries of the Persian Gulf and much of the Middle East into a declared American military protectorate. Such an arrangement would have far-reaching strategic implications, above all in the conflict between American imperialism and its rivals in Europe and Asia for control of markets and resources under conditions of the deepening global slump.

The report indicates that the Obama administration's declared openness to negotiations with Iran is aimed in large part at preparing the groundwork for possible military action. "Restoring confidence in US willingness to make extraordinary efforts to resolve the standoff with Iran is important in the event that Washington, after careful consideration of the advantages and disadvantages of any course of action, opts for other policy instruments to prevent Iran's development of a nuclear weapon," it declares.

Other proposals floated in the report include a call for the tightening of sanctions against Iran and extending Washington's current efforts to intimidate financial institutions and industrial firms from doing business with Iran. In particular, it calls for pressure aimed at preventing the construction of oil refineries in Iran in an attempt to exploit the country's shortage of gasoline.

The report also warns that the Israeli government is considering a unilateral attack on Iran's nuclear program and sees its window of opportunity closing.

"Whatever Americans may think, Israeli leaders seem convinced that at least for now they have a military option," it states. However, they "see the option fading over the next one to two years" both because of Iranian progress in its nuclear project and the pending shipment of more advanced Russian S-300 surface-to-air missiles to Teheran. "Israel therefore may feel compelled to act before the option disappears," the report warns, adding that the US could "pay a high price" for such a strike.

One of the report's recommendations, however, is that in response to Russia supplying S-300 missiles, which Moscow has portrayed as a stabilizing action, dissuading Israeli aggression, Washington should "promptly provide Israel with the capabilities to continue to threaten high-value Iranian targets--for instance, with more modern aircraft."

The report, whose authors include Obama's top advisor on the region, makes it clear that the new administration is not only continuing the occupation of Iraq and escalating the war in Afghanistan, but preparing for a new and potentially far more catastrophic military confrontation with Iran.

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