

Wipe Israel off map, says Iran's president

By Tim Butcher in Jerusalem

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Iran's new hard-line president called yesterday for Israel to be "wiped off the map" - the first time for many years that such a high-ranking Iranian official has called for the Jewish state's eradication.

The remarks by Mahmoud Ahmadinejad prompted a chorus of international condemnation.

The White House said they underlined American concerns about Teheran's nuclear ambitions. Several reports have estimated that Iran is five to 10 years away from developing a nuclear weapon.

President Ahmadinejad, elected in June, was addressing a conference in Teheran entitled "The World Without Zionism", attended by about 3,000 conservative students, who chanted: "Death to Israel!" and "Death to America!"

"The establishment of the Zionist regime was a move by the world oppressor against the Islamic world," he said. "As the Imam [the late Ayatollah Khomeini] said, 'Israel must be wiped off the map'... The Islamic world will not let its historic enemy live in its heartland."

Germany called his comments "completely unacceptable", and France "firmly condemned them".

Under his predecessor, Mohammad Khatami, Iran had shown signs of easing its hostility towards Israel.

But Mr Ahmadinejad's comments underscored how the gap between Iran and the West has widened during the row over Teheran's insistence of developing its nuclear capability.

His bellicose language was reminiscent of Iran's Islamic revolution, launched by Khomeini in 1979, when the new president was a young activist.

Israel's foreign minister, Silvan Shalom, said the comments demonstrated that the Iranian leadership represented a genuine threat to its existence.

"We believe that Iran is trying to buy time ... so it can develop a nuclear bomb," said Mr Shalom. "Iran is a clear and present danger."

He added: "This kind of regime is very extreme. It would be a nightmare for all the international community if they had a nuclear bomb."

Although Israel is widely believed to have its own nuclear arsenal, it fears such weapons falling into the hands of hostile states.

In 1981, when Saddam Hussein threatened to develop a nuclear capability, Israel launched a pre-emptive air strike to destroy Iraq's Osirak nuclear reactor.

Unilateral military action by Israel would be much harder against Iran's nuclear capability.

Military jets would have to fly much greater distances, and the Iranians have spread their nuclear programmes across a number of sites - some located under mountains.

However, Israeli military planners are believed to have a number of options including air strikes using American-designed bunker-busting munitions and commando raids.

Yesterday, Israel stressed that the threat of Teheran acquiring nuclear weapons was a danger to countries outside the region, including European nations in range of Iran's long-range missiles.

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