

Israel 'will attack Iran' before new US president sworn in, John Bolton predicts

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John Bolton, the former American ambassador to the United Nations, has predicted that Israel could attack Iran after the November presidential election but before George W Bush's successor is sworn in.

The Arab world would be "pleased" by Israeli strikes against Iranian nuclear facilities, he said in an interview with The Daily Telegraph.

"It [the reaction] will be positive privately. I think there'll be public denunciations but no action," he said.

Mr Bolton, an unflinching hawk who proposes military action to stop Iran developing nuclear weapons, bemoaned what he sees as a lack of will by the Bush administration to itself contemplate military strikes.

"It's clear that the administration has essentially given up that possibility," he said. "I don't think it's serious any more. If you had asked me a year ago I would have said I thought it was a real possibility. I just don't think it's in the cards."

Israel, however, still had a determination to prevent a nuclear Iran, he argued. The "optimal window" for strikes would be between the November 4 election and the inauguration on January 20, 2009.

"The Israelis have one eye on the calendar because of the pace at which the Iranians are proceeding both to develop their nuclear weapons capability and to do things like increase their defences by buying new Russian anti-aircraft systems and further harden the nuclear installations .

"They're also obviously looking at the American election calendar. My judgement is they would not want to do anything before our election because there's no telling what impact it could have on the election."

But waiting for either Barack Obama, the Democratic candidate, or his Republican opponent John McCain to be installed in the White House could preclude military action happening for the next four years or at least delay it.

"An Obama victory would rule out military action by the Israelis because they would fear the consequences given the approach Obama has taken to foreign policy," said Mr Bolton, who was Mr Bush's ambassador to the UN from 2005 to 2006.

"With McCain they might still be looking at a delay. Given that time is on Iran's side, I think the argument for military action is sooner rather than later absent some other development."

The Iran policy of Mr McCain, whom Mr Bolton supports, was "much more realistic than the Bush

administration's stance".

Mr Obama has said he will open high-level talks with Iran "without preconditions" while Mr McCain views attacking Iran as a lesser evil than allowing Iran to become a nuclear power.

William Kristol, a prominent neo-conservative, told Fox News on Sunday that an Obama victory could prompt Mr Bush to launch attacks against Iran. "If the president thought John McCain was going to be the next president, he would think it more appropriate to let the next president make that decision than do it on his way out," he said.

Last week, Israeli jets carried out a long-range exercise over the Mediterranean that American intelligence officials concluded was practice for air strikes against Iran. Mohammad Ali Hosseini, spokesman for the Iranian foreign ministry, said this was an act of "psychological warfare" that would be futile.

"They do not have the capacity to threaten the Islamic Republic of Iran. They [Israel] have a number of domestic crises and they want to extrapolate it to cover others. Sometimes they come up with these empty slogans."

He added that Tehran would deliver a "devastating" response to any attack.

On Friday, Mohamed ElBaradei, head of the UN International Atomic Energy Agency, said military action against Iran would turn the Middle East into a "fireball" and accelerate Iran's nuclear programme.

Mr Bolton, however, dismissed such sentiments as scaremongering. "The key point would be for the Israelis to break Iran's control over the nuclear fuel cycle and that could be accomplished for example by destroying the uranium conversion facility at Esfahan or the uranium enrichment facility at Natanz.

"That doesn't end the problem but it buys time during which a more permanent solution might be found.... How long? That would be hard to say. Depends on the extent of the destruction."

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