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Iran president missing badly

Ahmadinejad's crisis deepens as he endangers the petro-loot

- Abbas Milani
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The crisis in Lebanon has been a rude awakening for Iran's populist, fiery and forked-tongue president, Mahmoud Ahmadinejad. His dangerous messianic rhetoric has crashed on the hard rocks of geopolitics, and on the even-harder reality that the rest of the Iranian regime is reluctant to support anything that seriously endangers their control of \$70 billion-a-year in petro-loot. The fissures within the regime in Tehran have become more pronounced since the beginning of the Lebanon crisis.

Ahmadinejad came to power as the head of a surprisingly powerfully cabal of Revolutionary Guard commanders, leading members of the Basij (the militia-cum-street gang who are the regime's enforcers) and some stridently messianic clergy who expect the imminent return of the Mahdi.

The Mahdi is Shiism's missing messiah, in hiding for almost a millennium. On more than one occasion, Ahmadinejad has said that the main function of his administration is to facilitate the return of the hidden messiah. This rhetoric has introduced into Iranian political discourse the notion of Mahdaviyat, or messianism. The messiah's return, according to Shiism, is preceded by cataclysms of apocalyptic proportions. But the suffering and mayhem that accompanies the return will be followed by an eternity of salvation -- a story eerily similar to the stories favored by Christian fundamentalists, jubilant over what they think is the coming of Armageddon. But fundamentalist delusions and dreams do not generally make good policy -- they usually wind up in conflict with realpolitik. Ahmadinejad's Mahdaviyat has been no exception.

In the first few weeks of his presidency, he and his supporters took the Iranian political scene by storm. Mixed with his populism was his attempt to revitalize the regime's revolutionary spirit. He wanted to return to the days when Ayatollah Khomeini was still alive and advocating the export of the revolution.

Ahmadinejad's opponents, and even his allies, including spiritual leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, were surprised by his ideological intransigence, his dangerous international brinkmanship, particularly in the nuclear negotiations, and his many verbal faux pas -- accompanied by a struggling economy -- that embarrassed the regime (most famously by his absurd anti-Semitic denial of the Holocaust). Gradually and inexorably, the rest of the leadership tried to muzzle him and limit the damage he could do by his dangerous and

careless rhetoric. But his populism, his reputation for financial probity and the support of Revolutionary Guards and the Basijis have made him difficult to muzzle.

The start of the hostilities in Lebanon provided a new opportunity for Ahmadinejad to promote his aggressive new paradigm of exporting the Islamic revolution and creating a "Shiite revolutionary arc" in the Muslim world. In this vision, Iran will be the ideological leader, military supplier and financial supporter of an international brotherhood.

Ahmadinejad's first response to the crisis was to condemn Israel and predict its annihilation. He followed by inviting all Muslims to support their Shiite brethren in Lebanon, but the call fell on deaf ears. His later proposal for an immediate emergency meeting of leaders of Muslim countries was also ignored in other Middle East capitals -- worried as the leaders are about an emergent assertive Iran and a Shiite brotherhood.

Even in Iran, the rest of the leadership has, at least so far, supported a wait-and-see posture -- paying lip service to Hezbollah as brave and valiant soldiers of Islam, yet taking no practical steps that would entangle Iran in the hostilities.

When a shady semi-official organization registering "volunteers for martyrdom" announced that it was sending two small teams of "martyr-seekers" to Lebanon, the government was quick to distance itself. When a group of Majlis deputies announced their decision to go to Lebanon to show solidarity with Hezbollah, the Speaker, Hadad-Adel, who is connected to Khamenei by blood and politics, immediately ordered the trip canceled. Finally, anecdotal evidence from inside Iran, including reports by Western journalists, indicate the Iranian people have no stomach to enter the war between Israel and Hezbollah.

The future fate of Ahmadinejad's style of politics is profoundly entangled with the fate of Hezbollah. His aggressive paradigm of politics is founded on the idea that Islamist forces around the world can, through action and unity, become an invincible force and defeat both the West and Israel. Exporting the revolution and standing up to the West, Ahmadinejad believes, can and will bring victory.

A corollary is the proposition that on the nuclear issue, only by forcefully continuing enrichment activities and ignoring Western offers of carrot or threats of stick, can the Islamic regime maintain its dignity and achieve its goals.

If Hezbollah's power and prestige are debilitated, then the Ahmadinejad camp will be deprived of its most important tool for exporting the revolution. Such a defeat will also diminish the Islamic Republic's arsenal in its negotiations with the West over its nuclear program.

If on the other hand, Hezbollah emerges victorious -- and for Hezbollah, simply surviving means victory -- then Ahmadinejad and his agenda of exporting the revolution and pushing ahead with the nuclear program, will have won a round. Such a victory can be expected to contribute to strengthening of radical Islamists throughout the region. Inside

Iran, such an ascendancy can only mean further dismantling of civil society and retarding movement toward democracy. In the region, ascendant Islamist Shiites would threaten the future of authoritarian regimes -- from Sunni Saudi Arabia to Shiite-majority oil rich Bahrain.

The greatest tragedy is that the heavy human price for any of these eventualities is ultimately paid by the people of Iran, whose aspirations for democracy are on the line, and by the innocent civilians of Lebanon and Israel.

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