

Nov 04, 2016 by [Lina Khatib](#)

Ahmadinejad's Public Diplomacy Showcase

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Lebanon today witnessed one of the largest public diplomacy “events” staged by Iran, in the form of a formal state visit by President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad. While a state visit as such is not normally framed as a public diplomacy event, Ahmadinejad’s visit to Lebanon was marked by a degree of idiosyncrasy. This is not just because of Ahmadinejad himself (who excelled at the role of modest and earnest leader), but also because of the role played by Hizbullah in this public diplomacy event.

Hizbullah is of course a political party with Iranian backing, so it is not surprising that it would arrange a warm welcome for Ahmadinejad on his first visit to Lebanon. However, Hizbullah on this occasion acted like a local public diplomacy partner for Iran. Lebanese, pan-Arab, and Iranian television channels all prioritized Ahmadinejad’s visit, covering most of it live. Al-Manar, Hizbullah’s TV station, dedicated almost all of its air time to chronicling the event and welcoming “Lebanon’s great guest”. Its website featured a banner with the image of Ahmadinejad smiling and raising his hand in salute, with the cedar tree, Lebanon’s emblem, in the background along with a logo merging the Iranian flag and the Lebanese flag.

Billboards depicting Iran's President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad decorate the airport highway along with Iraq. But most notable was the extensive use of billboards, banners and balloons bearing the same images as Al-Manar’s banner and lining the road to and from Beirut’s airport. Since the end of the 2006 attack by Israel on Lebanon, Hizbullah has exclusively used billboards on both sides of this road to commemorate key events, mainly anniversaries of the attack and religious occasions like Ramadan or Ashura. This is the first time that billboards welcoming a foreign president have been used in this way in this location.

The billboards’ visual message was coupled with the words spoken by Hizbullah’s leader Sheikh Hassan Nasrallah in a speech given that same evening, where he stressed that Iran’s aims in Palestine and Lebanon are the same as those of the Palestinians and the Lebanese, and emphasized the pride of belonging to a “strong” *wilayat al-faqih* (Guardianship of the Islamic Jurists).

The speech was delivered in the Raya football field in Southern Beirut, where Ahmadinejad sat at the front row, behind him thousands of Iran/Hizbullah supporters waving the Iranian flag, while Nasrallah typically delivered his speech via video streaming. A crowd of thousands also lined the road to the airport, greeting Ahmadinejad (who stopped to shake hands with several people in the crowd) in Arabic and Persian. Nasrallah also finished his speech by welcoming Ahmadinejad in Persian.

Ahmadinejad’s first day in Lebanon wove the story of a natural embrace of Iran in Lebanon. His schedule for the rest of the visit includes a trip to Southern Lebanon to examine the fruits of Iran’s funding of reconstruction efforts in the region, and his presence in Southern Beirut today was also an opportunity for Hizbullah to showcase Iran’s rebuilding projects in the area

(Nasrallah thanked Ahmadinejad in his speech for his support and modesty).

Ahmadinejad's visit comes at a critical time for Lebanon, when tension over potential indictments by the Special Tribunal for Lebanon is mounting and people openly discuss their plans for what to do "when violence breaks out". Although, to date, the STL has not released any statement about who might be indicted, both Hizbullah and some members of the March 14 camp in Lebanon are expecting the indictments to point the finger at Hizbullah in some way.

In his speech, Nasrallah, his voice coarse in a loud and passionate delivery, stressed that the Sunnis should not be targeting the Shiites because of the STL. This was the first time that Hizbullah has framed the tension over the STL in blatant sectarian terms (before the framework was strictly political: March 14 versus March 8). In this way, Ahmadinejad's presence could be seen as a message of solidarity by Iran to the Shiite of Lebanon, as well as a message to the Iranians of his commitment to Lebanon.

It is also a message of defiance to Israel, which had unsuccessfully tried to stop his visit to Lebanon (a hawkish Israeli member of parliament said in Wednesday's Yedioth Aharonot that if Ahmadinejad happens to be in the sightline of an Israeli sniper then "he should certainly not go back home alive").

Iran's latest public diplomacy event has not won Iran new hearts and minds in Lebanon—those supporting Iran used the occasion to display their loyalty and gratitude—but it did send a strong message about Iran's primacy in the local politics of Lebanon to Iran's dissenters and supporters alike, and an image of solidarity to the Shiites of the Middle East at large. With Iran's influence on the formation of the next Iraqi government taking precedence over other external influences (neither the USA nor Saudi Arabia has managed to push its own preferred candidates for the position of prime minister), and with Bahrain's forthcoming parliamentary election witnessing arrests of Shiite activists ahead of the election, Ahmadinejad's visit to Lebanon is perhaps Iran's shrewdest public diplomacy statement about where it stands, and where it wants to be in the region's political game.

(Image: Billboards depicting Iran's President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad decorate the airport highway along with Iranian and Lebanese flags, as part of preparations for Ahmadinejad's visit to Lebanon. REUTERS/Sharif Karim, via PicApp)
