



MIDEAST MONITOR: Bruce Maddy-Weitzman

Ahmadinejad Goes to Lebanon

WIDESPREAD APPREHENSION PRECEDED IRANIAN President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad's recent high-profile state visit to Lebanon.

Purported plans for Ahmadinejad to personally cast stones across the Lebanese-Israeli border fence carried the possibility of igniting a new round of violence with possibly dangerous consequences. Within Lebanon, tensions surrounding the visit threatened to destabilize the fragile status quo among the country's rival camps. As it happened, the visit passed without incident, and essentially changed nothing. But it was nonetheless extremely significant, serving to highlight the current strategic landscape in the region, the state of the Arab system, and the balance of forces within always-vulnerable Lebanon.

At the height of the Second Lebanon War in 2006, US secretary of state Condoleezza Rice characterized the fighting as the "birth pangs of the new Middle East." Not only was the statement inappropriate, the outcome did not meet her expectations. Four years later, Iran continues to project its power into the Levant in ways not seen since the epic struggles between the ancient Persian Empire and Greece.

For Ahmadinejad, the visit was a welcome relief from the twin pressures of domestic difficulties and tightening international sanctions. He was greeted in both Beirut and the southern Lebanese Shi'ite town of Bint Jbeil by appreciative throngs, with Hizballah and the Lebanese state authorities coordinating the visit.

The Iranian president took every opportunity to appear as the leader of a popular, global anti-Western and anti-Zionist coalition, repeating to receptive ears his claims of a vast US-led conspiracy behind the 9/11 terror attacks on America, and familiar anti-Semitic canards branding Jews as "former slave owners" and Holocaust fabricators.

Iran's success in building up a strategic presence in Lebanon has been palpable. UN Security Council Resolution 1701 mandating an end to the inflow of weapons to Lebanese militias and their dismantlement has not been implemented. By all accounts, Hizballah's weapons stores, significantly depleted during the 2006 fighting, have been both replenished and upgraded. Moreover, Iran has funneled large-scale reconstruction aid, estimated at \$1 billion dollars, to the Lebanese south, and is now promising a major investment in Lebanese infrastructure projects, particularly the failing electricity network. In conjunction with Syria, Iran has managed to defang the Cedar Revolution/March 8 political bloc, which so enamored Bush Administration officials and conservative Arab regimes, giving Hizballah and Syria's other Lebanese allies a clear advantage in the Lebanese political game.

Iran has registered other strategic gains as well. Its political, financial and material support for Hamas against the Palestinian Authority has made it a player in both the internal Palestinian and Palestinian-Israeli equation as never before. The changing political landscape in Turkey is also a welcome development for Tehran. Official Turkish strategic thinking, as expressed by Foreign Minister Ahmet Davutoglu, no longer views Iran as a threat, making Turkey a weak link in the American efforts to forge an international coalition against

Iran's nuclear program. And within Iraq's highly contentious political field, Iran, the major regional beneficiary of Saddam Hussein's overthrow, wields significant influence, epitomized by the recent decision of Iranian client Moqtada al-Sadr to support Iraqi Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki's bid to remain in office.

Overall, the combination of the traditional Shi'ite sense of deprivation and victimhood, and Iran's self-image as a historically entitled major regional power, serve as a durable intellectual-emotional foundation for Ahmadinejad's activist foreign policy. The divided Arab system of states now confronts in its midst a non-Arab state able to project considerable power along with emotional appeal to large segments of its frustrated and young public. In essence, Iran now carries the flag of anti-Western militancy, which had belonged to earlier generations of Arab nationalists.

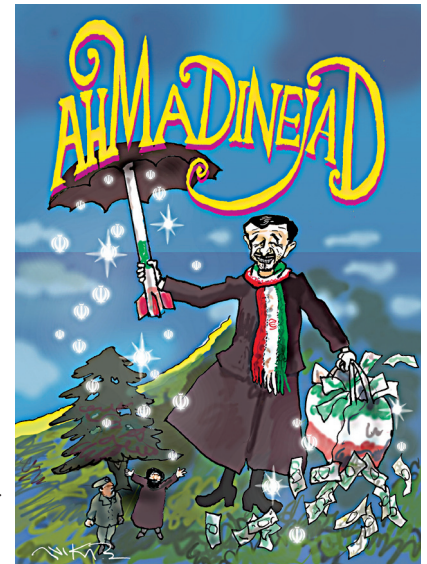
Conservative pro-Western Arab regimes are continually seeking ways to counter the Iranian thrust, with only limited results thus far. For the Egyptians, the traditional *primus inter pares* of the Arab system, Iran's involvement in Arab affairs, and particularly in the Palestinian question, as well as Ahmadinejad's unbridled attacks against the West and its regional allies, is especially galling. The Saudis have alternated between remonstrating and cajoling Syria, seeking to persuade it to prevent Iran from attaining complete hegemony in Lebanon. Syria, for its part, stands astride both camps – an ally of Iran and the Palestinian and Lebanese "resistance," as well as a critic of the value of the Arab peace initiative and of the PA, but also eager to keep all of its options open, vis-à-vis the West, Israel and other Arab states.

Indeed, Syria is a wild card in the strategic equation. The long-held assumption that Syria can be prised away from the Iranian-Hizballah-Hamas camp and induced to join the ranks of pro-Western Arab regimes in return for a Syrian-Israeli peace, which would entail a complete Israeli withdrawal from the Golan Heights, remains just that.

For the time being, in any case, the prospects for a Syrian-Israeli agreement appear remote, while the coming months will bear watching in a number of areas: in Lebanon, where the international tribunal investigating the assassination of Rafiq al-Hariri may well indict Hizballah operatives, which Hizballah and Syria will reject, raising the prospects of renewed intercommunal tension and conflict; the Palestinian-Israeli diplomatic track, whether stalled or revived; Egyptian parliamentary elections in November, followed by presidential elections next year; instability in Iraq, which more and more resembles Lebanon writ large; and, of course, the ratcheting up of Western sanctions on Iran.

Major developments in any of these spheres will likely have ripple effects across the region. Stay tuned. ●

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