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Israeli prime minister Ehud Olmert told visiting US Senator Barack Obama Wednesday night, July 23 that within little more than a year, Iran would be able to assemble all the components for a nuclear bomb. He said the international penalties to force Iran to give up its nuclear plans must be speeded up without removing the military option from the table.

Earlier, senior Israeli defense sources reported that Iran is set to receive Russian S-300 anti-air missiles for fighting off strikes against its nuclear facilities by early September, seriously complicating any air attack.

DEBKAfile's military sources note that this was the second statement in four days by Israeli security sources, stressing the need for expeditious action to preempt Iran's military nuclear progress.

It is not by chance that this latest statement coincided with the visit by the Democratic presidential nominee Barack Obama. He spoke in general about his commitments on Iran if he wins the race to the White House. This second Israeli statement indicated a specific time frame for action.

The Israeli sources, who refused to be named, said the first delivery of S-300 missile batteries was expected as soon as early September, weeks away, and could take six-to 12 months to be deployed and made operable.

"There is no doubt," he said, "that the S-300s would make an air attack more difficult.

This assessment clashed with a statement by US defense secretary Robert Gates who said on July 9 "it's highly unlikely that those air defense missiles would be in Iranian hands any time soon." Gates is known to be a firm objector to a US or Israeli military operation against Iran's nuclear sites.

Israel's chief of staff, Lt. Gen. Gabi Ashkenazi, who is spending a week in Washington will no doubt update American officials on Israel's latest intelligence on Iran's plans.

Saturday night, July 20, an Israeli "security-political official" estimated that if diplomatic efforts to bring Iran to give up uranium enrichment failed, President George W. Bush would order Iran attacked between the November 4 presidential election and his exit from the White House in January. The quote was aired shortly after the six-power talks with Iran in Geneva — with US official participation for the first time — ended without an answer from Tehran.

One of the purposes of the Israeli air force drill over the Mediterranean last month, widely seen as a dress rehearsal for a possible raid on Iran, was to practice passes against the S-300 batteries which Greece acquired from Russia via Cyprus.

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World must prevent Iran from getting nuclear weapon, says Barack Obama
Mark Tran and agencies guardian.co.uk, Wednesday July 23, 2008 Article history

Barack Obama today reiterated his hawkish stance towards Iran by saying he would "take no options off the table".

The Democratic presidential candidate, echoing George Bush's stance on Iran, warned that a nuclear Iran "would be a game-changing situation", not just in the Middle East but in the rest of the world.

"A nuclear Iran would pose a grave threat and the world must prevent Iran from obtaining a nuclear weapon," Obama told reporters on a visit to Israel.

Obama, who sounded less than self-assured on the complexities of the peace process between Israel and the Palestinians, was forthright about Iran in comments that will reassure the Israeli leadership.

Last month, Israel carried out a major military exercise in a less-than-subtle hint to Iran that it was prepared to bombard Tehran's nuclear facilities, no matter the diplomatic repercussions.

"I will take no options off the table in dealing with Iranian threat," Obama told an audience in the Israeli town of Sderot, which has been the frequent target of rocket attacks from Gaza until last month's truce with Hamas. "What remains of non-proliferation would disintegrate. Many of these countries have ties to terrorists. That is our single most important threat."

In remarks that will go down well with Israelis, Obama stuck to his controversial remark that Jerusalem should be capital of Israel.

"It is important we don't slice the city in half," he said, before backtracking slightly by saying the status of Jerusalem should be left to final negotiations.

Obama, who faces John McCain in the November election, dismayed Palestinian leaders last month when he said Jerusalem should be Israel's "undivided" capital, even though no US government has recognised Israel's 1967 annexation of East Jerusalem, claimed by the Palestinians as their future capital.

Later, Obama said he used "poor phrasing" when he made the remarks, but will have angered Palestinians with his comments on Jerusalem at Sderot.

Kadoura Fares, an MP in Abbas' Fatah party, strongly criticised Obama's comments on Jerusalem. "His correction was not enough," Fares said. "He should have said he recognises the Palestinian right to freedom."

During his visit to Israel - part of a tour that has already taken him to Afghanistan and Iraq and ends in Britain this weekend - Obama pledged to "not waste a minute" in tackling the Middle East conflict if elected president, Palestinian officials said.

Obama made the commitment after meeting the Palestinian president, Mahmoud Abbas, in Ramallah in the West Bank.

Saeb Erekat, an aide to Abbas, said Obama was willing to immediately engage in peace efforts. "Obama confirmed to President Abbas that he will be a constructive partner in the peace process," he said, adding that Obama told Abbas he would "not waste a minute" if elected in November.

Obama talked to Palestinian leaders after earlier telling Israeli officials he wanted to be a partner in bringing peace to the region.

"I'm here on this trip to reaffirm the special relationship between Israel and the United States, my abiding commitment to its security, and my hope that I can serve as an effective partner, whether as a ... senator or as a president, in bringing about a more lasting peace in the region," he said.

Obama, an Illinois senator, described Israel as a "miracle that has blossomed" since its founding 60 years ago, after meeting the Israeli president, Shimon Peres.

Later, wearing a Jewish skullcap, he laid a white wreath at the Yad Vashem Holocaust memorial museum. "Let our children come here and know this history so that they can add their voices to proclaim 'never again'," Obama wrote in the museum's visitors' book.

Obama met the Israeli defence minister, Ehud Barak, and the opposition leader, Benjamin Netanyahu. He will also hold talks with the foreign minister, Tzipi Livni, and the prime minister, Ehud Olmert - who is fighting for his political survival amid accusations of corruption.