



## My Meeting with Ahmadinejad

The Iranian president's religiously charged rhetoric is often incoherent and inflammatory, but is he really a threat to the United States?

By [John Feffer](#), [Stephen Zunes](#) | September 28, 2007

This past Wednesday, I was among a group of American religious leaders and scholars who met with Iranian president Mahmoud Ahmadinejad in New York. In what was billed as an inter-faith dialogue, we frankly shared our strong opposition to certain Iranian government policies and provocative statements made by the Iranian president. At the same time, we avoided the insulting language employed by Columbia University president Lee Bollinger before a public audience two days earlier.

The Iranian president was quite unimpressive. Indeed, with his ramblings and the superficiality of his analysis, he came across as more pathetic than evil.

The more respectful posture of our group that morning led to a more open exchange of views. Before an audience largely composed of Christian clergy, he reminded us we worship the same God, have been inspired by many of the same prophets, and share similar values of peace, justice, and reconciliation. The Iranian president impressed me as someone sincerely devout in his religious faith, yet rather superficial in his understanding and inclined to twist his faith tradition in ways to correspond with his pre-conceived ideological positions. He was rather evasive when it came to specific questions and was not terribly coherent, relying more on platitudes than analysis, and would tend to get his facts wrong. In short, he reminded me in many respects of our president.

Both Ahmadinejad and George W. Bush have used their fundamentalist interpretations of their faith traditions to place the world in a Manichean perspective of good versus evil. The certitude of their positions regardless of evidence to the contrary, their sense that they are part of a divine mission, and their largely successful manipulation of their devoutly religious constituents have put these two nations on a dangerous confrontational course.

Ahmadinejad can get away with it because he is president of a theocratic political system that allows very limited freedoms and opportunities for public debate. We have no such excuse here in the United States, however, for the strong bipartisan support for Bush's righteous anti-Iranian crusade, most recently illustrated by a series of provocative anti-Iranian measures recently passed by an overwhelming margin of the Democratic-controlled Congress.

There are many differences between the two men, of course. Perhaps the most significant is that, unlike George W. Bush, Ahmadinejad has very little political power, particularly in the areas of military and foreign policy. So why, given Ahmadinejad's lack of real political power, was so much made of his annual trip to the opening session of the UN General Assembly?

### **Ahmadinejad's Political Weakness**

The president of Iran is constitutionally weak. The real power in Iran lies in the hands of Ayatollah Khamenei and other conservative Shiite clerics on the Council of Guardians. Just as they were able to stifle the reformist agenda of Ahmadinejad's immediate predecessor Mohammed Khatami, they have similarly thwarted the radical agenda of the current president, whom they view as something of a loose cannon.

Furthermore, Ahmadinejad's influence is waning. The new head of the Revolutionary Guard Ali Jafari is from a conservative sub-faction opposed to the more radical elements allied with Ahmadinejad. He replaced the former Guard head Yahya Rahim-Safavi, who was apparently seen as too openly sympathetic to the president. In

addition, former president and Ahmadinejad rival Ayatollah Rafsanjani was recently elected to head the powerful experts' assembly, defeating Ayatollah Ahmad Jannati, who was backed by Ahmadinejad supporters and other hardliners.

Ahmadinejad's election in 2005 was not evidence of a turn to the right by the Iranian electorate. The clerical leadership's restrictions on who could run made it nearly impossible for any real reformist to emerge as a presidential contender. Ahmadinejad's opponent in the runoff election was the 70-year-old Ayatollah Rafsanjani, who was seen as a corrupt representative of the political establishment. The fact that he had become a millionaire while in government overshadowed his modest reform agenda. By contrast, Ahmadinejad, the relatively young Tehran mayor, focused on the plight of the poor and cleaning up corruption.

As a result, Iranian voters were forced to choose between two flawed candidates. The relatively liberal contender came across as an out-of-touch elitist, and his ultraconservative opponent was able to assemble a coalition of rural, less-educated, and fundamentalist voters to conduct a pseudo-populist campaign based on promoting morality and value-centered leadership. In short, it bore some resemblance to the presidential election in the United States one year earlier.

Under Ahmadinejad's leadership, the level of corruption and the economic situation for most Iranians has actually worsened. As a result, in addition to losing the backing of the clerical leadership, he has lost much of his base and his popularity has plummeted. In municipal elections last December, Ahmadinejad's slates lost heavily to moderate conservatives and reformers. Why, then, is all this attention being given to a relatively powerless lame duck president of a Third World country?

Part of the reason may be that highlighting Ahmadinejad's extremist views and questioning his mental stability helps convince millions of Americans that if Iran develops an atomic bomb, it will immediately use it against the United States or an ally such as Israel. With more than 200 nuclear weapons and advanced missile capabilities, Israel has more than enough deterrent capability to prevent an Iranian attack. Obviously, American deterrent capabilities are even greater. However, if you depict Iran's leader as crazy, it puts nuclear deterrence in question and helps create an excuse for the United States or Israel to launch a preventive war prior to Iran developing a nuclear weapons capability.

In reality, though, the Iranian president is not commander-in-chief of the armed forces, so Ahmadinejad would be incapable of ordering an attack on Israel even if Iran had the means to do so. Though the clerics certainly take hard-line positions on a number of policy areas, collective leadership normally mitigates impulsive actions such as launching a war of aggression. Indeed, bold and risky policies rarely come out of committees.

It should also be noted that while Ahmadinejad is certainly very anti-Israel, his views are not as extreme as they have been depicted. For example, Ahmadinejad never actually threatened to "wipe Israel off the map" nor has he demonstrated a newly hostile Iranian posture toward the Jewish state. Not only was this oft-quoted statement a mistranslation – the idiom does not exist in Farsi and the reference was to the dissolution of the regime, not the physical destruction of the nation – the Iranian president was quoting from a statement by Ayatollah Khomeini from over 20 years earlier. In addition, he explicitly told our group on September 26 that there was "no military solution to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict" and that it was "not Iran's intention to destroy Israel."

### **The Saddam Niche**

The emphasis and even exaggeration of Ahmadinejad's more bizarre and provocative statements makes it easier to ignore his more sensible observations, such as: "Arrogant power seekers and militarists betray God's will." It also makes it politically easier for the United States to refuse to engage in dialogue or enter into negotiations, such as those that led to an end of Libya's nuclear program in 2003. Ahmadinejad has welcomed American religious delegations to Iran, but the United States has denied visas to Iranian religious delegations to this country. The Bush administration has also blocked cultural and scholarly exchanges.

The disproportionate media coverage of Ahmadinejad's UN visit also suggests that Ahmadinejad fills a certain niche in the American psyche formerly filled by the likes of Saddam Hussein and Muammar Qaddafi as the Middle Eastern leader we most love to hate. It gives us a sense of righteous superiority to compare ourselves to these seemingly irrational and fanatical foreign despots. If these despots can be inflated into far greater threats than they actually are, these threats can justify the enormous financial and human costs of maintaining American armed forces in that volatile region to protect ourselves and our allies and even to make war against far-off nations in "self-defense." Such inflated threats also have the added bonus of silencing critics of America's overly-militarized Middle East policy, since anyone who dares to challenge the hyperbole and exaggerated claims regarding these leaders' misdeeds or to provide a more balanced and realistic assessment of the actual threat they represent can then be depicted as naive apologists for dangerous fanatics who threaten our national security.

Furthermore, focusing on Ahmadinejad's transparent double-standards and hypocrisy makes it easier to ignore similar tendencies by the U.S. president. Ahmadinejad's speech at the UN on September 25 was widely criticized for its emphasis on human rights abuses by Israel and the United States while avoiding mention of his own country's poor human rights record. It helps distract attention from President Bush's speech that same day, in which he criticized human rights abuses by dictatorial governments in Belarus, North Korea, Syria, Iran, Burma, and Cuba, but avoided mentioning human rights abuses by Egypt, Saudi Arabia, Equatorial Guinea, Oman, Pakistan, Cameroon, and Chad, or any other dictatorship allied with the United States.

The outreach by Christian clergy to Ahmadinejad, whom The New York Times described as "the religious president of a religious nation who relishes speaking on a religious plane," came out of a belief in the importance of dialogue and reconciliation. Our group emphasized that we were critical of the U.S. government's threats but also raised concerns on such issues as Iranian human rights abuses and Ahmadinejad's hostility toward Israel and denial of the Holocaust. Virtually all our questions, however, were thrown back in criticisms toward the United States. "Who are the ones that are filling their arsenals with nuclear weapons?" he said. "The United States has developed a fifth generation of atomic bombs and missiles that could hit Iran. Who is the real danger here?"

Indeed, it must seem odd to most people in the Middle East that the United States, which is 10,000 miles away from the longest-range weapon the Iranians can currently muster and possesses by far the most powerful militarily apparatus the world has ever seen, is depicting Iran as the biggest threat to its national security. As Ahmadinejad put it to our group that morning, "The United States has many thousands of troops on our borders and threatens to attack us. Why is it, then, that Iran is seen as a threat?" And though most Iranians, Arabs, and other Muslims recognize Ahmadinejad as an extremist, he is unfortunately correct in accusing the United States of unfairly singling out Iran, an issue that has real resonance in that part of the world.

Indeed, the United States is obsessed with Iran's nuclear program – still many years away from producing an atomic bomb – while we support the neighboring states of Pakistan, India, and Israel, which have already developed nuclear weapons and which are also in violation of UN Security Council resolutions regarding their nuclear programs. We blame Iran for the deaths of American soldiers in Iraq yet 95% of U.S. casualties are from anti-Iranian Sunni insurgents. We focus on Iranian human rights abuses while we continue to support the even more oppressive and theocratic Islamic regime in Saudi Arabia. We attack the Iranian president's denial of the genocide of European Jews while remaining silent in the face of Turkish leaders' denial of the genocide of Armenians. One of the most important principles of most faith traditions is moral consistency. Few receive greater wrath in most holy texts than hypocrites.

Americans have many legitimate concerns regarding Iranian policies in general and the statements of President Ahmadinejad in particular. However, as long as U.S. policy appears to be based upon such opportunistic double standards rather than consistent principles, Ahmadinejad's inflammatory rhetoric will continue to find an audience.

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