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### **Bush, Merkel pledge backing for Israel, denounce Iran and Hamas**

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Angela Merkel  
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WASHINGTON (AFP) - President George W. Bush said that the United States has an "unshakeable" commitment to defend Israel and pledged that his administration would have no contact with the militant Palestinian group Hamas so long as it refuses to recognize the Jewish state.

"America's commitment to Israel's security is strong, enduring and unshakeable," Bush said in a speech in Washington to the influential American Jewish Committee (AJC), which is marking its 100th anniversary.

He said the United States and Israel were "natural allies and these ties will never be broken".

German Chancellor Angela Merkel, who also addressed the gala event along with UN Secretary General Kofi Annan, evoked the horrors of the Holocaust and vowed that her country would not waver in its support for Israel.

"The right of existence of the state of Israel must never be questioned," Merkel, who was the first German chancellor to address the AJC, said to loud applause by the audience of some 2,500 Jewish leaders, US politicians and diplomats.

"This is why it is intolerable for any German government when the Iranian president questions the right of Israel's existence."

She was referring to repeated anti-Israel comments by Iran's President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad. In October he said that the Jewish state should be "wiped off the map".

Bush said the United States was "concerned because the Iranian regime is repressing its people, sponsoring terrorists, destabilizing the region, threatening Israel and defying the world with its ambitions for nuclear weapons".

"American will continue to rally the world to confront these threats," he said.

The United States is leading a bid to make the UN Security Council take action against Iran over its nuclear programme, which Washington and its allies fear hides an attempt to make an atomic bomb.

Iran insists its programme is for civilian purposes.

Merkel said the standoff with Iran over its nuclear program was of great concern and added that it was essential for the

international community to be united on the issue.

"Iran must be prevented from getting nuclear weapons," she said. "We need to stand together and show a united front."

Both Merkel and Bush also urged Hamas to choose the path of peace by recognizing Israel and thus offering a better future for the Palestinian people.

"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 will have no contact with the leaders of Hamas," Bush said.

Merkel said it was up to the militant group to "reject violence and acknowledge without ambiguity Israel's right to exist".

Annan said that despite enormous obstacles to peace between Israel and the Palestinians, he remained hopeful.

"I refuse to despair," he said. "There is still abundant evidence that peace is what the majority of both Israelis and Palestinians want, even if each is reluctant to believe that the other wants it too."

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