



A welcome mat for Ahmadinejad

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Mahmoud Ahmadinejad's visit to the United States last week was everything he could have hoped for.

At the United Nations, the Iranian president delivered [a speech laced with undiluted anti-Semitism](#), denouncing "people called Zionists" who dominate the world's "financial and monetary centers" and control "the political decision-making centers" in the West through "deceitful, complex, and furtive" means. His remarks were greeted not with jeers or stony silence, but with [lusty applause from the delegates](#) and a [hug from the president of the General Assembly](#).

Then CNN provided the hate-mongering head of state with another high-profile soapbox -- [an interview with Larry King](#), who warmly shook the Iranian president's hand and

tossed him a series of fatuous soft-balls: **Where in the US would you like to travel? Would you like to meet Sarah Palin, since you're both former mayors? You don't wish the Jewish people any harm, do you?**

On Thursday, at New York's Grand Hyatt Hotel, Ahmadinejad was the guest of honor at a dinner and "dialogue" hosted by several left-wing Christian organizations, including the American Friends Service Committee, the Mennonite Central Committee, and the World Council of Churches. The US Commission on International Religious Freedom had urged the organizers not to honor someone who "has manipulated such dialogues repeatedly into a platform for spreading hatred," and [warned](#) that lionizing Ahmadinejad would only "burnish the Iranian leader's legitimacy." To no

avail. The dinner went ahead despite the [protests](#), amid [pious invocations of "engagement" and "discussion."](#) Intoned Mark Graham of the American Friends Service Committee: "You can't just engage with people with whom you agree on all issues. That leads to a very myopic view of the world."

But the high point of Ahmadinejad's week must have been Friday night, after his return to Iran. That was when John McCain and Barack Obama met in Mississippi for their [first debate](#), and Obama reiterated once again his determination to meet Ahmadinejad "without preconditions" if he is elected in November.

"We . . . have to, I believe, engage in tough direct diplomacy with Iran," [Obama insisted](#). "And this is a major difference I have with Senator McCain. This notion -- by not talking to people we are punishing them -- has not worked."

Obama first adopted this stance in July 2007, when he was [asked in a Democratic Party debate](#) whether he would agree to meet the rulers of Iran, Syria, Venezuela, Cuba, and North Korea without preconditions and promptly answered: "I would." [His website reinforces that message](#), promising "direct presidential diplomacy with Iran without preconditions." During Friday's debate, Obama claimed that even Henry Kissinger, a McCain adviser, "just said that we should meet with Iran - - guess what -- without precondition."

Obama was wrong about Kissinger, who rejected Obama's view in [a statement](#) after the debate. And he is wrong on the broader issue, for at least three reasons:

First, as McCain argued, an American president's unconditional willingness to negotiate with the head of an outlaw regime gives that regime "more credence in the world arena." The more Ahmadinejad and the mullahs who back him flout fundamental standards of civilized behavior -- by fomenting terrorism, by murdering US peacekeepers, by convening Holocaust-denial conferences, by threatening Israel's extermination -- the more they crave international legitimacy. "You'll sit down across the table from them," McCain told Obama, "and that will legitimize their illegal behavior." Face-to-face talks with the US president can only enhance Ahmadinejad's stature at home and bolster his authority abroad.

Second, far from persuading international villains to end their barbaric behavior, presidential negotiations would embolden them to prolong it. After all, if such behavior can lead to a coveted presidential invitation, it stands to reason that even more rewards can be reaped from behaving even worse.

Third, no-strings-attached negotiations consume time -- an invaluable asset to a government like Iran's as it pursues a nuclear bomb. "After five years of negotiations with the Europeans," [John Bolton wrote last May](#), "the only result is that Iran is

five years closer to having nuclear weapons."

As a general rule, talking with critics and competitors makes sense, in diplomacy as in daily life. But Obama, like the UN delegates who applauded Ahmadinejad and the Christian groups that invited him to

dinner, seems to believe that the welcome mat should *always* be out. That more dialogue is *always* called for. That no regime or head of state is *ever* so abhorrent as to deserve only ostracism. On the campaign trail, such naiveté is distressing. In the Oval Office, it would be alarming.