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Iranian President Ahmadinejad's Vexing Visit Exposes U.N. Failures

James Phillips

The impending visit of Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad to address the opening of the U.N. General Assembly dramatically underscores the weakness of the U.N. in confronting one of the most dangerous security threats in the world today. Ahmadinejad's radical regime continues to defy U.N. Security Council resolutions regarding its nuclear program and seeks to destabilize fragile democracies that the U.N. supports in Iraq, Afghanistan, and Lebanon. Moreover, Ahmadinejad has—in statements that can be construed as incitement for genocide—repeatedly called for the destruction of the state of Israel, a member in good standing of the U.N. Despite Ahmadinejad's aggressive foreign policy and repression of Iranian human rights at home, the president of U.N. General Assembly has regrettably seen fit to honor the Iranian leader by attending a dinner for him later this week.

Ahmadinejad's Parting Shots. Before leaving Tehran and traveling to the opening of the General Assembly in New York, President Ahmadinejad ratcheted up his bellicose rhetoric. He provocatively asserted that the holocaust was a “fake” and proclaimed that Israel was perpetrating a holocaust against Palestinians. This cynical Israel-bashing was accompanied by continued defiance on the nuclear front. Not only did Ahmadinejad boast that Iran had no fear of another round of U.N. sanctions, but in a speech at a military parade—which included missiles capable of hitting the Jewish state and a truck that bore a banner with the message “Israel should be eliminated from the universe”—he warned that

Iran would “break the hand” of any power that tried to strike at its nuclear facilities.

Meanwhile, Ahmadinejad's regime is accelerating efforts to attain a nuclear weapon that potentially threatens Israel with another holocaust. The International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) released a report on September 15 noting that Iran has expanded its uranium enrichment program and now operates about 3,800 centrifuges—up from 3,300 in May—and is busy installing approximately 2,000 more. Although Tehran claims that its uranium enrichment program is designed solely to manufacture fuel for nuclear reactors, this program can also produce the fissile material necessary to arm a nuclear weapon. The September 15 IAEA report also noted that Tehran has failed to answer longstanding questions about documents indicating Iran has tried to develop a nuclear warhead and modify the nose cones of some of its missiles to carry a nuclear payload.

The U.N.'s Failure to Curb Iran's Nuclear Program. Iranian stonewalling on the nuclear issue has led the IAEA investigation to a dead end. The United States has sought to coax another sanctions resolution out of the U.N. Security Council, which

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has previously passed three rounds of limited sanctions on Iran due to that nation's failure to halt its uranium enrichment program and fulfill its obligations under the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty. But past American and European efforts to ratchet up sanctions against Iran have been frustrated by Russia and China, both of which have lucrative trade relationships and strategic ties to Tehran. Both countries have delayed and diluted efforts to impose sanctions at the Security Council.

The United States hosted a meeting on the Iranian nuclear issue with senior diplomats from Russia, China, Britain, France, and Germany at the State Department last Friday, but reportedly no agreement was reached. Nor is one likely to emerge in the immediate future. Russia's relations with the West have been severely strained by its invasion of Georgia, and Moscow has threatened to retaliate for Western criticism by taking action on other fronts. On September 18, Russia announced plans to sell more military equipment to Iran, including new anti-aircraft missiles that Iran could deploy to protect its illicit nuclear weapons program. Russia has already delivered Tor-M1 anti-aircraft missiles under a deal made with Iran in 2005 and continues work on Iran's Bushehr reactor, which will soon become operational. Given Moscow's increasingly confrontational behavior, the U.N. Security Council is likely to remain ineffective in addressing the Iranian nuclear issue because of the threat of the Russian veto.

Given Iran's brazen defiance of three U.N. Security Council resolutions, it is disturbing that Ahmadinejad will be allowed to parade before the U.N. General Assembly and smugly hector a global audience. Ahmadinejad seeks to shore up his flagging political support at home by lambasting the United States and engaging in a chest-thumping lecture on the superiority of Iran's radical Islamist regime. Ahmadinejad's motivation for strutting on the U.N. stage is understandable, but much less

comprehensible is the unseemly action taken by the newly installed president of the U.N. General Assembly, Miguel d'Escoto Brockmann. Mr. d'Escoto, the leftist Nicaraguan official who is close to President Daniel Ortega, has agreed to speak alongside Ahmadinejad at a September 25 dinner.

It is a dangerous hypocrisy that such a high-level U.N. official consorts with the Iranian leader during a tense standoff in which Iran continues to defy the U.N. Security Council. This joint appearance only makes a bad situation worse and confirms that the U.N. is doomed to do too little too late to address the growing security threat posed by Iran. The U.N. Security Council has missed many opportunities to apply strong and effective sanctions against Iran. If concerted action had been taken five years ago—shortly after Iran's concealment of its uranium enrichment activities had been revealed—the rising economic and international costs of its nuclear defiance might have led Tehran to reconsider its drive for nuclear weapons. Such action is more unlikely at the Security Council now than ever before.

Working Outside the U.N. The United States should try to ramp up further sanctions against Iran outside the U.N. framework by working directly with its Japanese and European allies to impose the strongest possible bans on investment, loans, and trade with Iran. But the tight world oil market reduces the prospects that effective sanctions will ultimately be applied. The bottom line is that the failure of the U.N. to enforce the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty and advance the collective security of its members has increased the chances of war in the near future.

—James Phillips is Senior Research Fellow for Middle Eastern Affairs in the Douglas and Sarah Allison Center for Foreign Policy Studies, a division of the Kathryn and Shelby Cullom Davis Institute for International Studies, at The Heritage Foundation.