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The World According to Mahmoud Ahmadinejad
By Lawrence J. Haas

"Is there art that is more beautiful, more divine, and more eternal than the art of martyrdom?" Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, then Iran's President-elect, mused in a television address in 2005. "A nation with martyrdom knows no captivity."

Ahmadinejad's broadcast over Iranian airwaves was not empty rhetoric. Indeed, Ahmadinejad subsequently launched a radical organization known as *Gharargah Ashghane Shahadat* (The Lovers of Martyrdom Garrison), and recruited some 50,000 men and women for the stated purpose of suicide operations against the United States and Europe.

Even if none of these men and women ever set foot in the United States or Europe, their recruitment teaches a valuable lesson: Ahmadinejad's embrace of martyrdom is not posture. It is his governing philosophy, reflecting a cult of death that pervades the upper reaches of Iran's current regime.

Though Scottish historian and philosopher Thomas Carlyle's "Great Man Theory" has largely fallen from favor as the predominant explanation for world events, a single, powerful individual can still dramatically influence history. Largely for religious and ideological reasons, Ahmadinejad seeks to be such an individual.

From Whence He Came

Born in 1956, Mahmoud Ahmadinejad was the fourth child of a struggling barber and his devoted wife. A student of engineering at Iran's University of Science and Technology, Ahmadinejad was passionate about the revolutionary changes that were taking place in Iran in the late 1970s.

Just as the pro-Western regime of Shah Mohammed Reza Pahlavi was beginning to lose its grip on power, Ahmadinejad founded an anti-Shah group called the Islamic Student Union. The future president also joined the Office for Strengthening and Unity (*Daftare Tahkim va Vahdat*) a student group that led demonstrations against the Shah and whose members were arrested and tortured by the state security service, the SAVAK.

Ahmadinejad reportedly emerged from this period unscathed and was ready to contribute to Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini's Islamic Revolution in more meaningful ways. Senior figures of Khomeini's new Iran sent Ahmadinejad to Lebanon to meet with Shi'ite militias. Questions remain over whether Ahmadinejad was personally involved in the Iranian hostage crisis of 1979, in which Iranian extremists held 52 Americans captive for 444 days. While much of the mainstream media now discredits previous reports, some experts insist that he not only participated but also helped plan the student takeover of America's embassy.

Toward the end of the Iran-Iraq War (1980-1988), Ahmadinejad joined the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corp (IRGC) as a commander and participated in attacks against Iraq's Kirkuk region. He also was an instructor for the *Basij*, the IRGC-controlled domestic militia in Iran, indicating his fervor for the ideology of the Islamic revolution.

After the war, Ahmadinejad returned on several occasions to teach at his alma mater, Iran's University of Science and Technology. During the 1990s, he also served in various bureaucratic posts, including advisor to the Islamic culture and guidance ministry, and governor-general of the Ardebil province. During this period, Ahmadinejad honed his skills as a politician and sharpened his radical ideas.

By 2003, a relatively unknown Mahmoud Ahmadinejad was elected mayor of Tehran. He proved a skilled politician, reportedly responding personally to voters' concerns while building consensus within the bureaucracy. He also undid years of reform by putting a conservative religious stamp on the city. In just two years as mayor, he turned cultural centers into prayer halls, designated separate elevators for men and women in the town hall, and gave the *Hamshahri*, the official newspaper of city government, a decidedly conservative slant.

Ahmadinejad declared his candidacy for President in early 2005. He campaigned on middle class (*bazaar*) issues of corruption, unemployment, and economics. He shrewdly reached out, on his own and through networks of supporters, to urban and rural voters. More importantly, he connected with Iran's young voters; nearly half of Iran's population is under 24 years old, according to some estimates.

While his audience changed from speech to speech, his conservative religious message never wavered. In mosques across Iran, he called for governance by traditional *shari'a* (Islamic law) and a return to the original values of the 1979 revolution. After a grueling campaign, he shocked the world, beating former president and Majlis speaker Ali Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani by winning 62 percent of the vote versus Rafsanjani's 36 percent.

After claiming victory, Ahmadinejad visited Khomeini's tomb to signal allegiance to his vision and emerged even more conservative, religious, and dogmatic. As president, he has tightened government controls over Iran's television, radio, internet, films, and books. He has threatened academics who do not toe the conservative religious line. Indeed, he seeks to minimize or obliterate liberal Western influences on Iranian culture.

The Threat to Europe

Ahmadinejad's challenge to the West since coming to power is a well-documented one. At first, his vows to "wipe" Israel "off the map" and to create a "world without America" caused outrage across the civilized world. But, today, his continuing threats to Israel and the United States are met with indifference, if not yawns.

Iran's threats to Europe, however, are less documented and worth reviewing. Warning the continent against defending Israel, for instance, he said in 2006, "You should believe that this regime [Israel] cannot last and has no more benefit to you. What benefit have you got in supporting this regime, except the hatred of the nations?"

"We have advised the Europeans," he continued, "that the Americans are far away, but you are the neighbors of the nations in this region. We inform you that the nations are like an ocean that is welling up, and if a storm begins, the dimensions will not stay limited to Palestine, and you may get hurt."

European powers, meanwhile, have labored to save Iran from itself. Starting in 2003, Great Britain, France, and Germany negotiated with Iran for three years in an effort to entice Tehran to drop its nuclear program in exchange for trade and other benefits. The "EU-3" sought to prevent a U.S. attack on Iran's nuclear facilities, as some of America's leading conservatives were advocating.

Soon after he became president, however, Ahmadinejad made clear that the talks were doomed to failure. Meeting with the EU-3's foreign ministers in September 2005, Ahmadinejad suddenly asked a startling question: "Do you know why we wish for chaos at any price?" Hearing no responses, he said: "Because, after the chaos, we can see the greatness of Allah."

Chaos at Any Price

Chaos is central to Ahmadinejad's religious beliefs and, by extension, his hopes for the future. He believes, as many zealous Shi'ites do, that the Twelfth Imam, or "*Mahdi*," a messianic figure from the ninth century, will soon reappear to signal the end of the modern world and the onset of Islamic justice over all the earth. Ahmadinejad believes that his presidency will herald the Mahdi. At one point, he even pinpointed the Mahdi's return to 2007.

Ahmadinejad is so sure of his role in heralding the Mahdi that he has shaped his decision-making around it. Soon after assuming the presidency, he visited the mosque from which the Mahdi supposedly will arise, and he later provided nearly \$20 million for improvements there. Ahmadinejad then pledged to organize all public policy around the Mahdi's return.

Such radical ideology even shapes Iran's foreign policy. Ahmadinejad believes violent conflict will accelerate the Mahdi's return. That is why he continues to stoke violence in the Middle East. Needless to say, nuclear weaponry in his hands will give him further means to do so.

Ahmadinejad also surrounds himself with advisors and officials who share his messianic beliefs. His cabinet is dominated by hard-liners, and he has replaced dozens of top diplomats, along with provincial governors, whom he deemed insufficiently conservative.

Living in Fantasy

Surrounding himself with fellow messianic believers, Ahmadinejad has insulated himself from facts on the ground. He does not differentiate between theology and politics. Nor does he differentiate fantasy from reality.

In his challenges to Israel, he believes Iran can destroy the most potent military force in the Middle East. In his challenges to the United States, he believes Iran can destroy the greatest military force known to mankind.

Fantasy colors his sense of history, too. Ahmadinejad has called the Holocaust a "myth" and a "sheer historic lie." He considers the issue a subject of legitimate debate. In 2006, Iran held a two-day conference to examine whether the Holocaust happened, allowing attendees to "express their views freely." Ahmadinejad surrounded himself with 67 fellow deniers of history from 30 countries.

In perhaps his most dangerous delusion, Ahmadinejad believes he is ordained to perform Allah's will. After he spoke to the United Nations in late 2005, he was caught on videotape telling a cleric that, during the speech, a halo appeared above his head. "Suddenly the atmosphere changed," he said. Of the world leaders in attendance, he said, "and for the duration of the twenty-seven or twenty-eight minutes, they did not even blink. I am not exaggerating. I looked up and I saw them. They were transfixed. It was as if a hand of God was holding them."

The Looming Challenge

Through a combination of delusion, religious fervor, and ideological zeal, Mahmoud Ahmadinejad predicts that the demise of the world is rapidly approaching. He vows to hasten that end through a violent confrontation with the West. Should the elected leader of Iran acquire nuclear weapons, and fulfill even a fraction of his radical vision, he would lend credence to the discredited theories of Carlyle, demonstrating that one man can still profoundly influence history.

Lawrence J. Haas, former Communications Director to Vice President Al Gore, is Vice President for Policy at the Committee on the Present Danger, which fights terrorism and the ideologies that breed it.