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Ahmadinejad shows soft side in New York

By Kaveh L Afrasiabi
9/26/2012

He may be scorned and vilified constantly in the US media, but President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad in his latest trip to New York to attend the United Nations General Assembly opted for a less combative and more conciliatory approach than in past US trips.

On Monday, at a private meeting with some US media heavies as well as members of US think tanks, Ahmadinejad addressed a broad range of issues, including the future of US-Iran relations, Syria, Afghanistan, the nuclear issue and, of course, Israel's threat of military action against Iran.

While dismissing Israel's threat as "not serious," Ahmadinejad nonetheless accused Tel Aviv of seeking "adventures" in order to exit the "dead end it finds itself today". He lashed out at "a few Zionists" who blackmail the US leaders, wondering aloud how could this come about and how long before the American people spoke out against such intrusions in their domestic affairs.

His comment came in response to a reporter's question that noted Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's image was being shown in political advertisements promoting Republican presidential candidate Mitt Romney in the state of Florida. When pressed to express his preference for the upcoming US presidential elections, Ahmadinejad responded that he would not make any comment that would in the least be considered as interfering in US elections.

Although some of what he told his audience has been heard before, Ahmadinejad impressed them by expressing his desire to cooperate with US on Afghanistan "in many ways" since there were "common interests that outweighed the differences". He recalled that after 9/11, the US

responded to Iran's cooperation on Afghanistan by placing it in the "axis of evil". He said Iran, Afghanistan and Pakistan were increasingly cooperating on Kabul's issues and "more countries can join as long as they are interested in peace and security".

On the nuclear issue, Ahmadinejad insisted that Iran's nuclear program is peaceful and under inspection by International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA), adding that Iran's offer to ship out a bulk of its 20% enriched uranium was still on the table. This may be welcome news to the Europeans in particular, who are keen on continuing the multilateral nuclear talks with Iran partly to avoid the unwanted headache of an Iran-Israel war. An Iran military commander recently said such a conflict has the potential to drag other nations in and become a "World War 3".

As for the US's decision last week to de-list the Iranian dissident group Mujahideen-e Khalq (MEK) from its terror list, Ahmadinejad insisted that this was a wrong move that showed double standards on terrorism. "This group is responsible for the murder of a popular president and a prime minister and thousands of innocent people." He said that by proving that the US was complicity with a terrorist group, Washington had given Iran a major public relations boost.

Regarding the conflict in Syria, Ahmadinejad stated that at the recent Non-Aligned Movement conference in Tehran, the issue of Iran forming a "contact group" was raised, which Iran is now pursuing with Egypt, Turkey, and (to a lesser extent) Saudi Arabia. "We are for free elections and national dialogue in Syria," Ahmadinejad said, denying reports that an Iranian military commander has admitted that Iran is training pro-Bashar al-Assad militias.

"That report has been officially denied," he insisted. With respect to the "Middle East Quartet," there were plans for meetings on the sideline of UN gathering, in light of Egyptian President Morsi's attendance and his stated desire to push this initiative forward in his New York visit.

But perhaps the most important aspect of his communications with the US audience was his desire to explore the possibilities for a "new approach" in US-Iran relations, one that could draw on lessons of the past.

"We must first understand how we got here," he said, recalling that the US fully backed the pre-revolutionary monarchy yet "never acknowledged the popular system that replaced it". Citing the US's support for Iraq during the Iran-Iraq war as yet another major error on the US's part, Ahmadinejad called on US to formally apologize for the 1987 downing of an Iranian passenger airline killing more than 200 passengers. He touched on the tensions in Persian Gulf and welcomed guardedly the idea of "an agreement in sea" aimed at avoiding accidental clash - although he said the best option was for all foreign forces to depart from the region.

In response to a question that cited the issue of anti-Islam films or caricatures as expressions of "freedom of speech", Ahmadinejad found it ironic that some Western governments that champion the cause of free speech have quashed it over the "right to do historical research", a veiled reference to European laws banning open discussions of the Holocaust.

"We need to have a uniform set of laws, one standard that would be long-lasting ... Freedom of

speech is not a license to attack other religions and their prophets." For sure, in his coming Wednesday speech at the UN, Ahmadinejad will raise this issue again, thus preserving his image as a Muslim leader.

Finally, Ahmadinejad repeatedly raised human concerns such as poverty and need for peace and ending conflicts, in light of his new role as the chairman of the Non-Aligned Movement, which represents some 120 nations. Wearing two hats at the UN, ie, Iran's and the NAM's, simply means that Ahmadinejad is inclined more than ever before to sound like a humanist and genuine globalist leader keen on dialogue among cultures and not an apostle of "clashing civilizations" - that robe is more befitting those who nowadays incite religious feelings throughout the Muslim world through vile images of the Prophet.

US President Barack Obama's Tuesday speech at the UN has been predicted to contain "sharp words" on Iran, hardly surprising in light of the US elections that have raised Iran into a key foreign policy issue. But the big question is whether or not Obama is actually willing to set a new benchmark on Iran that would be difficult to ignore if he is re-elected. While this remained to be seen, one thing was for sure: no one expects Obama to reciprocate Ahmadinejad's conciliatory gestures.