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Opinion

FORUM: Ahmadinejad words play to Muslim world

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By George T. Haley

RECENTLY, I played 20 questions with Iran's President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad. As a board member of the World Affairs Council of Connecticut, I was invited by Iran's mission to the United Nations to a dinner and discussion with the president. I enthusiastically accepted.

I knew that others from universities and organizations would attend, each group could pose one or two questions and I would have little opportunity to meet the president. However, I believed his immediate reactions and responses to unscripted questions would clarify the origins and goals of Iranian policy.

Ahmadinejad, a teacher before he entered politics, did not disappoint. I have a much clearer understanding of Iranian policy and his public statements. It is clear Iran's leaders, and particularly Ahmadinejad, often live in a different dimension.

Iran's public statements, especially when dealing with the U.S. and Israel, defy historical fact and current events.

We think of history as a recounting of facts; basically, as the truth. Yet, history as truth is a modern concept. Traditionally, the telling of history served as a diplomatic tool to glorify rulers and countries. Ahmadinejad certainly draws on these traditions.

Iranian foreign policy seeks to make the nation the dominant Islamic power and leader of the Islamic world — a difficult goal because of its Shiite and Persian, rather than Arab, origins. Most Arabs are Sunnis, and view their history as a struggle against foreign powers. Their oppressors include not just Westerners, but also Islamic Turks and Iranians.

While Ahmadinejad's answers often defied facts and logic, I discovered that, as with his other public statements, he was speaking at us rather than conversing or responding. Though speaking at us, he was conversing with the Islamic world.

As the Islamic world changes, his conversation with it changes. His annual United Nations trips provide the sound box for his voice to reverberate.

Ahmadinejad's answers included some constant refrains.

He stated, first, that the Middle East always has lived in peace unless Westerners stirred up trouble. Second, the Arab Spring challenged American-sponsored dictatorships. Third, Iran has no interest, and never did, in developing nuclear weapons. If NATO and the U.S. permitted Iran to purchase 20 percent enriched uranium — weapons-grade, but also necessary for cancer treatments — Iran would have never considered developing uranium capabilities, he said.

Contradictory stories surround Ahmadinejad's.

First, wars permeate Middle Eastern histories. Iran's Shia conversion occurred in bloodshed without any Western power's instigation. Second, among the Arab Spring's casualties and targets, the America's friends include only Egypt's President Hosni Mubarak and Bahrain's royal family. Syria's President Bashir al-Assad is allied closely with Iran. Libya's Moammar Gadhafi sponsored terrorist attacks on U.S. interests.

In the past, Ahmadinejad spoke to the same rulers he now disparages. Mubarak, Gadhafi and Assad respected power above all else. Therefore, when the president spoke at us in the past, he sought to demonstrate Iran's power to these rulers.

We do not know the Arab Spring's final result, but understand that its participants desire peace, prosperity, jobs, respect and a better life. Ahmadinejad is telling his story to them.

In his stories, Shia and Sunni nations have lived in peace throughout history unless Western powers provoked trouble; Arabs can trust Iran. The West wants to subjugate the Arab world through dictatorial proxies; Iran demands freedom for all Islam.

Ahmadinejad's historical retellings promote Iran's interests to the Arab Spring's people.

Though Ahmadinejad is continuing his attack on the West with different stories, the West must rely on the new Arab governments to create educated Islamic children, economic growth, jobs and a free press. Those things will staunch Ahmadinejad's revisions of history.

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