

The Iranian Letter to President Bush: Analysis and Recommendations

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

On May 9, 2006, world media outlets released news of a letter written by Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad to U.S. President George W. Bush. The letter was the first official communiqué from the Iranian government to the U.S. since the two countries broke diplomatic ties in 1979. The letter was dismissed by U.S. spokespersons as a “rambling” narrative or as a “meandering screed” that did not address the current U.S. concerns over the nuclear energy program initiated by President Ahmadinejad. For the next few days, world media sources repeated the U.S. dismissal while offering their own assessments of the meaning and significance of the communiqué.

Reactions to the letter were mixed. Controversies over how the incident was handled pointed to the “unsophisticated response” made by U.S. officials to the overture, however diplomatically unorthodox its format. Sources throughout the world indicated that not only had the intention of the letter been misrepresented by U.S. officials, but its meaning had also been misinterpreted, thus fueling ongoing speculation that any issues raised by President Ahmadinejad were secondary to the stated U.S. goal of discussing only nuclear development in Iran.

We answer three key questions: (1) How did the controversy play in international media outlets? (2) What was the intention and content of the letter, and was it, in fact, a “meandering screed?” (3) What lessons may be derived from this incident to guide future decisions about U.S. strategic communication?

Our analysis provides the following conclusions:

- The letter is addressed to President Bush but is intended to reach a broad international audience—perhaps all believers. As such, it represents a seemingly distinctive ecumenical approach to organizing all monotheist religions against the evil influences of Western style democracy and liberalism.
- The letter is not a “meandering screed” but instead is an organized and coherent statement that provides a focused narrative.
- The letter represents a *dakwah* or invitation to President Bush, which may be interpreted as a call to Islam and/or a prelude to violence.

Two broad recommendations are generated from our analysis: (1) the U.S. needs to develop a more theoretically and culturally informed *independent* process for analyzing and managing diplomatic communication; and (2) the U.S. needs to open communication with President Ahmadinejad by formulating a response to the letter in order to improve our image with other Muslim audiences around the world.

THE LETTER AND ITS RECEPTION

Release of the Letter

On May 9, 2006 media outlets worldwide published news stories about the existence of a personal letter written to President George W. Bush by Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad. The letter, 16 pages in Farsi and accompanied by an 18-page English translation, addressed what “an Iranian spokesman called ‘new ways’ to resolve the crisis over Iran's nuclear program.”¹ The letter had been delivered President Bush the previous weekend. It was also reported widely that the letter was the first official communication from the Iranian government to the United States since diplomatic ties were broken between the two countries in 1979.

United States spokespersons were quick to dismiss the relevance of the letter to current concerns about Iran’s plans to enhance its nuclear program:

“It was a meandering screed.”

Unnamed U.S. official

"This letter isn't it," Secretary of States Condoleezza Rice said in an interview with The Associated Press in New York. "This letter is not the place that one would find an opening to engage on the nuclear issue or anything of the sort. It isn't addressing the issues that we're dealing with in a concrete way."

An unnamed U.S. spokesperson was widely quoted saying “it was a meandering screed.” John Bolton, U.S. Ambassador to the United Nations, added that with this letter “Iran was throwing ‘sand in the eyes’ of diplomats.”

By May 10, 2006 a full-text translation provided by a French source (*le Monde*) found its way into public circulation (see Appendix A). Media outlets from around the world reported the existence of the letter as well as the repeated dismissal of its relevance to the current debate about Iran’s nuclear program by U.S. officials. On that day during an interview in Florida with representatives from seven newspapers, President Bush was asked about the letter and he replied: "It looks like it did not answer the main question that the world is asking, and that is, 'When will you get rid of your nuclear program?'"

Also on May 10 *The New York Times* published a story about the letter that included the following account:

¹ All direct quotations in this section of the paper are taken from published accounts in *The New York Times*, May 9-11, 2006.

“Mr. Ahmadinejad reiterated that Iran would reject any Security Council decision that restricted the country's nuclear activities, which he said his country, like others, had the right to pursue.

”The Iranian nation has decided,’ he said at a news briefing in Indonesia that was carried by the Iranian news agency IRNA. ‘It will defend and never renounce its rights.’ Mr. Ahmadinejad also cast the tensions over Iran's nuclear program as an unfair struggle against technological advancement in Muslim countries.

‘Iranians are strong enough to defend their rights,’ he said. ‘But it should also be stressed here that resistance of the Iranian nation will not only be for Iran but for all independent-minded states including Indonesia, Malaysia, Turkey, Egypt and other Muslim countries.’”

Foreign Media Coverage

The reaction by the foreign media to the letter to President Bush from President Ahmadinejad was swift and voluminous in nature². It is striking that so many of the sources comment that it is irresponsible to simply dismiss the communication, as it represents a rare diplomatic opening in an otherwise silent quarter of a century. The letter, argued many sources, presents a unique opportunity for dialogue between the two nations and their leaders.

“It would be wrong to dismiss Ahmadinejad’s letter”

The Jerusalem Herald

Though doubtless alarmed by some of President Ahmadinejad pronouncements about Israel, one writer for *The Jerusalem Herald* concluded, “IT WOULD be wrong to dismiss Ahmadinejad's letter to Bush as just another of the Islamic leader's many weird habits. It would be more prudent, and better politics, to take Ahmadinejad seriously and to try and understand him on his own terms” (*emphasis in original*, Taheri, 2006). Foreign commentators view the stakes for both sides in the escalating political war of words as gravely serious. Dr. Marwan Al Kabalan, a lecturer in Media and International Relations on the faculty of Political Science and Media, Damascus University, said the letter is significant in that “the Iranian leadership must have realised (sic) how dangerous this game is and hence may have decided to approach the

² Regional media outlets quickly picked up the story of President Ahmadinejad’s letter to President Bush. A narrow search on *Lexis-Nexis* revealed 230+ stories from May 9-May 14 from “Middle East / African Sources” in *Universe’s* “World News” library. Searching the “European News Sources” showed 120+ hits, 79 in the “North / South American News Sources” library, and 120 hits in the “Asian Pacific News Sources” library. Though not identifying duplicate records, the narrow search (“Bush” w/10 “Iran” and “letter” from “05/09/2006” to “05/14/2006”) revealed sources dealing primarily with reaction to the letter, rather than more general stories about U.S.-Iranian relations. Collectively, those four libraries represent over 1,000 regional newspapers, journals, and wire services.

Americans and get them to talk about what concerns them” (Al Kabalan). *The Daily Star* of Lebanon noted, "For the first time in years, there is cause for hope . . . The most effective way to resolve the international standoff over Iran's nuclear program and one of the few remaining strategies that has not yet been tried is through direct talks between Tehran and Washington” (A.Q.I., Kole).

These reactions stand in sharp relief to coverage of the U.S. reaction to the letter. Media outlets widely covered the dismissive remarks by administration officials and the cool reception by the White House. Reporting on Secretary of State Rice’s remarks on weekend television about the letter, *Agence France Presse* led with Secretary Rice’s intonation that the letter “[I]s not a serious diplomatic overture” (AFP, LN). From a State Department press briefing, *Xinhua News Service* highlighted the remarks by spokesman Sean McCormack who noted, "Our view at this point is that there are plenty of channels of communication if the Iranians want to pass information to us or we want to pass information to them” (*Xinhua*, LN). Still, other sources, noted Washington official’s remarks that the letter did little to thaw the chill in relations between the U.S. and Iran as the Administration’s questions surrounding Tehran’s nuclear intentions remained unanswered (Cornwell).

While political and policy differences within Iran were highlighted by some (Al-Issawi; *Mideast Mirror*), the logic and position of Iran – with regard to the United States – was highlighted by more sources, identifying comments by both President Ahmadinejad and those in his government (*BBC Monitoring(a)*; *Deutsche Presse-Agentur*; *Emirates News Agency*). Further, the letter’s open invitation for conversation, as well as chastisement, was highlighted by some of the same sources, noting areas of shared national and international urgency (*Mideast Mirror*; *BBC Monitoring (b)*).

Summary

Within a span of a few short days, the first communiqué from Iran to the United States in a generation had been framed solely in relation to the current nuclear development issue. Reaction to the letter by foreign media was highly favorable to the position of the leadership in Teheran and tended to frame the reaction by American officials as dismissive and somewhat unsophisticated given the detailed and extended prose of the letter. Drawing the parallel to the letter written by the late Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini to then Soviet Premier Gorbachev, one writer remarked that the letter needs to be read and understood in its proper context as both a political and religious document (*La Guardia*).

Whether or not this letter was prompted by the escalating debate over Iranian nuclear weapons development, it seems clear that its scope is much broader. While the letter is extremely critical of the U.S. and accordingly provides ample grounds for criticizing Iran and President Ahmadinejad, there are also many portions that highlight possible areas for rapprochement, even cooperation, in issues of mutual concern. On this singular occasion of a personal letter from the President of Iran to the President of the United States, were our official responses to it both accurate and appropriate? Was the letter really a “meandering screed?” What are the diplomatic implications of such dismissals given the broader understanding we have acquired about communication emanating from Middle Eastern religious and political leaders?

The challenge, for both the Presidents involved and everyone else, is to read through confrontational rhetoric to discover the possibilities for dialog. Our purpose in this white paper is to examine the Iranian letter within the context of current understandings of intercultural communication and diplomacy. First, we will provide an analysis of the *intention and context* of the letter and our official responses to it within the broader interrelated domains of world media circulation, world attitudes toward the U.S. and the Bush administration, and religious thought. Second, we will offer an *analysis of the content of the letter* to see if, in fact, it can fairly be characterized as a “meandering screed” and if the interpretations of its meanings have been accurate, given what is known about Middle Eastern cultures and the Muslim religion. Third, we will offer *strategy and process recommendations about future communication opportunities with Middle Eastern leaders*. Our goal with this paper is to help our leaders and spokespersons apply the wealth of current thinking about communication, culture, and religion to practical problems affecting the image, honor, and standing of the U.S. in the world.

INTENTION AND CONTEXT

President Ahmadinejad frames the letter to President Bush with this question:

"My basic question is this: Is there no better way to interact with the rest of the world? Today there are hundreds of millions of Christians, hundreds of millions of Muslims, and millions of people who follow the teachings of Moses. All divine religions share and respect one word, and that is monotheism, or belief in a single God and no other in the world."

While questions of intention are always tricky, and made more so by issues of cultural and language differences, nevertheless the above paragraph provides a clear identification of a major theme that recurs in

the letter and frames the issues informing it. Moreover, the statement provides two important clues to the meaning of the letter: (1) interaction with the religious peoples of the world is flawed and must be addressed if relations among nations and tribes are likely to improve; and (2) all religions share a belief in a single God—or, put differently—there is a unifying power available to those who want to interact more effectively with religious people in the world.

Key theme:
Interaction with
the religious
peoples of the
world is flawed
and must be
addressed.

President Ahmadinejad marshals an array of cultural, political, economic, and religious arguments to support his contention that “interaction” with religious peoples of the world is in danger and must be repaired. Those arguments include themes that are neither new nor particularly distinctive from those articulated by Osama bin Laden or other Muslim religious leaders and politicians since 9/11. His arguments, however, do include new nuances and ecumenical references that inform and deepen our analysis.

President Ahmadinejad’s major themes are:

- There are contradictions between a professed belief in God and the word of his prophets and the current political, economic, social, and religious behavior of the Western democracies, particularly the U.S.. The U.S. operates prisons at Guantanamo and elsewhere without providing inmates with legal representation or trials while keeping them away from their families;
- The continued existence of Israel and the unfailing support of the U.S. for that nation poses problems for other nations in the Middle East. Not only do we not support the democratically elected officials of Palestine, but the U.S. government’s use the existence of Israel to call technological advances by others in the region a threat to their existence;
- The U.S. government tells lies to its citizens and to the rest of the world;
- Other nations in Latin America, Asia, and Africa should be of greater concern to the U.S., and we should be helping them eradicate disease, end poverty, and provide peace and security to their citizens;
- The U.S. has used the “horrendous incident” of September 11, 2001 to perpetrate a mediated culture of fear and anxiety, to avoid telling the truth, and to turn away from the teachings of God. The U.S. is spending “hundreds of billions of dollars” on war when even within the U.S. poverty, homelessness, and unemployment exist.

- Is George W. Bush not concerned how he will be remembered by the people he has led? Did he manage to bring peace, security, and prosperity to his people?
- While “it is not my (President Ahmadinejad’s) intention to distress anyone,” if the prophets of all the world’s great religions were with us today, how would they judge such behavior?
- “Liberalism and Western style democracy ... have not been able to realize the ideals of humanity. Today, these two concepts have failed.” There is a worldwide religious movement toward God. Will (President Bush) not join them?

Toward the end of the letter, President Ahmadinejad issues an “invitation” to President Bush:

“Will you not accept this invitation? That is, a genuine return to the teachings of prophets, to monotheism and justice, to preserve human dignity and obedience to the Almighty and His prophets?”

The letter reflects political themes being aligned across the Middle East, Europe, and Asia.

As we will discuss later, this specific “invitation” (i.e., *dakwah*) has a known religious and political context within the Muslim world. So, too, do the concepts of “justice,” “human dignity,” and “obedience to the Almighty and His prophets.”

On the surface the letter has little to do with the chief U.S. agenda item—Iran’s nuclear capability. It has everything to do with the major political themes increasingly being aligned across the Middle East, Europe, and Asia by political, religious, and jihadi leaders. President Ahmadinejad is merely the most recent spokesperson. However, that he chose to break diplomatic silence with a personal letter to an American President and reiterate these themes deserves much closer scrutiny. Is it reasonable to interpret the letter as the ramblings of a dangerous and perhaps deranged political foe who is trying to deflect attention from the nuclear issue? Or was it—indeed is it—a window of diplomatic and cultural opportunity? Our analysis focused on two related questions: (1) is it reasonable to interpret the *form* of the letter as a rambling screed, and (2) was the *content* of the letter fully and accurately interpreted?

Form: Was it a “Meandering Screed”?

As we have documented an unnamed “White House official” said that Ahmadinejad’s letter was a “meandering screed,” a characterization that was picked-up in the wider press and sometimes transformed. For example, A UPI release (May 9) called it a “rambling letter.” From a rhetorical point of view, characterizing the text as “meandering” or

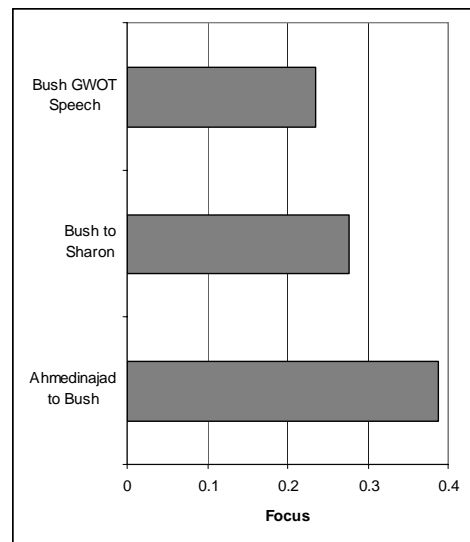
“rambling” is highly significant because it has implications for how seriously this message should be taken.

While each reader can decide for himself or herself whether the text is a rambling screed, in most cases this is a politically loaded judgment. We therefore turned to a more objective method of formal text analysis to determine how reasonable it is to describe the letter as “meandering” and “rambling.” Such characterizations essentially claim that a text is unorganized. Unorganized texts drift from topic to topic without taking care to connect the ideas being discussed into a coherent framework. A text analysis technique called Centering Resonance Analysis (Corman, Kuhn, McPhee, & Dooley, 2002) allows us to measure how organized Ahmadinejad’s letter is in a standardized way that permits comparison to other examples of communication. The measure, called *focus*, gives a value between zero and one describing the extent to which the concepts in a text are systematically organized. An important point about focus is that, other things being equal, longer texts tend to be less focused because they use more concepts, and it takes more effort/skill to organize more concepts.

The letter is 3% more focused than the average news story even though it is much longer.

The focus score for Ahmadinejad’s letter is 0.387. For comparison, the average focus of news story published by Reuters news service in the first quarter of 2006 was 0.358. So the letter was about 3% more focused than a news service story. This is significant because the letter was considerably longer than the average news story.

As another point of comparison we consider two recent texts from President Bush. One example is the text of a letter from Bush to Israeli Prime Minister Ariel Sharon in April 2004 dealing with a possible settlement between Israel and the Palestinians. The second is the text of a speech on the Global War on Terror delivered April 6, 2006 delivered in North Carolina. The letter, though shorter than Ahmadinejad’s letter to Bush, is a good point of comparison because it is a similar genre of communication. The speech is comparable in length to Ahmadinejad’s letter and is on a related topic.



The chart shows the comparative focus of these three texts.

Ahmadinejad’s letter is the most focused of the three texts. It is over

10% more focused than Bush's letter to Sharon, despite the fact that it is almost twice as long. It is 15% more focused than the Bush's GWOT speech, which is of comparable length. Clearly nobody would characterize these texts of President Bush as "rambling" or "meandering." By the same token, it was unreasonable for the "White House official" to characterize Ahmadinejad's letter as such given that it is considerably more focused.

Content: Was the Letter Fully and Accurately Interpreted?

As noted above, this letter is an elegant expression of *dakwah*, a call to Islam. It underscores the suffering and oppression that afflict many of the world's populations in the current global order, and hopefully points to the transformative power of divine justice that may result from more faithful obedience to God. There is also an apocalyptic undertext about the second coming of Christ. Ahmadinejad's apocalyptic sympathies have been pointed out before, as have those of some of bin Laden's supporters. It is important to note, however, that this is consistent with an orthodox interpretation of Islam. Many in the Middle East believe the situation in the region is so dire that this is the only hope for a solution.

The letter is an elegant expression of *dakwah*, a call to Islam.

Although the letter is addressed to President Bush, it is clearly directed at a larger audience. Perhaps most fundamentally, the letter is directed at the Muslim world as a whole. It is significant that there are no Shia sectarian themes in the document. For example, there are no references to Imams, central figures in Shia Islam but not in Sunni Islam. Even more significantly, perhaps, the apocalyptic portions of the text do not reference the return of the "hidden" Imam who figures significantly in Shia apocalyptic thought.

Dakwah is traditionally directed to Muslims, and this letter may reflect Ahmadinejad's invitation to Bush to become Muslim. (That the invitation to become a Muslim is traditionally viewed as obligatory prior to the use of violence has been noted by some interpreters.) He uses what would appear to be classical Islamic religious/political vocabulary, including peace, justice, tranquility, responsibility, dignity (see Bernard Lewis *The Political Language of Islam*) and defines the world's problems as the result of leaders who disobey God. As he rhetorically asks: "My basic question is this: Is there no better way to interact with the rest of the world?"

It is also noteworthy that the letter emphasizes the shared Jewish, Christian and Muslim values. In his words: "Today there are hundreds of millions of Christians, hundreds of millions of Muslims and millions of people who follow the teachings of Moses (PBUH). All divine

religions share and respect one word and that is monotheism or belief in a single God and no other in the world.” The letter is anti-Israel but not anti-Jewish. He takes the classical Islamic view that Jews, like Christians are ‘people of the book’ to whom God has sent Prophets and Holy Books. The Jewish Prophet to whom he refers is Moses (Musa) and the book is the Torah. Muslims also consider Jesus to be a Prophet and the Gospels to be the revealed book of the Christians.

The more ecumenical dimensions of this version of *dakwah* suggest that Ahmadinejad may be seeking an even larger audience. The classical expression “Peace Be Upon Him” after each reference to the prophets, including Jesus and Moses, exhibits a respectful tone. One most commonly hears this phrase after the name of Mohammed. So the many references to Jesus, followed by this phrase, in one single text are rhetorically very powerful. We are not aware of another Muslim text with so many references to Jesus with this ritual address of honor in such a condensed space. Consequently, the invitation to Islam is modified, seeming to extend this classical genre in a broader way to include the three religions of the Book and indeed the God of all people.

To this extent, the letter is an interesting intervention in the “clash of civilizations” dynamic. The “Islam against the West” framing that has been advanced by many, including especially the jihadis, shifts slightly insofar as the dividing line is between faithful followers of God (not simply followers of Islam) and the godless. This is only a slight variation on the former narrative, however, insofar as the primary political forms within the West—liberalism and Western style democracy—are denounced as failed concepts. He argues throughout the letter that secular democracy leads to war, oppression, misery, and poverty. He insists that the shared values of Islam, Judaism, and Christianity hold the key to a transformed world order that is more peaceful, just, prosperous, and dignified. What counts as faithful obedience to God remains captive to Ahmadinejad’s conservative version of Islam, a version that he proclaims is the shared values of Islam, Judaism, and Christianity. But the ecumenical manner in which he makes this case may well make it more compelling to larger segments of the Muslim world who reject jihadi versions of “Islam against the West” yet still feel alienated.

The ecumenical nature of the letter may make it more compelling to non-jihadi Muslims.

Dismissing this letter as the ramblings of a religious fanatic fails to honor the cultural resonance and legitimacy of this genre within the Muslim world. Not only may such a response intensify the strong anti-American feelings among Muslims, it may constitute a major “missed opportunity” to state our case in the public forum. In addition to acknowledging our shared values that are rooted in our religious heritages, it is essential to challenge the alignment between faithful obedience to God and rejection of liberalism and democracy. The

rhetorical power of the letter rests upon setting these in opposition, and this must be directly countered.

The “wall of separation” between church and state in the American tradition sets constraints on the response that the United States can realistically make to this letter. But that does not mean that he need avoid a substantive response. An effective response would make some reference to our shared values, and express sympathy for the suffering and oppression that mark the lives of so much of the world’s population. It would acknowledge this reality of the current global order, but it would then move on to disrupt the letter’s alliance between liberalism, democracy, and godlessness.

The privatization of religion within western democratic societies is sometimes accompanied by a sense that religious rhetoric carries no public claim, that it is essentially “irrational” and a form of irritating moralizing. The globalized world we are coming to inhabit makes it increasingly important to recognize that there are quite different rules regarding the appropriate role of religion in public discourse in other countries and traditions. After all the U.S. has long rhetorical tradition of mixing prophetic religion with the mission of liberalism and democracy. Ahmadinejad’s letter brings this issue to center stage.

Summary

Our analysis of the communicative, cultural, political, and religious aspects of the letter provide the following conclusions:

- The letter is not a “meandering screed” but instead is an organized and coherent statement that provides a focused narrative, which is at least as organized as statements typically made by President Bush;
- The letter represents a *dakwah* or invitation to President Bush, which may be interpreted as a call to Islam and/or a prelude to violence;
- The letter is addressed to a broader international audience—perhaps all believers—and as such represents a seemingly distinctive ecumenical approach to organizing all monotheist religions against the evil influences of Western style democracy and liberalism.

RECOMMENDATIONS: PROCESS, STRATEGY, AND PLAN

From a communication perspective, the letter represents an interesting rhetorical intervention in a situation defined by mediated conflict, disagreement over principles and methods, cultural

misunderstandings, and open hostility. This letter—all 18 pages of it, where not a single sentence refers to the development of nuclear technology—provides President Bush with a unique opportunity to engage President Ahmadinejad (and by extension, Muslims worldwide) in a personal as well as national conversation about how people of different faith traditions, different political systems, and differing views even on Israel can learn to live in peace, prosperity, justice, and mutual respect. The letter, and the official U.S. response to it, should serve as a case study in failed strategic communication. By misreading the intent and ignoring most the content of the message, by failing to adequately interpret the meaning of the letter within known intercultural and religious frameworks, and by refusing to respond to the significance of the communiqué even after world opinion chimed in, the U.S. lost an important opening for dialogue and further tarnished our image on the globalized world's mediated stage.

Lessons About Process

One consistent challenge faced by official U.S. spokespersons is the need for an informed approach to a message analysis that is strategically coupled with a coordinated approach to message alignment across government, military, and contracted spokespersons and agents. The Iranian letter incident provides a perfect example of the problems that occur when neither informed analysis nor alignment of messages occurs, but also affords those who are committed to improving communication of and about the U.S. an instructive heuristic to guide future actions.

The first lesson is the clear and present need for a theoretically- and culturally-informed non-governmental agency to provide real-time intercultural communication and religious analyses of messages *prior to* the formation of a coordinated strategic response. Relying on existing government agencies to provide communication interpretation and message strategy is a flawed policy because it means tying analysis to extant political agendas and therefore risks the imposition of political power dynamics to the interpretation of intercultural messages.

The second lesson is that the U.S. should frame these kinds of communiqués as opportunities for *dialogue*. From the religious philosopher Martin Buber forward, the idea of dialogue has been used to underscore “a meeting of the minds” mediated by “open, honest, authentic communication” that requires both participants to be “profoundly open to change” (Eisenberg, Goodall, & Trethewey, 2006).

By providing an 18-page letter organized by key questions articulated around common Middle Eastern concerns, President

Ahmadinejad opened a line of moral and philosophical communication that appears to be aimed at cross-cultural dialogue with President Bush on vital issues of the day.³ To ignore it, or to dismiss it, is to suggest that the invitation is either unacceptable or unworthy of respect. Either interpretation is unlikely to win the hearts and minds of Muslims the Middle East (and elsewhere) who understand the cultural, political, and religious dimensions of this message.

Lessons About Implementing a Strategic Response

However President Bush chooses to respond to this invitation to talk, we believe the following principles should guide the resulting interaction:

1. Communicate directly to President Ahmadinejad using the medium he selected—an open letter. Deliver the letter in English and with a careful Farsi translation.
2. Demonstrate respect for the courage to initiate direct contact after such a long hiatus. Point out that the letter raises deep and important questions and we value an open exchange of ideas.
3. Invite President Ahmadinejad to a summit at Camp David to further engage these ideas.

The above recommendations will accomplish two important strategic goals: (1) it will provide clear evidence of a willingness to engage world leaders on questions they have about our intentions in the Middle East, (2) it will place the “talking stick” back in the hands of President Ahmadinejad, and (3) it will signal to Muslim audiences around the globe that the U.S. President is willing to engage their leaders on matters of mutual interest beyond the singular nuclear development controversy. An added bonus will be a clear signal heard around the world that the United States understands the importance of cultural understanding and human communication—of a personal as well as the mediated variety—in winning the global war on terror.

Robert Wright, in a recent review of two new books about anti-Americanism in the world, says this: “So history has put America in a position where its national security depends on its further moral growth.” Our task, in part, is “to learn to see ourselves as others see us,” which is to say, to understand how the have-nots of the world see the haves. Throughout the Middle East, moral leaders are often religious leaders, and religious leaders often rise to lead their nations. In our country, we

³ Or, in fairness, it could be a political feign, similar to the bogus invitation to dialogue supposedly aimed at achieving peace offered by the North Vietnamese to President Nixon during the Vietnam War. The result was a prolonged and frustrating exchange of charges and counter-charges organized around the idea of “Paris Peace Talks.”

must look to our President to provide moral leadership as well as to guard the interests of the United States in world opinion. To do that will require a renewed dedication to a very American principle: *What we say matters.*

We believe our President may be at a tipping point in his own appreciation of the power of words to change perceptions of reality and to heavily influence tensions in the Muslim world. In a recent press conference in Berlin, he said: "We must understand words mean things to different people, . . . Sometimes my own messages send signals that I don't mean to send, but stirs up anxieties in the Muslim world" (White House, 2006). Our hope is that with a more strategic understanding and use of communication, this administration and its spokespersons may halt the continuing deterioration of our image worldwide. Responding to the Iranian letter would be an excellent step.

APPENDIX A: TEXT OF IRANIAN PRESIDENT'S LETTER TO PRESIDENT BUSH

EUP20060509394001 Paris Le Monde in English 09 May 06

[Text of letter written by Iranian President Ahmadinejad to U.S. President Bush; Le Monde provided no information on how the letter was obtained]

Mr George Bush, President of the United States of America
For sometime now I have been thinking, how one can justify the undeniable contradictions that exist in the international arena -- which are being constantly debated, specially in political forums and amongst university students. Many questions remain unanswered. These have prompted me to discuss some of the contradictions and questions, in the hopes that it might bring about an opportunity to redress them.
Can one be a follower of Jesus Christ (PBUH), the great Messenger of God,

Feel obliged to respect human rights, Present liberalism as a civilization model, Announce one's opposition to the proliferation of nuclear weapons and WMDs, Make War and Terror his slogan, And finally, Work towards the establishment of a unified international community - a community which Christ and the virtuous of the Earth will one day govern, But at the same time, Have countries attacked; The lives, reputations and possessions of people destroyed and on the slight chance of the ... of a ... criminals in a village city, or convoy for example the entire village, city or convey set ablaze. Or because of the possibility of the existence of WMDs in one country, it is occupied, around one hundred thousand people killed, its water sources, agriculture and industry destroyed, close to 180,000 foreign troops put on the ground, sanctity of private homes of citizens broken, and the country pushed back perhaps fifty years. At what price? Hundreds of billions of dollars spent from the treasury of one country and certain other countries and tens of thousands of young men and women - as occupation troops - put in harms way, taken away from family and love ones, their hands stained with the blood of others, subjected to so much psychological pressure that everyday some commit suicide and those returning home suffer depression, become sickly and grapple with all sorts of ailments; while some are killed and their bodies handed of their families.

On the pretext of the existence of WMDs, this great tragedy came to engulf both the peoples of the occupied and the occupying country. Later it was revealed that no WMDs existed to begin with.

Of course Saddam was a murderous dictator. But the war was not waged to topple him, the announced goal of the war was to find and destroy weapons of mass destruction. He was toppled along the way towards another goal, nevertheless the people of the region are happy about it. I point out that throughout the many years of the ... war on Iran Saddam was supported by the West.

Mr. President,

You might know that I am a teacher. My students ask me how can these actions be reconciled with the values outlined at the beginning of this letter and duty to the tradition of Jesus Christ (PBUH), the Messenger of peace and forgiveness.

There are prisoners in Guantanamo Bay that have not been tried, have no legal representation, their families cannot see them and are obviously kept in a strange land outside their own country. There is no international monitoring of their conditions and fate. No one knows whether they are prisoners, POWs, accused or criminals.

European investigators have confirmed the existence of secret prisons in Europe too. I could not correlate the abduction of a person, and him or her being kept in secret prisons, with the provisions of any judicial system. For that matter, I fail to understand how such actions correspond to the values outlined in the beginning of this letter, i.e. the teachings of Jesus Christ (PBUH), human rights and liberal values.

Young people, university students and ordinary people have many questions about the phenomenon of Israel. I am sure you are familiar with some of them.

Throughout history many countries have been occupied, but I think the establishment of a new country with a new people, is a new phenomenon that is exclusive to our times.

Students are saying that sixty years ago such a country did not exist. They show old documents and globes and say that as we have, we have not been able to find a country named Israel.

I tell them to study the history of WWI and II. One of my students told me that during WWII, which more than tens of millions of people perished in, news about the war, was quickly disseminated by the warring parties. Each touted their victories and the most recent battlefield defeat of the other party. After the war, they claimed that six million Jews had been killed. Six million people that were surely related to at least two million families.

Again let us assume that these events are true. Does that logically translate into the establishment of the state of Israel in the Middle East or support for such a state? How can this phenomenon be rationalized or explained?

Mr President,

I am sure you know how - and at what cost - Israel was established:

Many thousands were killed in the process.

Millions of indigenous people were made refugees.

Hundred of thousands of hectares of farmland, olive plantations, towns and villages were destroyed.

This tragedy is not exclusive to the time of establishment; unfortunately it has been ongoing for sixty years now.

A regime has been established which does not show mercy even to kids, destroys houses while the occupants are still in them, announces

beforehand its list and plans to assassinate Palestinian figures and keeps thousands of Palestinians in prison. Such a phenomenon is unique - or at the very least extremely rare - in recent memory.

Another big question asked by people is why is this regime being supported? Is support for this regime in line with the teachings of Jesus Christ (PBUH) or Moses (PBUH) or liberal values? Or are we to understand that allowing the original inhabitants of these lands - inside and outside Palestine - whether they are Christian, Muslim or Jew, to determine their fate, runs contrary to principles of democracy, human rights and the teachings of prophets? If not, why is there so much opposition to a referendum?

The newly elected Palestinian administration recently took office. All independent observers have confirmed that this government represents the electorate. Unbelievably, they have put the elected government under pressure and have advised it to recognize the Israeli regime, abandon the struggle and follow the programs of the previous government.

If the current Palestinian government had run on the above platform, would the Palestinian people have voted for it? Again, can such position taken in opposition to the Palestinian government be reconciled with the values outlined earlier? The people are also saying why are all UNSC resolutions in condemnation of Israel vetoed?

Mr President,

As you are well aware, I live amongst the people and am in constant contact with them --many people from around the Middle East manage to contact me as well. They do not have faith in these dubious policies either. There is evidence that the people of the region are becoming increasingly angry with such policies.

It is not my intention to pose too many questions, but I need to refer to other points as well.

Why is it that any technological and scientific achievement reached in the Middle East regions is translated into and portrayed as a threat to the Zionist regime? Is not scientific R&D one of the basic rights of nations? You are familiar with history. Aside from the Middle Ages, in what other point in history has scientific and technical progress been a crime? Can the possibility of scientific achievements being utilized for military purposes be reason enough to oppose science and technology altogether? If such a supposition is true, then all scientific disciplines, including physics, chemistry, mathematics, medicine, engineering, etc. must be opposed.

Lies were told in the Iraqi matter. What was the result? I have no doubt that telling lies is reprehensible in any culture, and you do not like to be lied to.

Mr President,

Don't Latin Americans have the right to ask, why their elected governments are being opposed and coup leaders supported? Or, why must they constantly be threatened and live in fear?

The people of Africa are hardworking, creative and talented. They can play an important and valuable role in providing for the needs of humanity and contribute to its material and spiritual progress. Poverty and hardship in large parts of Africa are preventing this from happening. Don't they have the right to ask why their enormous wealth - including minerals - is being looted, despite the fact that they need it more than others?

Again, do such actions correspond to the teachings of Christ and the tenets of human rights?

The brave and faithful people of Iran too have many questions and grievances, including : the coup d'etat of 1953 and the subsequent toppling of the legal government of the day, opposition to the Islamic revolution, transformation of an Embassy into a headquarters supporting, the activities of those opposing the Islamic Republic (many thousands of pages of documents corroborates this claim), support for Saddam in the war waged against Iran, the shooting down of the Iranian passenger plane, freezing the assets of the Iranian nation, increasing threats, anger and displeasure vis-à-vis the scientific and nuclear progress of the Iranian nation (just when all Iranians are jubilant and collaborating their country's progress), and many other grievances that I will not refer to in this letter. Mr President,

September Eleven was a horrendous incident. The killing of innocents is deplorable and appalling in any part of the world. Our government immediately declared its disgust with the perpetrators and offered its condolences to the bereaved and expressed its sympathies.

All governments have a duty to protect the lives, property and good standing of their citizens. Reportedly your government employs extensive security, protection and intelligence systems - and even hunts its opponents abroad. September eleven was not a simple operation. Could it be planned and executed without coordination with intelligence and security services - or their extensive infiltration? Of course this is just an educated guess. Why have the various aspects of the attacks been kept secret? Why are we not told who botched their responsibilities? And, why aren't those responsible and the guilty parties identified and put on trial? All governments have a duty to provide security and peace of mind for their citizens. For some years now, the people of your country and neighbors of world trouble spots do not have peace of mind. After 9.11, instead of healing and tending to the emotional wounds of the survivors and the American people - who had been immensely traumatized by the attacks - some Western media only intensified the climates of fear and insecurity - some constantly talked about the possibility of new terror attacks and kept the people in fear. Is that service to the American people? Is it possible to calculate the damages incurred from fear and panic?

American citizen lived in constant fear of fresh attacks that could come at any moment and in any place. They felt insecure in the streets, in their

place of work and at home. Who would be happy with this situation? Why was the media, instead of conveying a feeling of security and providing peace of mind, giving rise to a feeling of insecurity? Some believe that the hype paved the way - and was the justification - for an attack on Afghanistan. Again I need to refer to the role of media. In media charters, correct dissemination of information and honest reporting of a story are established tenets. I express my deep regret about the disregard shown by certain Western media for these principles. The main pretext for an attack on Iraq was the existence of WMDs. This was repeated incessantly - for the public to, finally, believe - and the ground set for an attack on Iraq.

Will the truth not be lost in a contrived and deceptive climate? Again, if the truth is allowed to be lost, how can that be reconciled with the earlier mentioned values? Is the truth known to the Almighty lost as well?

Mr. President,

In countries around the world, citizens provide for the expenses of governments so that their governments in turn are able to serve them. The question here is what has the hundreds of billions of dollars, spent every year to pay for the Iraqi campaign, produced for the citizens?

As your Excellency is aware, in some states of your country, people are living in poverty. Many thousands are homeless and unemployment is a huge problem. Of course these problems exist - to a larger or lesser extent - in other countries as well. With these conditions in mind, can the gargantuan expenses of the campaign - paid from the public treasury - be explained and be consistent with the aforementioned principles?

What has been said, are some of the grievances of the people around the world, in our region and in your country. But my main contention - which I am hoping you will agree to some of it - is : Those in power have specific time in office, and do not rule indefinitely, but their names will be recorded in history and will be constantly judged in the immediate and distant futures.

The people will scrutinize our presidencies.

Did we manage to bring peace, security and prosperity for the people or insecurity and unemployment? Did we intend to establish justice, or just supported especial interest groups, and by forcing many people to live in poverty and hardship, made a few people rich and powerful - thus trading the approval of the people and the Almighty with theirs'? Did we defend the rights of the underprivileged or ignore them? Did we defend the rights of all people around the world or imposed wars on them, interfered illegally in their affairs, established hellish prisons and incarcerated some of them? Did we bring the world peace and security or raised the specter of intimidation and threats? Did we tell the truth to our nation and others around the world or presented an inverted version of it? Were we on the side of people or the occupiers and oppressors? Did our administration set out to promote rational behavior, logic, ethics, peace, fulfilling obligations, justice, service to the people, prosperity, progress and respect

for human dignity or the force of guns. Intimidation, insecurity, disregard for the people, delaying the progress and excellence of other nations, and trample on people's rights? And finally, they will judge us on whether we remained true to our oath of office - to serve the people, which is our main task, and the traditions of the prophets - or not?

Mr President,

How much longer can the world tolerate this situation? Where will this trend lead the world to? How long must the people of the world pay for the incorrect decisions of some rulers? How much longer will the specter of insecurity - raised from the stockpiles of weapons of mass destruction - hunt the people of the world? How much longer will the blood of the innocent men, women and children be spilled on the streets, and people's houses destroyed over their heads? Are you pleased with the current condition of the world? Do you think present policies can continue? If billions of dollars spent on security, military campaigns and troop movement were instead spent on investment and assistance for poor countries, promotion of health, combating different diseases, education and improvement of mental and physical fitness, assistance to the victims of natural disasters, creation of employment opportunities and production, development projects and poverty alleviation, establishment of peace, mediation between disputing states and distinguishing the flames of racial, ethnic and other conflicts were would the world be today? Would not your government and people be justifiably proud? Would not your administration's political and economic standing have been stronger? And I am most sorry to say, would there have been an ever increasing global hatred of the American governments?

Mr. President, it is not my intention to distress anyone.

If Prophet Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Ishmael, Joseph or Jesus Christ (PBUH) were with us today, how would they have judged such behavior? Will we be given a role to play in the promised world, where justice will become universal and Jesus Christ (PBUH) will be present? Will they even accept us?

My basic question is this: Is there no better way to interact with the rest of the world? Today there are hundreds of millions of Christians, hundreds of millions of Moslems and millions of people who follow the teachings of Moses (PBUH). All divine religions share and respect on word and that is monotheism or belief in a single God and no other in the world.

The holy Koran stresses this common word and calls on an followers of divine religions and says: [3.64] Say : O followers of the Book! Come to an equitable proposition between us and you that we shall not serve any but Allah and (that) we shall not associate aught. With Him and (that) some of us shall not take others for lords besides Allah, but if they turn back, then say: Bear witness that we are Muslims. (The Family of Imran).
Mr. President,

According to divine verses, we have all been called upon to worship one God and follow the teachings of divine prophets. To worship a God which is above all powers in the world and can do all He pleases. The Lord which knows that which is hidden and visible, the past and the future, knows what goes on in the Hearts of His servants and records their deeds. The Lord who is the possessor of the heavens and the earth and all universe is His court planning for the universe is done by His hands, and gives His servants the glad tidings of mercy and forgiveness of sins. He is the companion of the oppressed and the enemy of oppressors. He is the Compassionate, the Merciful. He is the recourse of the faithful and guides them towards the light from darkness. He is witness to the actions of His servants, He calls on servants to be faithful and do good deeds, and asks them to stay on the path of righteousness and remain steadfast. Calls on servants to heed His prophets and He is a witness to their deeds. A bad ending belongs only to those who have chosen the life of this world and disobey Him and oppress His servants. And a good and eternal paradise belongs to those servants who fear His majesty and do not follow their lascivious selves.

We believe a return to the teachings of the divine prophets is the only road leading to salvations. I have been told that Your Excellency follows the teachings of Jesus (PBUH), and believes in the divine promise of the rule of the righteous on Earth.

We also believe that Jesus Christ (PBUH) was one of the great prophets of the Almighty. He has been repeatedly praised in the Koran. Jesus (PBUH) has been quoted in Koran as well; [19:36] And surely Allah is my Lord and your Lord, therefore serves Him; this is the right path, Marium (Mary mother of Jesus).

Service to and obedience of the Almighty is the credo of all divine messengers.

The God of all people in Europe, Asia, Africa, America, the Pacific and the rest of the world is one. He is the Almighty who wants to guide and give dignity to all His servants. He has given greatness to Humans.

We again read in the Holy Book : The Almighty God sent His prophets with miracles and clear signs to guide the people and show them divine signs and purify them from sins and pollutions. And He sent the Book and the balance so that the people display justice and avoid the rebellious. All of the above verses can be seen, one way or the other, in the Good Book as well.

Divine prophets have promised: The day will come when all humans will congregate before the court of the Almighty, so that their deeds are examined. The good will be directed towards Haven and evildoers will meet divine retribution. I trust both of us believe in such a day, but it will not be easy to calculate the actions of rulers, because we must be answerable to our nations and all others whose lives have been directly or indirectly effected by our actions.

All prophets, speak of peace and tranquility for man - based on monotheism, justice and respect for human dignity.

Do you not think that if all of us come to believe in and abide by these principles, that is, monotheism, worship of God, justice, respect for the dignity of man, belief in the Last Day, we can overcome the present problems of the world - that are the result of disobedience to the Almighty and the teachings of prophets - and improve our performance? Do you not think that belief in these principles promotes and guarantees peace, friendship and justice?

Do you not think that the aforementioned written or unwritten principles are universally respected?

Will you not accept this invitation? That is, a genuine return to the teachings of prophets, to monotheism and justice, to preserve human dignity and obedience to the Almighty and His prophets?

Mr. President, History tells us that repressive and cruel governments do not survive. God has entrusted the fate of man to them. The Almighty has not left the universe and humanity to their own devices. Many things have happened contrary to the wishes and plans of governments. These tell us that there is a higher power at work and all events are determined by Him.

Can one deny the signs of change in the world today? Is this situation of the world today comparable to that of ten years ago? Changes happen fast and come at a furious pace.

The people of the world are not happy with the status quo and pay little heed to the promises and comments made by a number of influential world leaders. Many people around the world feel insecure and oppose the spreading of insecurity and war and do not approve of and accept dubious policies.

The people are protesting the increasing gap between the haves and the have-nots and the rich and poor countries.

The people are disgusted with increasing corruption.

The people of many countries are angry about the attacks on their cultural foundations and the disintegration of families. They are equally dismayed with the fading of care and compassion. The people of the world have no faith in international organizations, because their rights are not advocated by these organizations.

Liberalism and Western style democracy have not been able to help realize the ideals of humanity. Today these two concepts have failed.

Those with insight can already hear the sounds of the shattering and fall of the ideology and thoughts of the liberal democratic systems.

We increasingly see that people around the world are flocking towards a main focal point - that is the Almighty God. Undoubtedly through faith in God and the teachings of the prophets, the people will conquer their problems. My question for you is: Do you not want to join them?

Mr President,

Whether we like it or not, the world is gravitating towards faith in the Almighty and justice and the will of God will prevail over all things.

Vasalam Ala Man Ataba'al hoda

Mahmood Ahmadi-Najad President of the Islamic Republic of Iran

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