

## Nicolas Sarkozy warns of Iran's nuclear crisis

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Nicolas Sarkozy gave warning yesterday that unless the West redoubled its efforts to curb Teheran's nuclear ambitions it could lead to "an Iranian bomb or the bombing of Iran".

The French president, in his first major speech on foreign policy, made it clear he intends to apply the same energetic approach to French diplomacy as he has to domestic policy since taking office in May.

From the Middle East to relations with Russia, the president promised a break with France's traditional Gaullist position of "splendid isolation", particularly towards the United States.

Speaking to 180 French ambassadors, Mr Sarkozy said a nuclear-armed Iran would be "unacceptable" and that the only response was to tighten sanctions while being open to talks if Iran suspended nuclear activities.

"This initiative is the only one that can enable us to escape an alternative that I say is catastrophic: the Iranian bomb or the bombing of Iran," he said, adding that it was the worst crisis facing the world.

He was equally direct on matters elsewhere in the Middle East, promising that France would not allow a "Hamastan" to be created in the Palestinian territories after the takeover of the Gaza Strip by the radical Islamic group Hamas in June.

advertisementLast week, Bernard Kouchner made the first visit to Iraq by a French foreign minister since Paris led the opposition to the US-led invasion in 2003.

The trip was part of a wider bid by Mr Sarkozy - seen as far more pro-American than his predecessor Jacques Chirac - to mend fences with Washington after four years of tensions. Yesterday he called for a "clear timetable for the pullout of foreign troops".

However, he made no mention of an embarrassing faux pas by Mr Kouchner, who was forced to apologise yesterday after describing the Iraqi government as "not functioning" and calling for the prime minister, Nouri al-Maliki, to be "replaced".

Claiming he was quoted out of context by Newsweek magazine, Mr Kouchner said yesterday that he had spoken to Mr Maliki, "to whom I apologised this morning and who might be leaving us shortly".

He offered French mediation in forming a government of national unity. Mr Sarkozy described his efforts as "remarkable".

Unlike Mr Chirac, the new French president said he was prepared to hold high-level talks with Syria if it backed French efforts to end the political crisis in Lebanon.

A stern rebuke to Russia came as a shock after more than a decade of indulgence from Mr Chirac. "Russia is imposing its return on the world scene by using its assets, notably oil and gas, with a certain brutality," Mr Sarkozy said. "When one is a great power, one should not be brutal."

He also urged European Union nations to shoulder a greater share of defence spending. At present, Britain, France, Germany and Italy pay for three-quarters of Europe's defence budget, with Britain top of the list.

Mr Sarkozy stuck to his view that Turkey should be given a privileged partnership, not full EU membership, but that negotiations should continue.

He outlined a range of new ideas, such as turning the G8 to the G13 to include emerging giants like China, and setting up a committee of 12 "wise men" to discuss the future shape of Europe. He also called for a UN Security Council meeting on Africa.

Mr Sarkozy's dynamic approach to international affairs has met with approval in France. A poll published yesterday suggested that 75 per cent thought he had boosted France's role in the world after years of decline.

However other European partners, Germany in particular, are less than ecstatic. There was annoyance at Mr Sarkozy

taking the credit for freeing six Bulgarian medics from jail in Libya, which European diplomats spent years negotiating.

African leaders were furious last month when he said the continent had turned its back on progress.

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