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Obama may need Ahmadinejad after all

By Shahir Shahidsaless
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When President Mahmud Ahmadinejad was asked his thoughts on the video message that United States President Barack Obama delivered for the Iranian New Year in March, calling for a new beginning in the US-Iran relationship, he responded, "I sent a congratulatory message to Mr Obama. This was a major decision ... and I was criticized here at home, in Iran. Nevertheless, I did that. I am yet to receive a response."

Ahmadinejad's congratulatory message to Obama was unprecedented, the first of its kind since the 1979 Islamic Revolution. It raised many people's eyebrows inside and out of the country while many thought that it could be a turning point to break the ice, beginning a march towards opening dialogue between the two hostile governments. However, as succeeding events transpired, it turned out that Obama had no intention of responding to Ahmadinejad's reconciliatory message.

There were two reasons why Obama ignored Ahmadinejad. First, it is hard, if not unfeasible, for any US administration, Obama's included, to extend a hand towards a man who has questioned the holocaust and predicted the "demise of the Zionist regime".

Second, the assumption is that American policy-makers and political analysts overwhelmingly and strongly believe that dealing with Ahmadinejad is nothing but a waste of time, as the real power rests in the hands of Iran's Supreme Leader, Ayatollah Ali Khamenei. Reports prepared by a variety of American think-tanks strongly recommend that the US administration open a channel to directly deal with the ayatollah.

Based on these two reasons, Obama ignored Ahmadinejad, and, instead, delivered the Nowrouz (the Iranian new year) message with the hope of grabbing Khamenei's attention.

It somehow worked. Khamenei, without wasting time, directly addressed Obama's message - although not very nicely but reasonably nicer than the traditional hostile tone - to establish his role, and send a signal to [Washington](#) that yes, you are dealing with me.

However, as examined in an earlier article ([Ahmadinejad really is the man in charge](#) [Asia Times Online](#), March 11, 2009), the United States is mistaken. Ahmadinejad represents the most powerful network in the political arena of Iran led by the [dominant](#) faction in Sepah (Iranian Revolutionary Guards Corps) and simply cannot be ignored. In his recent interview with George Stephanopoulos of ABC, not once, but twice Ahmadinejad expressed his disappointment in not having his outreach returned by Obama. His message was clear: don't try to bypass me.

Despite Ahmadinejad's ultra-poor management of the economy and a cloud of doubt that was hanging over the "Principlist" camp, and while the consensus on his candidacy looked far-fetched, an article published in Sobhe Sadegh (a Sepah publication) silenced the critics. As a result, on April 25 a coalition of 14 conservative groups announced their support for Ahmadinejad's candidacy.

The article in Sobhe Sadegh, written by General Javani, one of the masterminds of Sepah, was focused on analyzing the real political inclinations of Mir Hussein Mousavi, the number one rival of Ahmadinejad in the upcoming elections.

Mousavi has a very strong revolutionary background, and although close to Iran's reformist ex-president Mohammad Khatami (who pulled out of this June's presidential race in Mousavi's favor), has not been involved actively with any reform party or organization before. While he calls himself a "reformist principlist" - a term coined by him - reformist groups hope that he can attract both the pro-reform voters, who outnumber the conservatives in large cities, and a good portion of conservative voters, to seal the race against Ahmadinejad with victory.

The analysis published in Sobhe Sadegh totally dismissed Mousavi and implicitly accused him of being a hypocrite. A part of the analysis read: "Strategically, Mousavi is a reformist. However, in order to attract those voters who are [Islamic] value-oriented, he has tactically chosen some principlist slogans."

Sepah, which according to the law is prohibited to take any political side, virtually ruled out Mousavi as a candidate that would meet the principlists' values. This gave rise to Ahmadinejad as Sepah's candidate of choice.

It is not unreasonable to expect that, with the support of Sepah, the same scenario that shaped the outcome of the 2005 presidential election will repeat itself. During that election, the emergence of an absolutely unknown character named Ahmadinejad was so peculiar and so unexpected that it left his powerful rival, the ex-president and the current chairman of the Assembly of Experts, Hashemi Rafsanjani, in a state of shock. Hashemi, in an open letter to the nation following the elections, referred to "some individuals" who "illegally interfered with the elections" and asked God to help him.

[Israel](#) and its lobby cannot fathom the realization of a normalization process between the US and a government headed by Ahmadinejad. However, if Ahmadinejad is able to declare victory in the June elections, then the United States should seriously consider talking to the hardliner, whether its neo-conservatives or their allies like it or not. As Ahmadinejad implied in his interview, he is not to be ignored.

However, the United States may get lucky. If any of Ahmadinejad's opponents draw an

irresistible and overpowering majority of voters, his supporters led by the dominant faction in Sepah will be taking a huge political risk if they stand by his side. Not affording to go against a huge majority's will, Sepah would likely concede and be prepared to work with the new president. This could make it easier for the US to engage in dialogue, should there be a genuine political will to do so.