

Iran's Leader Joins Large Anti-Israel March

Tehran Protesters Back Hate Speech

By Mehrdad Mirdamadi and Karl Vick

Washington Post

October 29, 2005

TEHRAN, Oct. 28 -- A day after drawing international condemnation for declaring that "Israel should be wiped off the map," Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad joined an estimated several hundred thousand demonstrators in an annual anti-Israel march that made clear his words are a time-honored slogan in Iran.

"This is our duty, to condemn Zionism and punch the U.S. in the mouth," said Maysam Hosseinpour, 14, as he marched with fellow students on what is known here as Jerusalem Day. It was designated a quarter-century ago by Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini, the leader of the 1979 revolution that made Iran a theocracy, as an annual show of rejection of a Jewish state on land claimed by Arabs.

As the marchers' signs and banners emphasized on Friday, Khomeini had also declared that Israel must be "wiped off the map." The phrase became a staple of hard-line Iranian rhetoric, and it served as the headline on the state broadcasting Web site's account of Ahmadinejad's speech to a student conference in Tehran on Wednesday.

But when it also made headlines outside Iran, the ensuing outrage caught Tehran off guard.

On Thursday, Russia joined the European Union, the United States and many other countries in condemning the remark. Ahmadinejad's call was also rejected by Palestinian Authority officials, who noted that they accepted the existence of Israel while taking issue with much of its conduct. On Friday, the U.N. Security Council condemned the statement, and the Vatican expressed "great concern."

A foreign policy novice, Ahmadinejad made a strident speech at the United Nations last month that was widely criticized. As happened this week, Western governments seized on his words in support of their concerns that the country might be developing its formerly secret nuclear program to produce weapons. The Tehran government denies pursuing such a goal.

Iranian officials have rallied to defend Ahmadinejad. "Considering that the president's comments have been repeated by other Iranian officials during the past 26 years and the Iranian government is not announcing a new policy, some Western countries' reaction to these remarks has surprised the world public opinion," a commentator on state-run radio said, according to a translation posted by the BBC.

Ali Larijani, Iran's chief nuclear negotiator, called the uproar "bogus noises made by arrogant world powers to achieve certain aims."

"The Zionist regime and the criminal U.S. desecrated the Islamic Republic of Iran on many occasions in the past," Larijani said, according to the state-run IRNA news agency.

The Iranian Embassy in Moscow sought to play down the president's words. "Mr. Ahmadinejad did not have any intention to speak in sharp terms and engage in a conflict," the embassy said in a statement.

The nationwide demonstrations, which routinely occur on the last Friday of the Muslim holy month of Ramadan, were cast as a show of support for Ahmadinejad. Among the marchers who turned out in the capital were the president and his mild-mannered predecessor, the reformist cleric Mohammad Khatami.

Ali Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani, the millionaire mullah who finished a distant second to Ahmadinejad in the presidential election in June, delivered the sermon at Friday prayers and offered a more moderate view. "We want all the Palestinians back in their homeland, and then there can be a fair referendum for people to choose the form of state they want," he said. "Whoever gets the majority can rule."

U.S. and Israeli flags were burned in the street in front of Tehran University, where Friday prayers are held. Crowds alternated chants of "Death to America!" "Death to Israel!" "Death to England!" and "Nuclear energy is our indubitable right!"

The protests appeared to be more intensely felt than in recent years and the crowds slightly larger. State television and radio had encouraged turnout as a demonstration of defiance. "What our president said in his speech is what our people are saying," said Rahim Savafi, head of the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps, a hard-line group in which Ahmadinejad once served.

"The U.S. and the Israelis are trying to make propaganda to cover their defeats in Gaza and Iraq," Savafi said, according to the Iranian Students' News Agency. "The Americans and the Zionists have repeatedly talked about regime change in Iran and ousting the Islamic Republic, so they cannot tolerate our president repeating what our late Imam said and what our people say now."

Vick reported from Ankara, Turkey.