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Bush: US has powerful duty to ensure Israel's security

By HAVIV RETTIG, JPOST.COM STAFF AND AP



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US President George W. Bush said Thursday at the American Jewish Committee conference in Washington that the United States had a strong and inalienable obligation to ensure the security of Israel, referring to the threats Iran had made against the Jewish state.



President Bush, with Kofi Annan, makes remarks at the American Jewish Committee Dinner in Washington. Photo: AP

Bush repeated his pledge that the United States will not deal with the Hamas-led Palestinian Authority as long as Hamas refuses to disavow terrorism and to acknowledge Israel's right to exist.

The US president also said that he would keep pushing for a strong resolution at the United Nations to curb Iran's nuclear programs. "America will continue to rally the world to face these threats," Bush said.

The audience applauded repeatedly his rhetoric against Hamas, a group the United States considers a terrorist organization.

"As you know, I'm a strong believer of democracy and free elections, but that does not mean that we have to support elected officials who are not committed to peace," Bush said.

"Hamas has made it clear that they do not acknowledge the right of Israel to exist, and I've made it clear that so long as that's their policy, we'll have no contact with the leaders of Hamas," Bush said.

The United States, United Nations, European Union and Russia, co-sponsors of a Middle East peace plan known as the road map, have spelled out their demands of Hamas.

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"Democratically elected leaders cannot have one foot in the camp of democracy and one foot in the camp of terror," Bush said, repeating a theme of his administration since Hamas' election to head the Palestinian Authority in January. "Hamas must accept the demands of the international community, to recognize Israel, disarm and reject terrorism and stop blocking the path to peace."

Bush was followed at the podium by Angela Merkel, the first German chancellor to address the American Jewish Committee's annual meeting.

Merkel backed Bush's stances against Hamas and Iran. "It must not be permitted that Iran gets possession of nuclear weapons," she said. While supporting the formation of a Palestinian state, she said Hamas will have to answer to the Palestinian people for the consequences of its policies.

Bush spoke fondly about Ariel Sharon, the Israeli leader who had a stroke on Jan. 4. Israel's Cabinet declared Sharon permanently incapacitated on April 11, officially ending his five-year tenure.

"Ariel Sharon is a friend who remains in our thoughts and prayers. He is a man of courage and a man of peace," Bush said. "And so tonight we pray for his recovery and we rededicate ourselves to the cause to which he devoted his life _ the peace and the security of Israel."

Earlier in the day, the White House congratulated Israel on the inauguration of its new government, and a Bush spokesman said that the US President expected to work with Prime Minister Ehud Olmert and his ministers.

The spokesman said that the "Roadmap" was the proper way to push the peace process forward and stressed that Hamas was not a partner in this course of action.

Concern was voiced in the Israeli media Thursday night that no Israeli political figure would be in attendance at the AJC.


When asked for the American Jewish Committee's reaction to this fact, Col. (res.) Eran Lerman, head of the American Jewish Committee's Israel/Middle East office told *The Jerusalem Post* on Thursday night that everyone in attendance "understood completely" the critical importance of the new Israeli government's swearing in Jerusalem late that night.

"Shimon Peres was on our schedule, but he couldn't possible miss the ceremony in which he, as speaker of the Knesset, was handing over the reigns to the next speaker," he added.



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