

US government behind Sept 11 attacks, Ahmadinejad says

Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, the president of Iran, caused fresh outrage on Thursday when he said most people believed the US government was behind the September 11 attacks, prompting the American, British and several European delegations at the United Nations to walk out.

By Alex Spillius in New York

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In a speech to the UN General Assembly, Mr Ahmadinejad said it was mostly US government officials who believed a "powerful and complex terrorist group" was behind the four suicide plane hijackings in 2001.

Another theory, he said, was "that some segments within the American government orchestrated the attack to reverse the declining American economy, and its grips on the Middle East, in order to save the Zionist regime".

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"The majority of the American people as well as most nations and politicians around the world agree with this view," Mr Ahmadinejad told the 192-nation assembly.

A third theory, he said, was that a terrorist group was exploited and aided by the Americans to carry out the attacks on New York and the Pentagon that claimed nearly 3,000 lives.

It was the first time that the Iranian leader has broadcast his conspiracy theories in New York, which he has visited for the annual UN meeting throughout the six years of presidency. US and European leaders have walked out during past speeches

by Mr Ahmadinejad at the UN because of anti-American or anti-Israeli comments.

"Rather than representing the aspirations and goodwill of the Iranian people," said Mark Kornblau, spokesman for the US mission to the UN, "Mr Ahmadinejad has yet again chosen to spout vile conspiracy theories and anti-Semitic slurs that are as abhorrent and delusional as they are predictable."

The remarks underlined the difficulty the US administration and its allies faces as they try and persuade the Iranians to enter talks about their nuclear programme, which has now been subjected to four rounds of UN sanctions. US officials have this week spoken of encouraging signs from Iranian officials, but Mr Ahmadinejad's provocation will bring the seriousness of those signals into question.

The Iranian leader also spoke of threats to burn the Koran by a small American church in Florida to mark the anniversary of the September 11 attacks. Although that church burning did not proceed, there were a handful of copycat incidents in which pages of the Muslim holy book were burned.

Holding up a copy of the Koran and the Bible, Mr Ahmadinejad said that Iranians respected both books and religions.

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