

US with Israel against Iran's nuclear ambitions: Bush

Visiting US President George W. Bush expressed unequivocal support for Israel Thursday, saying it had a right to defend itself against attacks by extremists and had American backing in opposing Iran's nuclear ambitions.

'We believe that targeting innocent lives to achieve political objectives is always and everywhere wrong. So we stand together against terror and extremism, and we will never let down our guard or lose our resolve,' he said in an historic speech to the Israeli Knesset (parliament) in Jerusalem.

'America stands with you breaking up terrorist networks and denying the extremists sanctuary. And America stands with you in firmly opposing Iran's nuclear ambitions,' he said.

Bush, who arrived in Israel Wednesday for a 48-hour visit in honour of Israel's 60th anniversary, was given a standing ovation when he began his speech, which was frequently interrupted by applause.

The most prolonged came after he said that 'Israel's population may be just over 7 million. But when you confront terror and evil, you are 307 million strong, because America stands with you.'

'We also believe that nations have a right to defend themselves and that no nation should ever be forced to negotiate with killers pledged to its destruction,' he said, in reference to Hamas, whose charter calls for the elimination of Israel, and in reference to the Israeli raids on the Gaza Strip in response to the ongoing rocket attacks on southern Israel from the salient.

Bush made no mention in his 23-minute address to the current Israeli-Palestinian peace negotiations, which were renewed at the turn of the year under his auspices. Instead he devoted most of his words to Israeli-US relations, and to what he defined as 'the defining challenge of our time', namely 'the fight against terror and extremism'.

Prime Minister Ehud Olmert who spoke before the president, also dealt in his speech on Iran, saying Tehran's nuclear ambitions represented a 'serious threat' to the whole world.

Israel regards Iran's drive to acquire nuclear weapons as its biggest existential threat, and Olmert warned that the threats by President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad to wipe the Jewish state off the map, and his preparations to do so by acquiring long-range missiles, obliged Israel to be ready to defend itself.

Turning to the Israeli-Palestinian peace negotiations, Olmert said he had no doubt that any peace deal between two sides which resulted in two states existing alongside each other, as Bush has called for, would be supported by a large majority of the Israeli Knesset and the Israeli public.

He told a press conference in Jerusalem that the negotiations 'hopefully will come to fruition within this year, 2008', in accordance with a pledge he and Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas made at last year's Annapolis summit, to try and reach a peace deal by the end of the year.

Prior to his Knesset speech, Bush and his wife Laura had toured the ancient fortress of Masada, overlooking the Dead Sea and deserts south-east Jerusalem.

The fortress was built by the Jewish Roman client king Herod the Great in the first century BC, and is famous as the site where a group of Jewish zealots made their last stand against the Romans in 73 A.D. and committed mass suicide rather than surrender to the Roman legions.

The president and first lady are scheduled to attend a roundtable discussion with Israeli youth Friday morning, before flying to Saudi Arabia. On Saturday and Sunday Bush will hold talks with Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas and Prime Minister Salam Fayyad in the Egyptian Red Sea resort of Sharm al-Sheikh.

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