

A President's Hate Speech

The Washington Post
October 28, 2005

IRANIAN PRESIDENT Mahmoud Ahmadinejad used words Wednesday that have not been heard from a senior Iranian official in some time. "Israel," he declared, "must be wiped off the map." What's more, "anyone who recognizes Israel will burn in the fire of the Islamic nation's fury." Such murderous threats are not exactly new -- as the president noted, they originated with Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini, the leader of Iran's Islamic revolution. But Mr. Ahmadinejad's recent predecessors generally avoided such rhetoric, partly because the goal of eliminating Israel has been disavowed by the Palestinian leadership and partly because Iran sought to improve relations with the West.

These vile words won't necessarily be followed by actions, though Iran possesses missiles that can reach Israel and sponsors terrorists who carry out suicide attacks in its cities. They do, however, send the clearest signal yet that Iran's new government has no intention of seeking accommodation with Europe or the United States, or of accepting a more peaceful Middle East in which Israel lives alongside a democratic Palestinian state.

That's why there was a red-faced flurry of activity in European capitals yesterday; the British, French and German governments all summoned Iranian envoys to protest Mr. Ahmadinejad's speech. While Israel has never doubted the threat from Iran, the three European Union states have invested their prestige and two years of diplomacy in the idea that the Iranian regime would cease steps toward developing nuclear weapons in exchange for Western economic concessions. The Europeans persuaded a reluctant Bush administration to go along with their initiative earlier this year, only to have the talks break down in August, not long after Mr. Ahmadinejad's election. Iran's president then appeared before the U.N. General Assembly to deliver a speech in which, in between ludicrous allegations about the United States, he repeatedly insisted on Iran's intention to proceed with uranium enrichment.

The Europeans still cling to their hopes for negotiations, though last month they finally joined the Bush administration's long-standing -- and equally futile -- attempt to refer Iran's violations of the nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty to the U.N. Security Council. But the crudeness of Mr. Ahmadinejad, and his already evident failure to deliver on his populist promises to raise Iranian living standards, ought to open the way to a different approach. Unlike their president, most young Iranians would like to live in a prosperous and democratic society that enjoys good relations with the West. The West should stand up for that Iran; it can do so by rejecting and isolating the hateful ideologue who would drag the country in the opposite direction.