

An Iranian offer that America must heed

The Ahmadinejad letter is an invitation to dialogue as well as a reminder of the dangers posed by the Bush administration

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Global Research, May 12, 2006

The Hindu 12 May 2006

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WITH THE exception of one highly regrettable sentence implicitly questioning the historicity of the Nazi holocaust against the Jews and another hinting at the complicity of U.S. intelligence agencies in 9/11, Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad's [18-page letter to his American counterpart, George W. Bush](#), is a tour de force of the kind the world of diplomacy has not seen for a long time.

This extraordinary document — cleverly drafted in the religious idiom that Mr. Bush and his neoconservative advisers allegedly believe in, complete with a reference to Judgment Day — is the first official communication from the head of the Iranian government to an American President since the 1979 revolution that overthrew the Shah. It is also a masterpiece of political clarity and philosophical opaqueness, which will frustrate and provoke Washington. The world sees the well-timed letter as a diplomatic opening — which it most certainly is — but the Bush administration is not interested in diplomacy. Nor does it look kindly upon those who seek to suggest that the recent crescendo of allegations against Iran resembles the lies Washington told about weapons of mass destruction in the run-up to its disastrous invasion of Iraq in 2003.

The experience of Iraq is the single most important argument the Iranian President marshals to make the point that the Bush administration's policy towards Iran is misconceived and dangerous. And he urges the American President to change course lest he be judged harshly by three separate courts: of God, of history and of his own people.

Because of the possibility of the existence of WMDs in Iraq, Mr. Ahmadinejad's letter notes, the country was occupied, "around one hundred thousand people killed, its water sources, agriculture and industry destroyed, close to 180,000 foreign troops put on the ground, sanctity of private homes of citizens broken, and the country pushed back perhaps fifty years ... Lies were told in the Iraqi matter. What was the result? I have no doubt that telling lies is reprehensible in any culture, and you do not like to be lied to."

The letter is formally addressed to Mr. Bush but its arguments are all aimed at a wider audience, particularly in Europe, West Asia, and the U.S. To the people of the United States, Mr. Ahmadinejad offers a reminder of the high price they are paying thanks to the Bush administration's lies in Iraq: "Hundreds of billions of dollars spent from the treasury of one country and certain other countries and tens of thousands of young men and women — as occupation troops — put in harm's way, taken away from family and loved ones, their hands stained with the blood of others, subjected to so much psychological pressure that everyday some commit suicide and those returning home suffer depression, become sickly and grapple with all sorts of ailments; while some are killed and their bodies handed to their

families.”

Post-9/11, Mr. Ahmadinejad writes, the American people have been made to feel less secure thanks to their government’s policies. And the U.S. administration has thrown all principles of human rights out of the window by incarcerating people indefinitely without trial and maintaining secret prisons. In a direct reference to Mr. Bush’s much-publicised religious beliefs, the Iranian President asks how all of this can be reconciled with someone being “a follower of Jesus Christ, the great Messenger of God.”

But there is more to the letter than mere rhetoric. In directly addressing the U.S. President, Mr. Ahmadinejad is reprising a tradition as familiar to Iranian statecraft as its experience with `regime change.’

Under pressure from the same Anglo-American powers ranged against Teheran today, Mohammed Mossadegh, who was Prime Minister of Iran until being forcibly overthrown in 1953, wrote a number of letters to President Dwight D. Eisenhower. Mossadegh had asserted Iran’s independence against the British by nationalising its oil and was being subjected to punitive action by Britain and the U.S. “Although it was hoped that during Your Excellency’s administration attention of a more sympathetic character would be devoted to the Iranian situation,” [Mossadegh wrote to Eisenhower on May 28, 1953](#), “unfortunately no change seems thus far to have taken place in the position of the American Government.” He also complained that Iran had made numerous proposals for the amicable settlement of its dispute with the Anglo-American oil companies but these had not been responded to.

Unlike President Bush, who got Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice to reject Mr. Ahmadinejad’s letter, Eisenhower gave Mossadegh the courtesy of a reply. But he was also dishonest and misleading. The plot hatched by the Dulles brothers for Mossadegh’s overthrow was already under way. On August 19, 1953, Iran was brought back kicking and screaming into the Free World.

As a former teacher, Mr. Ahmadinejad knows Iran’s history well. He also knows Mossadegh erred in not correctly reading the intentions of the U.S. and in being reactive. Elected to the presidency last year, Mr. Ahmadinejad quickly — and correctly — concluded that there was no way the Bush administration would give up its goal of `regime change’ in Iran. After all, the opening to Washington attempted by his more liberal predecessor, Mohammed Khatami, had not only been summarily rejected but rewarded by Iran’s inclusion in the `axis of evil.’ Mr. Ahmadinejad was equally certain that no matter what concessions Teheran made to provide its European interlocutors “objective guarantees” of its peaceful nuclear intentions, Washington would never accept the development or retention of safeguarded fuel cycle activities by Iran.

Calculated escalation

Sitting in his Teheran office in August 2005, Mr. Ahmadinejad could be forgiven for believing in the inevitability of American sanctions and eventual use of force. The hopes in liberal Iranian circles that France, Germany, and Britain would come up with a credible formula for the resolution of the nuclear question were dashed when the E-3 produced their limp proposal of August 5. Rather than sitting back and allowing Washington to calibrate the pace and extent of crisis escalation, President Ahmadinejad probably surmised that Iran’s best chance of avoiding the fate that befell Iraq lay in escalating the crisis on its own terms.

The rhetoric against Israel last fall, the resumption of enrichment experiments in January this year, and the declaration that Iran has mastered the technology and is now a “nuclear nation” would have made no sense to a Mossadegh. But to a leader convinced about the inevitability of an American military attack, it was a high-risk gamble that appears to have paid off. By bringing the crisis to a boil at a time when Washington has neither the military nor diplomatic capability to launch an attack — let alone persuade the world to impose sanctions — President Ahmadinejad has, paradoxically, increased his country’s room for manoeuvre. His letter to Mr. Bush is part of the same strategy, except that it comes as a soothing unguent to the high octane grandstanding of the past few months. Certainly, the international oil bourses have taken it that way.

What should the Bush administration do? It should heed the advice of its friends and allies and grasp the diplomatic nettle that Mr. Ahmadinejad has thrust into its unwilling hands. Contrary to Washington’s deafening propaganda, Iran has not crossed the nuclear weapons rubicon and it is not at all clear that it even wishes to do so. In any case, if the Iranian leadership decides to build nuclear weapons, there is absolutely nothing the U.S. or the world can do to force it not to do so. The key, then, lies in making sure Mr. Ahmadinejad and his colleagues — and the wider Iranian clerical-corporate establishment of which they are a part — continue to have no incentive to go down that path. Imposing sanctions and threatening military action are not disincentives; if anything, they will strengthen the hands of those in Teheran who argue nuclear weapons are needed as the ultimate deterrent against ‘regime change.’ Mr. Ahmadinejad’s letter has raised issues about American policies that are shared by countries in the region and the wider world. These are also issues that are being keenly debated inside the U.S. itself. President Bush should do himself and the world a favour and enter into a dialogue with Iran on these.

As far as the nuclear issue is concerned, Iran has said it will provide time-bound answers to all outstanding questions raised by the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) provided its dossier is transferred back from the U.N. Security Council to the IAEA. This proposal should be accepted. There can also then be a speedy resumption of Iran’s Additional Protocol obligations, including surprise complementary accesses to sites international inspectors wish to visit. Technical fixes like inspections are necessary to assure the world about the peaceful nature of Iran’s nuclear programme. But they have to be supplemented by a political approach that addresses Iran’s security concerns. Mr. Ahmadinejad has provided a rational and cogent outline of what these concerns are. Nowhere in the letter does he call for the destruction of Israel or any other state. Peace in the region requires a change of course by Washington. It is up to the rest of the world to push for such a change.

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