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SPIEGEL INTERVIEW WITH IRANIAN PRESIDENT MAHMOUD AHMADINEJAD

"We Are Determined" (2)

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SPIEGEL: Mr. President, we're talking about the Holocaust because we want to talk about the possible nuclear armament of Iran -- which is why the West sees you as a threat.

Ahmadinejad: Some groups in the West enjoy calling things or people a threat. Of course you're free to make your own judgment.

SPIEGEL: The key question is: Do you want nuclear weapons for your country?

Ahmadinejad: Allow me to encourage a discussion on the following question: How long do you think the world can be governed by the rhetoric of a handful of Western powers? Whenever they hold something against someone, they start spreading propaganda and lies, defamation and blackmail. How much longer can that go on?

SPIEGEL: We're here to find out the truth. The head of state of a neighboring country, for example, told SPIEGEL: "They are very keen on building the bomb." Is that true?

Ahmadinejad: You see, we conduct our discussions with you and the European governments on an entirely different, higher level. In our view, the legal system whereby a handful of countries force their will on the rest of the world is discriminatory and unstable. One-hundred and thirty-nine countries, including us, are members of the International Atomic Energy Authority (IAEA) in Vienna. Both the statutes of IAEA and the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty as well as all security agreements grant the member countries the right to produce nuclear fuel for peaceful purposes. That is the legitimate legal right of any people. Beyond this, however, IAEA was also established to promote the disarmament of those powers that already possessed nuclear weapons. And now look at what's happening today: Iran has had an excellent cooperation with IAEA. We have had more than 2,000 inspections of our plants, and the inspectors have obtained more than 1,000 pages of documentation from us. Their cameras are installed in our nuclear centers. IAEA has emphasized in all its reports that there are no indications of any irregularities in Iran. That is one side of this matter.

SPIEGEL: IAEA doesn't quite share your view of this matter.

Ahmadinejad: But the other side is that there are a number of countries that possess both nuclear energy and nuclear weapons. They use their atomic weapons to threaten other peoples. And it is these powers who say that they are worried about Iran deviating from the path of peaceful use of atomic energy. We say that these powers are free to monitor us if they are worried. But what these powers say is that the Iranians must not complete the nuclear fuel cycle because deviation from peaceful use might then be possible. What we say is that these countries themselves have long deviated from peaceful usage. These powers have no right to talk to us in this manner. This order is unjust and unsustainable.

SPIEGEL: But, Mr. President, the key question is: How dangerous will this world become if even more countries become nuclear powers -- if a country like Iran, whose president makes threats, builds the bomb in a crisis-ridden region?

Ahmadinejad: We're fundamentally opposed to the expansion of nuclear-weapons arsenals. This is why we have proposed the formation of an unbiased organization and the disarmament of the nuclear powers. We don't need any weapons. We're a civilized, cultured people, and our history shows that we have never attacked another country.

SPIEGEL: Iran doesn't need the bomb that it wants to build?

Ahmadinejad: It's interesting to note that European nations wanted to allow the shah's dictatorship the use of nuclear technology. That was a dangerous regime. Yet



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those nations were willing to supply it with nuclear technology. Ever since the Islamic Republic has existed, however, these powers have been opposed to it. I stress once again, we don't need any nuclear weapons.

We stand by our statements because we're honest and act legally. We're no fraudsters. We only want to claim our legitimate right. Incidentally, I never threatened anyone - that, too, is part of the propaganda machine that you've got running against me.

SPIEGEL: If this were so, shouldn't you be making an effort to ensure that no one need fear your producing nuclear weapons that you might use against Israel, thus possibly unleashing a world war? You're sitting on a tinderbox, Mr. President.

Ahmadinejad: Allow me to say two things. No people in the region are afraid of us. And no one should instill fear in these peoples. We believe that if the United States and these two or three European countries did not interfere, the peoples in this region would live peacefully together as they did in the thousands of years before. In 1980, it was also the nations of Europe and the United States that encouraged Saddam Hussein to attack us.

Our stance with respect to Palestine is clear. We say: Allow those to whom this country belongs to express their opinion. Let Jews, Christians and Muslims say what they think. The opponents of this proposal prefer war and threaten the region. Why are the United States and these two or three European nations opposed to this? I believe that those who imprison Holocaust researchers prefer war to peace. Our stance is democratic and peaceful.

SPIEGEL: The Palestinians have long gone a step further than you and recognize Israel as a fact, while you still wish to erase it from the map. The Palestinians are ready to accept a two-state solution while you deny Israel its right to existence.

Ahmadinejad: You're wrong. You saw that the Palestinian people elected Hamas in free elections. We argue that neither you nor we should claim to speak for the Palestinian people. The Palestinians themselves should say what they want. In Europe it is customary to call a referendum on any issue. We should also give the Palestinians the opportunity to express their opinion.

SPIEGEL: The Palestinians have the right to their own state, but in our view the Israelis naturally have the same right.

Ahmadinejad: Where did the Israelis come from?

SPIEGEL: Well, if we tried to work out where people have come from, the Europeans would have to return to east Africa where all humans originated.

Ahmadinejad: We're not talking about the Europeans; we're talking about the Palestinians. The Palestinians were there, in Palestine. Now 5 million of them have become refugees. Don't they have a right to live?

SPIEGEL: Mr. President, doesn't there come a time when one should accept that the world is the way it is and that we must accept the status quo? The war against Iraq has put Iran in a favorable position. The United States has suffered a de facto defeat in Iraq. Isn't it now time for Iran to become a constructive power of peace in the Middle East? Which would mean giving up its nuclear plans and inflammatory talk?

Ahmadinejad: I'm wondering why you're adopting and fanatically defending the stance of the European politicians. You're a magazine, not a government. Saying that we should accept the world as it is would mean that the winners of World War II would remain the victorious powers for another 1,000 years and that the German people would be humiliated for another 1,000 years. Do you think that is the correct logic?

SPIEGEL: No, that's not the right logic, nor is it true. The Germans have played a modest, but important role in post-war developments. They do not feel as though they have been humiliated and dishonored since 1945. We are too self-confident for that. But today we want to talk about Iran's current mission.

Ahmadinejad: Then we would accept that Palestinians are killed every day, that they die in terrorist attacks, and that houses are being destroyed. But let me say something about Iraq. We have always favored peace and security in the region. For eight years, the Western countries provided arms to Saddam in the war against us, including chemical weapons, and gave him political support. We were against Saddam and suffered severely because of him, so we're happy that he has been toppled. But we don't accept a whole country being swallowed under the pretext of wanting to topple Saddam. More than 100,000 Iraqis have lost their lives under the rule of the occupying forces. Fortunately, the Germans haven't been involved in this. We want security in Iraq.

SPIEGEL: But, Mr. President, who is swallowing Iraq? The

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United States has practically lost this war. By cooperating constructively, Iran might help the Americans consider their retreat from the country.

Ahmadinejad: This is very interesting: The Americans occupy the country, kill people, sell the oil and when they have lost, they blame others. We have very close ties to the Iraqi people. Many people on both sides of the border are related. We have lived side by side for thousands of years. Our holy pilgrimage sites are located in Iraq. Just like Iran, Iraq used to be a center of civilization.

SPIEGEL: What are you trying to say?

Ahmadinejad: We have always said that we support the popularly elected government of Iraq. But in my view the Americans are doing a bad job. They have sent us messages several times asking us for help and cooperation. They have said that we should talk together about Iraq. We publicly accepted this offer, although our people do not trust the Americans. But America has responded negatively and insulted us. Even now we're contributing to security in Iraq. We will hold talks only if the Americans change their behavior.

SPIEGEL: Do you enjoy provoking the Americans and the rest of the world now and then?

Ahmadinejad: No, I'm not insulting anyone. The letter that I wrote to Mr. Bush was polite.

SPIEGEL: We don't mean insult, but provoke.

Ahmadinejad: No, we feel animosity toward no one. We're concerned about the American soldiers who die in Iraq. Why do they have to die there? This war makes no sense. Why is there war when there is reason as well?

SPIEGEL: Is your letter to the president also a gesture toward the Americans that you wish to enter into direct negotiations?

Ahmadinejad: We clearly stated our position in this letter on how we view the problems in the world. Some powers have befouled the political atmosphere in the world because they consider lies and fraud to be legitimate. In our view that is very bad. We believe that all people deserve respect. Relationships have to be regulated on the basis of justice. When justice reigns, peace reigns. Unjust conditions aren't sustainable, even if Ahmadinejad does not criticize them.

SPIEGEL: This letter to the American president includes a passage about Sept. 11, 2001. The quote: "How could such an operation be planned and implemented without the coordination with secret and security services or without the far-reaching infiltration of these services?" Your statements always include so many innuendos. What is that supposed to mean? Did the CIA help Mohammed Atta and the other 18 terrorists conduct their attacks?

Ahmadinejad: No, that's not what I meant. We think that they should just say who is to blame. They should not use Sept. 11 as an excuse to launch a military attack against the Middle East. They should take those who are responsible for the attacks to court. We're not opposed to that; we condemned the attacks. We condemn any attack against innocent people.

SPIEGEL: In this letter you also write that Western liberalism has failed. What makes you say that?

Ahmadinejad: You see, for example you have a thousand definitions of the Palestinian problem and you offer all sorts of different definitions of democracy in its various forms. It does not make sense that a phenomenon depends on the opinions of many individuals who are free to interpret the phenomenon as they wish. You can't solve the problems of the world that way. We need a new approach. Of course we want the free will of the people to reign, but we need sustainable principles that enjoy universal acceptance - such as justice. Iran and the West agree on this.

SPIEGEL: What role can Europe play in the resolution of the nuclear conflict, and what do you expect of Germany?

Ahmadinejad: We have always cultivated good relations with Europe, especially with Germany. Our two peoples like each other. We're eager to deepen this relationship.

Europe has made three mistakes with respect to our people. The first mistake was to support the shah's government. This has left our people disappointed and discontent. However, by offering asylum to Imam Khomeini, France earned a special position that it lost again later. The second mistake was to support Saddam in his war against us. The truth is that our people expected Europe to be on our side, not against us. The third mistake was Europe's stance on the nuclear issue. Europe will be the big loser and will achieve nothing. We don't want to see that happen.

SPIEGEL: What will happen now in the conflict between the West and Iran?

Ahmadinejad: We understand the Americans' logic. They suffered damage as a result of the victory of the Islamic Revolution. But we're puzzled why some European countries are opposed to us. I sent out a message on the nuclear issue, asking why the Europeans were translating the Americans' words for us. After all, they know that our actions are aimed toward peace. By siding with Iran, the Europeans would serve their own and our interests. But they will suffer only damage if they oppose us. For our people is strong and determined.

The Europeans risk losing their position in the Middle East entirely, and they are ruining their reputation in other parts of the world. The others will think that the Europeans aren't capable of solving problems.

SPIEGEL: Mr. President, we thank you for this interview.

Interview conducted by Stefan Aust, Gerhard Spörl and Dieter Bednarz in Tehran.

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