

Iran's Ahmadinejad says no place for Israel in new Middle East



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(Reuters) - Many thousands of Iranians shouted "Death to America, death to Israel" during state-organized protests on Friday and President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad told them there was no place for the Jewish state in a future Middle East.

[Iran](#), penalized by tough Western sanctions, faces the threat of an Israeli or U.S. military strike on its disputed nuclear facilities. With popular uprisings reshaping the region, the Islamic Republic is also trying to prevent the overthrow of its closest Arab ally, Syrian President Bashar al-Assad.

"You want a new Middle East? We do too, but in the new Middle East ... there will be no trace of the American presence and the Zionists," Ahmadinejad told worshippers at Tehran University in an event broadcast live on state television.

The Iranian leader, whose own authority is under challenge from hardliners as well as reformers, was restating Tehran's familiar goals as the Middle East undergoes a very different upheaval from the 1979 Islamic revolution that toppled the U.S.-backed Shah and brought Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini to power.

"Saving the existence of the Zionist regime (Israel) is a joint commitment by most arrogant Western governments," Ahmadinejad said in a speech to mark the annual Al-Quds (Jerusalem) Day decreed by Khomeini and held on the last Friday of the Muslim holy fasting month of Ramadan.

He called for Muslim unity to foil Western support for Israel, which he described as a "cancerous tumor" for its occupation of Palestinian land.

But there was little unity on display at an Islamic summit in Mecca earlier this week when the 57-member Organisation of Islamic Cooperation suspended [Syria](#) despite Iran's objections.

Speaking at the emergency summit, Ahmadinejad said Western powers could never be a role model for the Islamic world.

"Freedom and democracy will not come from the barrels of NATO guns and the interference of Western nations," he said.

Shi'ite Iran has watched in dismay as rebels drawn mainly from Syria's Sunni Muslim majority try to oust Assad, whose country has been a vital part of Iran's "axis of resistance" against Israel, Sunni-ruled Arab states and the West.

"I think the enemies have been successful to a certain extent in creating regional conflicts," Ahmadinejad acknowledged, without naming Syria.

Iran accuses the United States and its allies in the Middle East of backing Assad's opponents to try to relieve pressure on Israel by destroying the "axis of resistance" between Tehran, Damascus and the Lebanese Shi'ite Hezbollah movement.

State television said millions of Iranians joined the al-Quds Day marches across the country and showed large crowds chanting slogans and carrying portraits of Khomeini and his successor, Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei.

Some bore a coffin decked with pictures of Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu and other Israeli leaders. Demonstrators burned American and Israeli flags.

Israel, thought to be the Middle East's only nuclear-armed power, sees Iran's nuclear activities as a threat to its existence and has repeatedly threatened military action if diplomacy fails to resolve the issue. Iran denies seeking a bomb and says its nuclear work has only peaceful purposes.

(Reporting by Zahra Hosseinian; Editing by Alistair Lyon)