

Iran to host militants for 'alternative' Mideast meet

Contributed by AFP
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TEHRAN (AFP) - Iran said on Tuesday that it had invited Palestinian militant factions to a meeting in Tehran aimed at countering a US-hosted Middle East peace conference seeking to kickstart the peace process.

"These groups are planning to come to Tehran within the next week or two and they are all the Palestinian groups that are struggling for the freedom of their land," government spokesman Gholam Hossein Elham told reporters.

Iran is one of the most vocal backers of Palestinian militant groups like Hamas and Islamic Jihad and pledged millions of dollars in 2006 to the then Hamas government crippled by a Western aid cut.

The Islamic republic does not recognise Israel and its President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad has provoked outrage by calling for the Jewish state to be wiped off the map.

Elham indicated the Tehran meeting would be a riposte to the conference bringing together Israeli and Palestinian leaders which started in Annapolis outside Washington on Tuesday.

"It means that the Annapolis conference is not representing the Palestinians and not talking on their behalf, but on the contrary is moving against their rights," he said.

More than a dozen Arab countries, including Saudi Arabia and Iran's top regional ally Syria, have sent representatives, leaving Tehran conspicuously isolated.

On Monday Ahmadinejad told Saudi King Abdullah in a telephone call that he "wished" the kingdom was not taking part in the peace conference.

Tehran's arch foe Washington, which is hosting the meeting, dismissed the Iranian criticism as "not surprising," and charged that Tehran backs the extremists sidelined by the talks.

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