

Clinton stirs Israeli fears US will accept nuclear Iran



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Secretary of State Hillary Clinton on Wednesday stirred Israeli fears that Washington would accept a nuclear armed Iran when she raised the idea of a US "defence umbrella" for Gulf allies.

However, Clinton, during a visit to Thailand for an Asian security conference, said later that she was not announcing a new policy and simply wanted to turn Iran away from pursuing a nuclear weapon.

Clinton told Thai television in Bangkok that President Barack Obama's administration was still open to engage Iran in talks about its nuclear programme but warned that Tehran would not be safer if it obtains a bomb.

"We will still hold the door open" to talks over its nuclear program Clinton said.

"But we also have made it clear that we will take action, as I've said time and time again, crippling action, working to upgrade the defence of our partners in the region," she said.

Her previous references to "crippling action" have referred to sanctions.

"We want Iran to calculate what I think is a fair assessment: that if the US extends a defence umbrella over the region, if we do even more to support the military capacity of those in the Gulf, it is unlikely Iran will be any stronger or safer," Clinton said.

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"They won't be able to intimidate and dominate as they apparently believe they can once they have a nuclear weapon."

In Jerusalem, Israeli Intelligence Services Minister Dan Meridor criticised her remarks.

"I heard without enthusiasm the American declarations according to which the United States will defend their allies in the event that Iran uses nuclear weapons, as if they were already resigned to such a possibility," he said.

"This is a mistake," Meridor said. "We cannot act now by assuming that Iran will be able to arm itself with a nuclear weapon, but to prevent such a possibility."

Clinton made her initial comments during a recording for a Thai television show before heading to Asia's largest security forum in the Thai resort island of Phuket, where talks were expected to focus on possible nuclear links between North Korea and Myanmar.

Speaking at a press conference in Phuket later, Clinton suggested her remarks were misunderstood.

"I'm not suggesting a new policy. In fact we all believe that Iran's pursuit of nuclear weapons is unacceptable, and I've said that many times," she said.

"I'm simply pointing out that Iran needs to understand that it's pursuit of nuclear weapons will not advance its security or achieve its goals of enhancing its power regionally and globally," she said.

"The focus that Iran must have is that it faces the prospect -- if it pursues nuclear weapons -- of sparking an arms race in the region," she said.

"That should affect a calculation of what Iran intends to do and what it believes is in its national security interest because it may render Iran less secure, not more secure," she said.

US lawmakers on Monday stepped up pressure on Obama to ready tough new economic sanctions on Iran in the event Tehran fails to freeze its uranium enrichment programme by late 2009.

Iran, labouring under UN sanctions for its defiance, has rejected the West's charges that it seeks nuclear weapons under cover of a civilian atomic energy program.

Obama has said he wants a diplomatic solution to the standoff but has repeatedly warned that he has not ruled out the use of force.

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