

FORWARD

Dear Mr. Mahmoud Ahmadinejad

By HILLEL LEVINE AND NIR EISIKOVITS

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Mr. Mahmoud Ahmadinejad

President of the Islamic Republic of Iran

May 26, 2006

Your Excellency,

Our sincere apologies for the delayed response to your letter from earlier this month. We appreciate your effort at self-clarification and assume that it expresses a genuine desire to engage in dialogue. We write to you as fellow teachers who share your concern for the conflicts pervading the international arena.

Teachers, Mr. President, owe their students a commitment to the truth. They must teach them the difference between verity and rhetoric. Having read your letter and having followed your recent public statements, we have come to doubt your dedication to this distinction.

You have repeatedly denied the destruction of Europe's Jews by the Nazis. You have described the Israelis as "a new people." You have insinuated that the attacks of September 11, 2001, could not have occurred without the complicity of America's own intelligence services.

Is this what you teach your students, Mr. President? Are blatant lies and conspiracy theories the intellectual preparation required for being an intelligent, responsible citizen of Iran? How would your people respond if we taught our own students that the war between Iran and Iraq started exclusively because of Iranian aggression? Or if we instructed them that Iran suffered no more than a few thousand casualties during that war?

You will perhaps be surprised to learn that we share some of the concerns you raise in your letter. Like you, we believe that American involvement in Iraq is a misguided waste of human life and resources, and a diversion from what our national security requires. Like you we believe that some of the policies America has undertaken in its war on terrorism — including the holding of detainees without trial in Guantanamo, the torture of prisoners in the Abu Ghraib prison, and the curbing of civil liberties at home — are shameful. Like you, we believe that some of our country's interventions in Latin America and elsewhere have been both illegitimate and politically disastrous.

Teachers, Mr. President, must educate their students to be self-critical, independent thinkers who question authority. These virtues are key for any nation's progress. Do you inculcate them?

This letter you are now reading will not make our government happy — but it will be published. Would it be published in Iran? You lecture us about our human rights failures, and some of what you say is true.

Do you discuss Iran's human rights record with your own students? Did you explain to them why the philosopher Ramin Jahanbegloo has been held in Evin prison in Tehran without charge for the last few weeks?

Did you talk to them about how police brutally beat a group of women celebrating international women's day in Tehran on March 8? Did the students inquire why your government executed two young men for homosexual conduct in the town of Gorgan last November? Or why it takes two female witnesses to make up for one male witness in Iranian courts?

This brings us to your criticisms of liberal democracy. Having seen a great deal of slaughter in the name of religion over the centuries, we have abandoned the rule of God in favor of the rule of law. We try, not always successfully, to base our politics on procedural principles of fair play and due process.

This does not make us godless nihilists. Many of us — including, as you point out, the current president — are deeply religious. But we try to keep religion a private matter. We try not to persecute those who follow a different god. There are no infidels under a liberal regime, only citizens.

We believe that human beings flourish only when they are given the conditions to determine their own destiny and develop their capacities. We think the state's job is to enable this sort of self-determination and development. We refuse to make martyrs of our children, and are both disgusted and frightened by those who do.

We believe in free inquiry and free expression. Liberalism is a creed, a set of principles that is prior to and independent from any government that happens to be in power. Some administrations have better records than others in realizing liberal ideals. The Bush administration has strayed from liberal principles quite frequently, as have several Israeli governments. When they do so liberalism provides a coherent and robust framework for criticizing and reforming them. What is the framework for criticizing and reforming your own policies, Mr. President?

We allow ourselves a remark that is most often unnecessary in the liberal democracies that you criticize: One of us is an American Jew and the other an Israeli Jew, and both of us are cousins of the many Jews who lived in your country for more than two-and-a-half millennia and contributed to the rich culture of which you are the heir. By repeatedly denying the Holocaust and threatening to destroy Israel, you trample the most fundamental aspects of our identity. Is this the legacy of religious respect and tolerance that you constantly allude to in your letter?

There is much more to be said about your letter and about the fundamental differences between how we see the world. While we cannot agree to disagree under the threat of genocide and nuclear annihilation, we can agree to do what you are now doing: to communicate.

It is squarely in the tradition of the religious and political leaders whom you venerate to engage in sincere dialogue, even with those whom we fear most. Stop your threatening actions and stop your threatening words. Encourage Iranian citizens to meet with American and Israeli citizens of all backgrounds, and call for the type of meeting that another great Muslim leader, Anwar Sadat, called for.

Sadat was eventually murdered by the opponents of peace. That, perhaps, is the only kind of martyrdom we can identify with.

Sincerely,

Hillel Levine

Nir Eisikovits

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