

## Road Show

### New Yorker Comment

by [Laura Secor](#) October 8, 2012

Last week, after an eight-year run, the Mahmoud Ahmadinejad show closed in New York. The final appearance at the United Nations General Assembly by the Iranian President, who will leave office after the elections next summer, reprised all the familiar numbers: anti-Israeli statements to the press; insinuations that the September 11, 2001, attacks were an inside job; a long sitdown with a TV interviewer (this time, Piers Morgan), in which he gleefully parried questions about Iran's nuclear program and the threat of an attack from Israel; and a sanctimonious speech to the General Assembly, minus those delegates who walk out or absent themselves, about the perfidy of certain powerful Western nations that arrogate to themselves the authority to police a world they have aggressed, oppressed, and immiserated.

This made for great theatre eight years ago. Now mostly just tourists turn up at the box office. It's hard to say exactly when the Ahmadinejad show jumped the shark: the year the N.Y.P.D. denied him permission to visit Ground Zero; the time he spoke at Columbia, after a lacerating introduction by the university's president; the fall of 2009, when Iranian-Americans flocked to the city to protest the bloody suppression of dissent after his contested reelection; or last year, when he calmly announced that there were no political prisoners in Iran, just as he had told his audience at Columbia that there were no homosexuals in his country. Maybe it was when the adjective "fiery" affixed itself to just about every description of his speeches, despite their nearly identical content year after year.

To be fair, Ahmadinejad isn't the only player reading from an unchanging script. Every year, Iran is reported to be a year away from building a nuclear weapon. Every year, Israel is reported to be a year away from bombing Iranian nuclear facilities. And every year the Internet lights up with opinion pieces by knowledgeable people denouncing the coming war with Iran while proclaiming it inevitable. Come September, there is no war and no nuke, and Ahmadinejad is back in town.

And yet much has changed in Iran since Ahmadinejad took office, in 2005. He came to power as the establishment's candidate; he inherited an economy that was sick but not wasted, and a polity that was disillusioned but not completely cynical. Today, the President is an isolated figure. His relationship with the Supreme Leader has soured. Last spring, Ahmadinejad became the first Iranian President to be summoned to parliament for hostile questioning, his close allies were barred from running for office, and one of his top aides was sentenced to prison. The Leader has even toyed with the idea of abolishing the Presidency.

Ahmadinejad's economic policies stoked inflation well before the latest round of sanctions, but the current situation is far more severe. In the past year, the Iranian rial has depreciated by two hundred and fifty per cent against the dollar; official statistics put inflation at about twenty-four per cent, which means that it's probably higher; and the price of chicken has increased threefold, leading to a riot in the city of Neyshabur, and an outpouring of "chicken crisis" jokes on the Web. Under the circumstances, New York must have been a welcome respite for Ahmadinejad, and not only because of the ready availability of an affordable chicken dinner. Here he's a big man; in Tehran, he's approaching irrelevance.

The ebbing of Presidential power in Iran is one of many indicators of worsening repression under the hand of the Supreme Leader. Iran leads the world in the imprisonment of journalists; opposition leaders languish under house arrest; and even the once powerful

former President Hashemi Rafsanjani has two children in Evin Prison. The week that Ahmadinejad travelled to New York, the regime cut access to Google and Gmail, in what was rumored to be the first step toward introducing a threatened national intranet, scrubbed clean of foreign influence and susceptible to total surveillance.

The United States, preoccupied with the Iranian nuclear program, has encountered firm resistance in Tehran, despite a ferocious regime of multilateral sanctions that the Obama Administration has put into effect in the past two years. An oil embargo has decreased Iranian exports by more than a million barrels a day; financial sanctions, including those on Iran's Central Bank, are even more devastating. If the goal was to inflict pain, the policy is working. No one is more apt to bear the brunt of that pain than Iran's already beleaguered middle class. If the goal was to halt the progress of the nuclear program, the policy's efficacy is less clear. The regime has never had much problem living with popular discontent, and it is not inclined to beg for mercy. Multiple rounds of talks have ended in stalemate. Proponents of the policy say to give it more time. Meanwhile, sanctions, it has been said, have a logic of their own: until they achieve their goal, they must keep intensifying. That means increased hardship for the Iranians, with no end in sight.

Critics of the sanctions point in two directions: to diplomacy without pressure or to war. If non-coercive diplomacy were ever a realistic option, it ceased to be so the minute sanctions were locked into place. But the military option is the worst by far. Eleven days before the opening of the General Assembly, a bipartisan group in New York, called the Iran Project, released a report titled "Weighing Benefits and Costs of Military Action Against Iran." The group, which is composed of thirty-two foreign-policy heavyweights who run the gamut from Richard Armitage to Anne-Marie Slaughter, persuasively argues that a sustained U.S.-Israeli bombing campaign, supplemented by cyber-attacks and covert operations, could delay the Iranian nuclear program by at most four years, and that it would do so at considerable cost to American and Israeli interests. If Israel were to act alone, it might delay the program by no more than two years. In the long run, bombardment would make the Islamic Republic all the more likely to go nuclear. Any more lasting objective—such as regime change—would require a wholesale invasion and occupation of Iran, which, according to the report's authors, would cost more in blood and treasure than have the past ten years of war in Iraq and Afghanistan combined.

Iran policy is a conundrum for the United States. Every four years, we hear otherwise—that it is only want of courage or good sense that prevents us from bringing the Islamic Republic to heel. But our options are bad, our objectives are ambiguous, and the Iranian people stand as hostages between their government and ours. The Ahmadinejad show may be over. But Groundhog Day has only just begun.