Mahmoud Ahmadinejad in Lebanon

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The recent visit of Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad to Lebanon has stimulated global interest, coming at a time of conflict in Lebanon with respect to delicate issues with both local and international repercussions; and at a time when Iran, a major player in the Lebanese political scene, attempts to create a strong foothold for its influence on the Mediterranean.

This report presents a short assessment of the two-day visit that began on Wednesday October 13, 2010.

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Background

Despite Iran's domestic problems and international isolation, the Islamic Republic continues to strongly support, among other radical groups, Hezbollah, a radical Shia organization, whose forces are considered the shock troops of Iran's Revolutionary Guards in Lebanon. Tehran's ties with the group stretch back to 1979, when Iran's Revolutionary Guards started setting up an ideological outpost in Lebanon, which later developed into the "Party of God" i.e. Hezbollah.

Thus, Iranian influence in Lebanon is primarily through its ideological, religious, political, financial and military relations with Hezbollah.

While Hezbollah's Secretary General Hassan Nasrallah states that he is "Proud to be a Member of the Party of [Iran's] Supreme Command 'Wilayat al-Faqih'," his Deputy Naim Qassem considers the relationship between Hezbollah and Iran to be a "blood relation." Along corresponding lines, Iran believes that Hezbollah and Hamas are "the children of the Islamic Revolution", as acknowledged by former Iranian ambassador to Syria for fourteen years, Mohsen Akhtari, who supervised the building of Hezbollah, by Iranian Revolutionary Guards specifically sent to Lebanon for this purpose.

Moreover, Iran provides Hezbollah with over $300 million a year, according to various estimates, and about $1 billion since the 2006 war between Hezbollah and Israel; these amounts are directly supplied to Hezbollah rather than to government institutions. Also, Iran supplies Hezbollah with large amounts of weapons including Unmanned Aerial Vehicles (UAVs) and even an attack aircraft as recently reported by Kuwaiti Newspaper Al-Siyasah.

The Iranian President's visit takes place against the backdrop of increasing international pressure on Iran to stop its nuclear program, and of broadening sanctions, through UNSCR 1929 of June 9, 2010, to include bans on weapons sales and transfers, restrictions on financial institutions and banks, and targeted measures against individuals and entities. At the same time, the U.S. continues to look into other means to further isolate and punish the Iranian regime, including measures taken by the Treasury Department, a pending bill in Congress and coordinated actions with other nations.

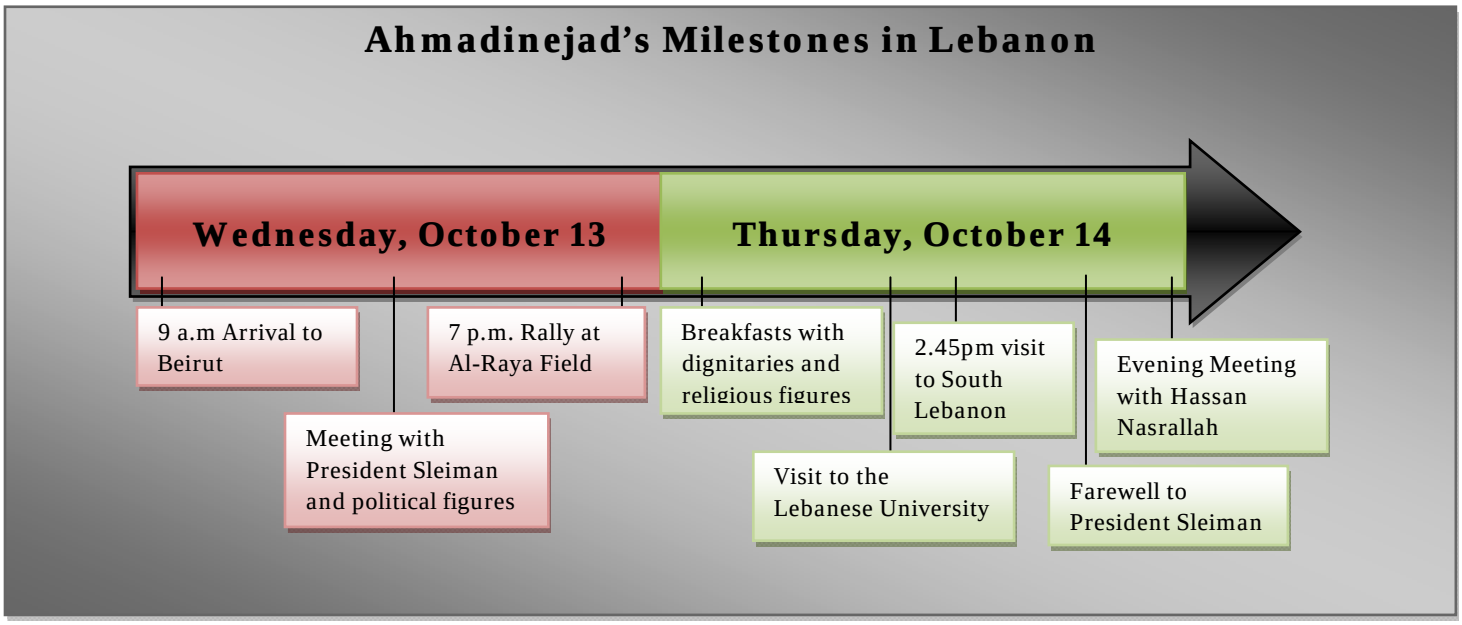


Hezbollah Secretary General Sayyed Hassan Nasrallah kisses the hand of Iran's Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei in July 2000.

Ahmadinejad lands in Lebanon, lavishly welcomed by Hezbollah and their allies, the March 8 Coalition. His visit comes in a period of tension within the small democratic country as the pro-Western majority, comprised largely of the March 14 coalition and which supports Prime Minister Saad Hariri, battles Iran and Syria's allies over the legitimacy of the Special Tribunal for Lebanon (STL).

Hezbollah and their allies continue to exert pressure on the Lebanese government to reject the Hariri Tribunal, claiming that the investigations are politically motivated.

For Lebanon, this show of force is nothing new; in fact, Syria and Iran's allies have repeatedly castigated moderate Arab states as well as the international community for their support of Lebanese sovereignty and the UN Security Council Resolutions (UNSCR) concerning Lebanon. Also, the March 8 Coalition has not-so-subtly threatened another show of force against the parliamentary majority if it continues to support the STL.



Visit Details

Preparations for the Visit and Reception

Ahmadinejad arrived to the Beirut Rafik Hariri International Airport on Wednesday, October 13th at 9:00 am, accompanied by a 70-member delegation including the President's Chief of Staff Esfandiar Rahim Mashae'i, Iran's Foreign Minister Manouchehr Mottaki, Chairman of Tehran's City Council Mehdi Chamran, Head of the Foundation for Martyrs and War Veterans Masoud Zaribafan, and Vice-President for Parliamentary Affairs Seyed Mohammad Reza Mir-Tajeddini. Ahmadinejad was greeted at the airport by Lebanese Speaker Nabih Berri and Ministers Ali Chami and Ali Abdullah, and proceeded to the Presidential Palace in Baabda amid a huge crowd on the airport's main road.

Program/Itinerary

Ahmadinejad's activities in Lebanon included a visit to Martyrs Square in Downtown Beirut to ceremoniously lay a wreath on the Martyrs Tomb, as well as banquets held in his honor by President of the Republic General Michel Sleiman, Speaker of Parliament Nabih Berri, and Prime Minister Saad Hariri.

On Wednesday evening, Ahmadinejad attended a popular rally at the Raya Field in the Beirut's southern suburbs, jointly organized by Hezbollah and the Amal Movement.

Ahmadinejad's program for Thursday comprised a work-breakfast banquet held in his hotel suite and attended by 25 dignitaries, most of whom were March 8 figures. This was followed by a meeting with religious dignitaries.

Additionally, Ahmadinejad delivered a lecture at 10.30 a.m. on Thursday at Premier Rafik Hariri University City in Hadath; he was also granted an honorary Doctorate in Political Sciences there.

On Thursday afternoon, Ahmadinejad headed to South Lebanon where he attended a rally in Bint Jbeil and visited the village of Qana, where he laid a wreath at the Martyrs' Cemetry, before returning to the Baabda Palace in the evening to bid farewell to President Sleiman.

The program of Ahmadinejad's visit, released by the Presidential Palace Media Bureau, did not originally include a meeting with Hezbollah's Secretary-General Hassan Nasrallah. However, the Iranian President ended his two-day visit to Lebanon by meeting with Nasrallah, who offered him an Israeli rifle captured during the 2006 July War as an appreciation for Iran's support of the Islamic resistance in Lebanon

Statements

Before his departure to Lebanon, Ahmadinejad identified Lebanon as "the center of resistance against expansionist powers." He further praised the country as the

"school of resistance against tyrants and the university of heroism and jihad for the sake of the holy humanitarian goals," describing Israel as the "embodiment of the deception of capitalist world order and materialistic ideas," adding that "any new adventure by the Zionist entity will only be of use in shortening its lifespan." Furthermore, Ahmadinejad claimed that "the only solution to the Palestinian issue is for the [Israeli] invaders of the occupied land to leave, and give the Palestinians their rights and return all the refugees to their original land." He called on the United Nations to carry out its mission and force Israel to abide by the international laws and resolutions.

On the Lebanese domestic level, the Iranian President called assassinated former Prime Minister Martyr Rafik Hariri "a dear friend and a dignitary who was loyal to his country," asserting that "arrogant hegemonic powers used the sinful hand of treachery in Lebanon to reach Hariri." In a clear attack against the STL and in defense of Syria and Hezbollah, Ahmadinejad claimed that these "hegemonic powers" proceeded to "fabricate reports" and "accuse another remaining friend in order to sow division." The Iranian leader added that "the enemy" does not want to see regional countries united, noting that Israel is attempting to disrupt relations between Lebanon and Syria in particular. On the U.S. front, Ahmadinejad called for the "formation of an independent and neutral team to examine the facts and discover the truth of the September 11th events," adding that the events were "executed through premeditated planning for the sake of expansionist goals."

"The 9-11 events were executed through premeditated planning for the sake of expansionist goals."

– Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad in Beirut

Ahmadinejad advocated the exit of "the occupiers of Afghanistan and Iraq," and suggested they "apologize to their peoples and compensate for losses." Moreover, he declared that "a resistance front has been formed by the peoples of Lebanon, Palestine, Syria, Turkey, Iran, Iraq and all the region" and that this "front" will isolate and condemn anyone who recognizes Israel.

The Iranian President also called for the release of four Iranian diplomats that were kidnapped in Lebanon during the 1982 Israeli invasion. "We have confirmed information that those four Iranian diplomats are now in Israeli jails and we want them to be released," he declared.



Security Detail at the Raya Stadium in Beirut's Southern Suburbs

Left: President Ahmadinejad refuses to deliver speech from behind bulletproof glass
Right: Hezbollah's Secretary-General Hassan Nasrallah addresses
the crowd via live feed Khomeini and Khamenei are omnipresent in speeches and posters

South Lebanon

Before a frenzied crowd in the town of Bint Jbeil, which is baptized by Hezbollah as the "Capital of Freedom" in South Lebanon, Ahmadinejad promised the demise of the Israeli enemy to thunderous applause, stating that "The world should know that eventually the Zionists will be forced to go and will not last long. They are enemies of humanity and will have no choice but to surrender. Palestine will be liberated through the force of faith."



"The whole world should know that the Zionists will eventually disappear and Bint Jbeil will remain alive." – Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, a few miles away from the Lebanese-Israeli Border

While addressing the residents of South Lebanon, Ahmadinejad said: "You are the heroes that guard Lebanon's sovereignty; you have proven that no force in the world can beat you. The resistance of the Lebanese nation, born from faith in God, can stand up to any Israeli force – planes, tanks and ships." He further stressed the importance of Lebanese unity behind the resistance: "There is no doubt that your enemies fear your unity. Unity is the symbol of endurance, steadfastness and victory. We thank God that all the Lebanese had shown a spirit of unity and patience, which allowed them to emerge victorious. "

In Qana, a village that witnessed Israeli bombings and heavy civilian casualties in both 1996 and 2006, Ahmadinejad said that the Islamic Republic of Iran will continue to support the region's nations, noting that Qana's martyrs are alive whereas its enemies are dead: "I came to say peace be upon Qana, the land of endurance and resistance," he said. "Today, Qana is living evidence of the valiant resistance of the Israeli enemy's criminal mentality," he added.

Observations

Security Arrangements

Various Lebanese political figures have commented on the security arrangements during Ahmadinejad's visit and specifically upon his immediate arrival; members of Parliament Elie Marouni and Antoine Zahra took note that every aspect of the Iranian President's visit, including the security detail, was organized by Hezbollah. Reportedly, the Lebanese army and Lebanese security forces were absent during Ahmadinejad's arrival at the Beirut airport. Deputy Nadim Gemayel tacitly accused army and security forces of momentarily giving up Lebanese sovereignty at the airport. The same pattern was observed during Ahmadinejad's trip to South Lebanon, despite the fact that UNIFIL Deputy Spokeswoman Andrea Tinenti had declared on the day of his arrival that "the Lebanese Army is solely responsible for securing Ahmadinejad's visit within UNIFIL's action zone."

Political Participation

The complete political spectrum, including the staunchest opponents of Iran's involvement in Lebanon, such as Lebanese Forces Leader Samir Geagea, participated in the official gathering for Ahmadinejad in the Lebanese Presidential Palace; however, it is important to mention that the other meetings



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were quasi-exclusively attended by Pro-Syrian/Iranian figures. Ahmadinejad's breakfast with "dignitaries" on the second day of his visit was attended by March 8 figures; some March 14 figures did not attend despite having been invited.

Popular Participation

It was clear that large popular masses welcomed Ahmadinejad and participated in the two major rallies that were organized in his honor. However, what was also clear was the fact that the popular participation in those events was overwhelmingly limited to one sect: Shia supporters of Hezbollah and Amal.

While schools in the Lebanese capital closed for safety reasons, Hezbollah-run schools in South Lebanon were shut down to ensure participation from their staff and students in the events accompanying the visit.

Outcomes

During Ahmadinejad's first day in Lebanon, he and President Sleiman signed 17 agreements and memoranda of understanding, aiming to strengthen bilateral relations in the areas of agriculture, energy, construction, industry, telecommunications and information technology, housing, trade, and education. The agreements contained no military aid despite Iran's promise in August that it would supply military equipment to Lebanon in the wake of the U.S. freeze on military aid over concerns about Hezbollah's influence on the army.

Also, Ahmadinejad offered to Lebanon an Iranian-made "nanoscope," designed to develop scientific and technical programs. The Iranian President's visit included various meetings between Lebanese Governmental officials and their Iranian counterparts: Culture Minister Selim Wardeh welcomed his counterpart Mohammed al-Husseini to discuss cinematic, artistic, and cultural agreements; the Iranian Security Minister met with the Lebanese Minister of the Interior Ziad Baroud to consider social, political, and security cooperation; and the Labor ministers of both countries examined each nation's employment sector.

Furthermore, and following the signature of a Memorandum of Agreement for Media Exchange at the Baabda Presidential Palace, the Iranian News Agency Director General Ali Akbar Khwan Feker visited Lebanon's National News Agency (NNA) Director Laure Sleiman at her office at the Information Ministry. The two signed a joint cooperation agreement, entailing the exchange of news, photos, and journalistic expertise either in Lebanon or Iran, and Sleiman was invited to visit Iran and experience the ongoing work at the Iranian Agency.



Lebanese Billboards Reacting to Ahmadinejad's Visit: The Reflection of a Divide

Left: In Tripoli (a Sunni stronghold in Northern Lebanon), a poster of Ahmadinejad crossed and message that reads, "You are not welcome in Lebanon," a few days before his contested visit. (AFP)
Right: A poster on Beirut's Airport Road welcoming Ahmadinejad in both Arabic and Farsi (Iranian Presidency Official Website)

Reactions

Syria: Lebanon stands beside Iran and Syria

Ahead of the visit, Syrian President Bashar el Assad affirmed during a meeting with Ahmadinejad in Tehran that Syria has "stood [by Iran] in a brotherly way from the very beginning of the [Iranian Islamic] revolution," calling efforts against President Ahmadinejad's visit to Lebanon "useless," and claiming that "the visit will lead to strengthening regional resistance against hegemonic powers."

Top Syrian officials have concluded that the visit was overall "successful," especially because it indicated, in their opinion, that Lebanon stands besides both Iran and Syria. According to the Secretary-General of Syria's Arab Socialist Ba'ath Party Abdullah al-Ahmar, "the Lebanese nation's warm reception of Ahmadinejad sent a message that Lebanon is Iran's brother, companion and brother-in-arms against the Zionist regime."

USA: Provocative Gesture

Ahmadinejad's visit has been widely viewed by both the White House and the U.S. State Department as a provocative gesture. Secretary Hillary Clinton commented that the Iranian President's visit to Lebanon, his support of Hezbollah both financially and morally, and his use of inflammatory language lead to a "volatile situation."

U.S. Officials perceived the visit's only goal as "rally[ing] Hezbollah, which continues to serve as Iran's proxy in Lebanon," as Assistant Secretary of State Philip Crowley observed. He emphasized his concern that "Iran continues to take steps that undermine Lebanese sovereignty and security," and his hope that "Lebanese officials will keep that in mind during the president's visit." Crowley further stated that "states like Iran and sub-groups like Hezbollah are trying to undermine the effectiveness of the national government and the sovereignty of Lebanon itself," pointing out his "strong suspicions about the motives of Iran and the groups that it supports who do not have Lebanon's long-term interest at heart."

For his part, Assistant Secretary of State for Near Eastern Affairs Jeffrey Feltman commented on the Iranian President's apparent desire to organize activities that only exacerbate tensions in Lebanon, while the international community works to alleviate them.

On another hand, some U.S. officials have viewed the visit as an incentive to reaffirm the U.S. support for Lebanese sovereignty and democracy: Mr. Crowley reiterated on October 13th that "the United States is committed to Lebanon's security and sovereignty," confirming U.S.' willingness to "continue to work directly with the government." Ambassador to Lebanon Maura Connelly echoed this U.S. commitment by warning that "Washington's containment policy with Syria does not mean that it is relinquishing Lebanon." Others, however, have interpreted the Iranian President's visit as an additional reason to continue the freeze on U.S. military aid to Lebanon. According to Lebanese daily An-Nahar, Reps. Howard Berman and Nita Lowey, respective chairs of the Foreign Relations Committee and Subcommittee on Foreign Appropriations, have become even more opposed to lifting the freeze.

Israel: Lebanon is becoming an extension of Iran's Ayatollah Regime

Israel, also, has viewed Ahmadinejad's visit as "intentionally provocative" and as a "very worrying" threat to the stability of Lebanon and of the Middle East.

Effectively, Prime Minister Binyamin Netanyahu said that "Lebanon is quickly becoming an extension of the Iranian Ayatollah regime. It is a tragedy in Lebanon, but Israel will defend itself against this development."

Moreover, Foreign ministry spokesman Yigal Palmor relayed that Ahmadinejad "has already said to Syrian President Bashar al Assad that south Lebanon was Iran's border with Israel," which is clearly "very worrying for anyone who is concerned about the stability of Lebanon and of the Middle East." Palmor added that "after [Ahmadinejad] stole votes in Tehran, he is now coming to Lebanon to steal the whole country."

"Lebanon is quickly becoming an extension of the Iranian Ayatollah regime. It is a tragedy in Lebanon, but Israel will defend itself against this development."

– Israeli Prime Minister Binyamin Netanyahu

Saudi Arabia: Warning against the creation of an irreversible situation

Ahead of the visit, Saudi King Abdullah Ben Abdul Aziz received a phone call from President Ahmadinejad, whereby they tackled regional developments as well as bilateral ties. Saudi King Abdullah warned the Iranian leader not to create an "irreversible" situation in Lebanon. "We still need Lebanon," Abdullah said.

Lebanon

President Michel Sleiman

During a lunch banquet at the Lebanese Presidential Palace held in honor of the Iranian President, Lebanese President Michel Sleiman thanked Ahmadinejad for his incessant support in facing Israel. The Lebanese President reaffirmed his gratitude during a later press conference, claiming that "Lebanon was able to confront Israel thanks to its people, army and Resistance." Sleiman emphasized Lebanon's desire that Israel fully abide by UN Resolution 1701 and Lebanon's right to liberate its territories from all occupiers through any possible and legitimate means. Sleiman further stressed that safeguarding the country is only feasible through preserving national unity, legitimate institutions, coexistence, and national consensus.

Parliament Speaker Nabih Berri

During a dinner in honor of the Iranian President, Lebanon's Parliament Speaker Nabih Berri thanked Ahmadinejad for his "support of Lebanon's right to resistance which aims to liberate its land and defend its sovereignty;" he also highlighted Iran's right to "a nuclear program for the peaceful use of nuclear energy." Berri also thanked Tehran for its willingness to help the Lebanese army. "We do not see anything wrong in [Iran's offer], especially that Lebanon's friends have offered aid and the Iranian help would be unconditional," he said. He also emphasized that "Iran's backing of the Resistance in Lebanon is a support for all the Lebanese, rather than just the armament of the Shias of Lebanon." Berri finally asked for the nuclear disarmament of "the Zionist regime first" and declared that global nuclear disarmament would not be possible unless Israel's unchecked nuclear arsenal was supervised by the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA).

Prime Minister Saad Eddine Hariri

Overall, not much is known about Prime Minister Saad Hariri's meeting with President Ahmadinejad. News reports said that the leaders tackled the latest developments in Lebanon, the general situation in the country, and bilateral relations between Iran and Lebanon at the Grand Serail on Thursday, in the presence of Iranian Ambassador to Lebanon Ghazanfar Rokanabadi.

According to the Iranian Ambassador, PM Saad Hariri laid no blame on the Iranian stance regarding the STL, and Roknabadi stressed that the STL issue is a strictly domestic one. However, he said both Hariri and the Iranian President ventured into the STL dossier in the context of other regional affairs.

As for Iran's offer to gear up the Lebanese army, Ambassador

Roknabadi only said Iran is ready to provide help for Lebanon on all levels and that talks with Hariri addressed a number of local, regional, and international developments. “There is no security problem in Lebanon,” he said.

March 14th Coalition: Inconsistency in Ahmadinejad’s speeches

Lebanon's March 14 parliamentary majority perceived Ahmadinejad’s visit as an effort to establish Lebanon as “an Iranian base on the Mediterranean.” The Coalition took advantage of the Iranian head of state’s visit to stress the need for stronger official institutions in Lebanon. Kataeb deputy Nadim Gemayel spoke out on October 16th against Ahmadinejad's visit, which he considered tantamount to Iran “laying hands” on Lebanon through Hezbollah.

Lebanese Forces parliamentary bloc member Antoine Zahra criticized the contradictory speeches of the visiting president: “Ahmadinejad gave a sensible and logical speech at the Baabda Presidential Palace, but he gave a totally different speech in the Beirut southern suburbs, where he adopted the position of Hezbollah on the STL,” Zahra said.

President of the Kataeb Party Amine Gemayel echoed Zahra’s comment: “The Iranian President adopted two diverse speeches in Lebanon. His first speech at the presidential palace highlighted the positive existing relations between Lebanon and Iran, whereas the second speech he delivered in the Beirut Southern Suburbs was rich with mobilization efforts as Ahmadinejad capitalized on Iran's well-known positions.”

Along those lines, Future Movement Deputy Ahmad Fatfat opined that President Ahmadinejad's visit to Lebanon should be assessed as official and should not be used to dismiss certain parties in favour of pro-Iranian groups. Another Future Movement block member, Deputy Mohammad Hajjar, hoped that Iran's ties with Lebanon are with the state and not with a particular party.

March 8: A massive uni-sectarian welcome

The March 8th Coalition, comprised largely of Shia groups Hezbollah and the Amal Movement, expressed its gratitude for Ahmadinejad’s trip to Lebanon and highlighted the visit’s significance for the Islamic resistance in Lebanon. March 8 leaders considered his visit an opportunity to gain political momentum and to demonstrate to regional and international forces that Iran, Syria, and “the Lebanese resistance” are very closely tied.

Hezbollah’s Secretary-General Nasrallah claimed that “what Iran wants for Lebanon is what the Lebanese want,” naming these desires “the Iranian scheme” and adding that Iran is “one of the most important guarantees in our Islamic and Arab worlds, and the greatest evidence of that is Iran's stance on the American pastor who wanted to burn the Koran. ”

Nasrallah further declared that



Consistency Check: Different speeches and attitudes in Beirut for Ahmadinejad the Head-of-State and Ahmadinejad the Party Sponsor

"the West cannot put up with the Iranian president because he says the truth and declares that Israel must be eradicated. Iran's role in the Arab region is for the sake of the Arab Nation."

Lebanese Population: Mixed Reactions

While thousands of supporters greeted Ahmadinejad at the airport with rose petals and Iranian flags, and attended rallies in his honor in both the Beirut Southern Suburbs and Bint Jbeil, many Lebanese from all sects had reservations about the visit as several disruptions, ranging from unbearable traffic jams to last-minute event cancellations, left many with feelings that ranged from frustration to disgust. In the meantime, a video from the mid-1980s in which Hezbollah's leader Hassan Nasrallah describes his party's original mission statement, was circulated as a reminder that the aims of the "Party of God" are to establish an Islamic state in Lebanon as part of the Islamic Republic of Iran lead by the Wali el Fakih ('The Supreme Leader').

Conclusion

While U.S. Ambassador to Lebanon Maura Connelly noted that "Lebanon as a sovereign country can welcome whoever it wants," Hezbollah and its allies were devoted to making Ahmadinejad's visit particularly memorable.

The Iranian President, for his part, owed the Lebanese a great debt of gratitude for their warm reception to him, commenting that he felt at home in Lebanon.

However, beyond the "Home on the Mediterranean" feeling that Lebanon was able to provide to the Iranian guest, the visit did nothing beyond re-confirm Iran's controversial and worrisome policies in Lebanon. The most dangerous aspect of its involvement in the democratic country is its political, financial, and military support of Hezbollah.

Hezbollah continues to forcefully assume the role of Lebanon's foreign policy decider, in coordination with Iran, as well as with Syria. The common belief within the party is that "the resistance" protects Lebanon's sovereignty and dignity and is currently under attack from "conspiracies" spread by "the enemy."

Ahmadinejad's signs of support for Hezbollah during his visit only exacerbate worries about negative foreign influence in Lebanon.

Furthermore, Ahmadinejad assured that the "Lebanese-Iranian coordination will be limitless, especially since both share the same opinions regarding international political matters."

Therefore, the real danger does not lie in the Iranian President's visit itself, but rather in the potentially destabilizing repercussions following his trip. A major issue on that front is that of the STL, and while the U.S. reconfirms that no amount of political manipulation can undermine the investigation, Iran's allies in Lebanon have mimicked Iran in taking threatening stances against the STL and the Lebanese that support it.

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