

World Leaders Condemn Iranian's Call to Wipe Israel 'Off the Map'

By Mary Jordan and Karl Vick
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LONDON, Oct. 27 -- Leaders around the world on Thursday condemned a call by Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad that Israel be "wiped off the map," and a top Iranian official said that mass demonstrations in his country on Friday would rebuff the rising criticism from abroad.

"I have never come across a situation of the president of a country saying they want to . . . wipe out another country," British Prime Minister Tony Blair said at a summit outside London of the 25 leaders of the European Union's member states.

Blair said Ahmadinejad's comment was "completely and totally unacceptable."

In a joint statement, the E.U. leaders "condemned in the strongest terms" the Iranian president's call, saying it "will cause concern about Iran's role in the region and its future intentions." President Jacques Chirac of France told reporters that Ahmadinejad risked Iran "being left on the outside of other nations."

Russia's foreign minister, Sergei Lavrov, in Israel, called the Iranian president's statement "unacceptable."

The statement was widely reported in the Arab world; leaders there reacted for the most part with silence. Most Arab countries have no diplomatic relations with Israel. But the Palestinian negotiator, Saeb Erekat, said, according to the Associated Press: "We have recognized the state of Israel and we are pursuing a peace process with Israel, and . . . we do not accept the statements of the president of Iran. This is unacceptable."

U.S. and European leaders have grown increasingly worried about the bellicose attitude of Iran at a time when it is pursuing a nuclear program that they have said may be intended to produce a nuclear weapon.

The E.U. has engaged in contentious and so far unsuccessful negotiations with Iran to try to persuade it to drop parts of the program that could be used to make bombs. Iran says its nuclear program is entirely peaceful and aimed at generating electric power for its citizens.

Iran's foreign minister said mass public demonstrations were planned for Friday in Tehran, the Iranian capital, to show support for the country's president. Manouchehr

Mottaki was quoted on state-run television saying that the "Zionist regime is illegitimate" and that "the world will see the anger of the Islamic world against this regime."

Ahmadinejad made his remarks in a speech Wednesday to 4,000 students attending a conference called "The World Without Zionism." He was quoting the late Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini, who led the 1979 Islamic revolution that established Iran's theocratic government and made fierce opposition to Israel a matter of political orthodoxy.

Ahmadinejad also called the 1948 establishment of Israel, on territory also claimed by Palestinians, the fall of "the last trench of Islam."

Virulent anti-Israel sentiment remains strong in the hard-line circles from which Ahmadinejad emerged to win the presidential election in June. "Israel Should Be Wiped Off the Map" was the slogan draped on a Shahab-3 ballistic missile during a military parade in Tehran a month ago. Six of the missiles, which, with a 1,250 mile range, could reach Israel, were the high point of the parade. "We Will Trample America Under Our Feet," read another banner.

The landslide that carried Ahmadinejad into office was grounded in promises of economic improvement, tapping broad public appetite for social justice similar to the sentiments that fueled the 1979 overthrow of Shah Mohammad Reza Pahlavi. Since taking office in August, Ahmadinejad has moved to share the wealth from Iran's oil exports, offering legislation to establish what officials call a "love fund" to distribute cash to newlyweds.

But as a foreign policy novice, he has stumbled frequently in dealings with the outside world. The strident tone of a speech he delivered to the U.N. General Assembly in September alienated many of the diplomats who Iran was trying to influence before a possible vote on its nuclear program.

"He has not yet moved from a leader of an ideological faction to the presidency of the country," said Nasser Hadian-Jazy, a political science professor at Tehran University who has known Ahmadinejad since childhood.

By contrast, Ahmadinejad's predecessor, Mohammad Khatami, was known for erudition and for softening Iran's international image with frequent calls for "a dialogue between civilizations."

At Friday prayers last week, Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, the country's supreme leader, appeared to subtly distance himself from the new president and at the same time urged Iranians to give his government time "to get on with it."

"It is a short period of time since the establishment of the government, some two or two-and-a-half months," Khamenei said. He then continued on to attack Israel and the "war-mongering and extremist American administration, attempting to create an empire and to dominate the world."

In Tel Aviv, Israeli Deputy Prime Minister Shimon Peres said: "I don't see such a crazy declaration being made by a head of state, a member of the United Nations. . . . It is unbearable. He cannot remain a member."

In Washington, State Department spokesman Sean McCormack said Iran must "start behaving in a responsible manner as a member of the international community, cease its pursuit of nuclear weapons under the cover of a civilian nuclear program, end its support for terror, and stop oppressing its own people."

Vick reported from Istanbul. Correspondent Scott Wilson in Jerusalem and staff writer Robin Wright in Washington contributed to this report.

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