

Ahmadinejad's letter to Bush opens dialogue in Middle Eastern rhetorical style

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Understanding how Middle Eastern rhetoric differs from Western communication can aid in deciphering diplomatic correspondence like the 2006 letter from President Ahmadinejad of Iran. Failure to understand such communications and respond appropriately may result in missed opportunities to avert hostilities or establish effective rapport with other nations. Success in grasping the intent of Iran's diplomatic overture can provide a basis for creating a response that expresses American sentiments in a way that can be seen as intelligent and appropriate by Middle Eastern recipients. Such correspondence could entail establishing a respectable ethos, arranging content as expected, and emphasizing common values. Knowledge of the Middle Eastern rhetorical tradition can inform a viable understanding for diplomatic correspondence.

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1. Introduction

President Ahmadinejad's letter to President Bush, "the first formal communication between leaders of the two nations in 27 years" (Associated Press 2006) prompted commentary from political officials, Middle Eastern scholars, and media professionals; however, few in the West have noted that Ahmadinejad exemplifies the Middle Eastern equivalent of the Western "good citizen speaking well" by establishing ethos, rhetorically arranging content, and expertly applying style — in traditional Middle Eastern fashion. In his letter, Ahmadinejad portrays himself as a concerned citizen speaking for others. He emulates a wide-spread, traditional Middle Eastern arrangement of Story-List-Sanction as American writers today follow the basic outline of Cicero (with thesis and topics, evidence and refutation of counterarguments, and a summarizing conclusion). Ahmadinejad includes more figured style than factual content which is unlike Western, scientific-oriented,

plain prose; however, this excess content also provides significant information if one understands its rhetorical purpose. An examination of Middle Eastern rhetorical traditions can help American diplomats and political advisors to gain deeper insight into Ahmadinejad's meaning, so that they can respond appropriately. By Middle Eastern standards, Ahmadinejad exemplifies the good person who communicates effectively with style in his letter to the President of the United States; his letter begins and ends with appeals to God, and he portrays himself throughout as a capable man with good intentions.

2. Middle Eastern Rhetoric

It is appropriate to begin with a brief overview of the discovery of Middle Eastern rhetorical structures. Binkley examines authorial voice in hymns to the goddess Inanna by an ancient Mesopotamian priestess, Enheduanna (2300 BC); Mesopotamia includes modern Iraq, northeastern Syria, and bordering areas. James Watts examines rhetoric, defined as "any and all forms of persuasion" in an analysis of "texts from a wide variety of periods and cultures in the ancient Near East and eastern Mediterranean" (Watts 2004: 197). K. Allin Luther and Marilyn Robinson Waldman demonstrate the figurative nature of rhetoric in ancient Persia and pre-modern Iran, respectively.

Binkley focuses on one text originating from the beginning of literacy. In *The Exultation of Inanna*, Binkley sees a clear sense of self (author) and others (inspiring muse and audience). The final translation, though based on numerous copies made by temple scribes over half a millennium, retains rhetorical complexity and sophisticated composition in the 153-line hymn wherein Enheduanna describes the goddess, declares Inanna to be supreme among the gods, then names and describes herself (author) in the first person, finally ending with praises to Inanna for restoring the author to the position of high priestess after her exile (Binkley 2004: 49). The hymn describes the authorial process of moving from self to union with the goddess for the purpose of sharing a story with an audience of worshippers so that "[a]uthorship becomes a tri-part communion among the writer, the audience, and Cosmos (in this case Inanna as representative of the cosmos)" (Binkley 2004: 50). The holistic view of subjectivity as tied to the body opposes the dualism of the ancient Greeks (Binkley 2004: 56). Further, both the physically situated author and the sacred Other are feminine, showing a notion of feminine agency not found in ancient Greek writing. "This study is informed by anthropological reflexive studies (Clifford; Hallam, and Street) and in general by postcolonial and postmodern theorists such as Bernal, Cassin, Said, and Van der Mieroop... It is also influenced by rhetorical theorists who have engaged with the question of the

representation of the Other, such as Glenn and Swearingen, as well as the feminist and postmodern Assyriologists Asher-Greve and Bahrani” (Binkley 2004: 48). The detailed focus on this earliest written text clearly delineates differences between Middle Eastern and Western rhetorical strategies.

Watts studies similarities that can be found in a wide array of ancient Near Eastern texts, including: inscriptions from Kurigalzu, a Kassite king of Babylonia of the mid-second millennium BC, from Naram-Sin of 23rd century BC Akkad, from the 13th century BC “Apology” of the Hittite king Hattusili III, from the 8th century BC Karatepe inscription of Azatiwada (Phoenician governor of Adana), from a 14th century dedicatory inscription of Seti I of Egypt, and from a 4th century BC Persian stela from the Leto Temple at Xanthos; legal documents of the 17th century BC Babylonian Hammurabi (code of laws) and the earlier Sumerian laws as well as late second millennium BC Hittite treaties and the Hebrew Bible (Deuteronomy, 1–30); and the Babylonian creation epic of the second millennium BC concerning the god Marduk. These texts all employ a story-list-sanction arrangement. Watts points out that some texts combine two out of the three traditional elements; these variations on the story-list-sanction structure are always used for “the same recognizable purpose: persuasion” (Watts 2004:203). The tri-part persuasive strategy is used throughout ancient Near Eastern and Mediterranean societies across genres in texts that are intended for public display/performance and are primarily from royal/authorized persons who want to “bring pressure to bear on those in power to accede to their demands” (Watts 2004:206). Watts points out that this strategy was not prized in the West; in fact “Aristotle considered narration introductory and superfluous, necessary only for ‘weak’ audiences incapable of grasping the logic of enthymemic proof (Rhetoric 3.13–14)” (Watts 2004: 207). Greek theorists “classified blessings and curses as ‘magic’ ... and viewed them as techniques for manipulating an audience’s emotions” which is an act that Plato viewed as a punishable, unethical diversion from the truth (Watts 2004:208). Rational demonstrations took pride of place in Western rhetoric; story telling was categorized as literary entertainment. While a story-list-sanction structure can be found in some legal and political rhetoric in the West, Aristotelian structures dominated European rhetorical development in all other areas from religion to science. In contrast, all public discourse evinced the story-list-sanction persuasive strategy in Near Eastern texts.

Luther studies the writings of twelfth century (by the Western calendar) Persian scribes who were employed by rulers, and Waldman examines pre-modern Muslim historical writings. Luther explores the concept of *maqṣūd* (overall purpose) that is traditionally tied to ancient Persian writing. The origins of figured prose are seen among the numerous scribes who wanted to display their rhetorical talents to various rulers of the day in order to position themselves for higher-level

employment opportunities (Luther 1990: 93–4). Luther carefully analyzes the stylistic means by which more was said than the overt content of documents entailed. These structures were seen again during unsettled times in pre-modern Iran in communications from religious and political figures who wanted to remain safe while delivering messages that would be understood by intended audiences. Waldman notes that pre-modern Muslim historical writings use elements of structure (organization, pace, arrangement, focus, selection, repetition, juxtaposition, omission, and emphasis) to convey the attitudes of the author (1980: 12). Repetition, for example, is used to focus attention. The findings of Luther and Waldman show stylistic similarities in the rhetoric of ancient Persians and pre-modern Iranians, indicating a continuation of the rhetorical tradition.

Binkley's examination of the writings of an ancient Mesopotamian priestess along with Watts' study of the rhetoric from a wide variety of writings in the ancient Near East can be combined with Luther's research in ancient Persian writing and Waldman's study of more recent Iranian documents to create a clearer picture of Middle Eastern rhetoric. With an understanding of traditional Middle Eastern ways of establishing ethos, arranging content strategically, and using style to communicate more than what is overtly said, one can undertake a more appropriate analysis of Ahmadinejad's letter.

3. Translation issues

The analysis presented here is based on a translation from the original Farsi (modern form of Persian), so certain kinds of analyses are not possible; however, even a translation can reveal authorial ethos, content arrangement, and repetitions from the original. Naturally, rhythm, rhyme, and grammatical constructions will be lost. Yet enough remains to show the Middle Eastern persuasive strategies of the author.

Preliminary research revealed the most accurate translation available of Ahmadinejad's letter. The IRNA website noted, "government spokesman Gholam-Hossein Elham said ... that President Ahmadinejad, in his letter, talked of international developments and crises, analyzed the global situation and offered new ways to resolve international disputes. The letter was submitted to President Bush via the Swiss embassy in Tehran ..." (Presidency of The Islamic Republic of Iran). Ahmadinejad's letter has been discussed in numerous Websites. The archives of the 'Aqoul website discuss translation issues, concluding that the official translation given to the Whitehouse, while not optimal, it is the best available. One translation (with notes about quality) was provided to CNN by Jim Henley and was posted at: <http://edition.cnn.com/interactive/world/0605/transcript.lemonde.letter/>. Baleen provided "the

official and somewhat better quality translation” at <http://www.president.ir/eng/ahmadinejad/cronicnews/1385/02/19/> (“First as Tragedy”). This version is available from Wikisource (at: http://en.wikisource.org/wiki/Ahmadinejad%27s_2006_letter_to_Bush) and The Washington Post (at: http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2006/05/09/AR2006050900878_pf.html). “A White House official confirmed to CNN that this is the exact English translation of the letter the White House received” (CNN). This translation is used herein to examine the author’s ethos, content arrangement, and style.

4. Establishing ethos

Throughout his letter, Ahmadinejad expresses his interest in establishing connections with the United States in order to uphold the duties of his office, his commitment to adhere to his faith, and his desire to openly express the concerns of the Iranian people for whom he speaks. Authorial intention has been a factor in Middle Eastern persuasive discourse since the time of Enheduanna who “clearly establishes her own *ethos* by stepping forward in the first person to tell her own story, naming herself” (Binkley 2004: 49). Ahmadinejad likewise states his intentions, in first person, at the beginning of his letter. “For sometime now I have been thinking...” (2006) is an opening suggesting that his letter is not a hastily written rant but a carefully considered communication. He states his purpose: “Many questions remain unanswered. These have prompted me to discuss some of the contradictions and questions, in the hopes that it might bring about an opportunity to redress them” (2006), as invitation to engage in dialogue about topics of concern. Ahmadinejad further identifies himself as a teacher and leader whose reasons for writing involve the needs of his constituents: “You might know that I am a teacher. My students ask me how can these actions be reconciled with the values outlined at the beginning of this letter and duty to the tradition of Jesus Christ (PBUH), the Messenger of peace and forgiveness” (2006). Ahmadinejad shows personal commitment in using the first person pronoun repeatedly (“I” is used 19 times, and “me/my” is repeated 13 times). Ahmadinejad initially expresses “hope” for the possibility of resolving problematical issues, thereby showing concern for others as well as himself. He repeatedly addresses the American president by name, by title, and in the second person (he writes “Mr. President” or “Mr. Bush” 12 times and you/your 25 times). Ahmadinejad reaches out to his audience, expressing sympathy to America, by stating “September Eleven was a horrendous incident. The killing of innocents is deplorable and appalling in any part of the world. Our government immediately declared its disgust with the perpetrators and offered its condolences to the bereaved and expressed its sympathies” (2006).

This statement establishes his ethos as a caring and concerned citizen of the world. Ahmadinejad then seeks union with all others. "All governments have a duty to protect the lives, property and good standing of their citizens" (2006). He reminds Bush of their common positions and duties as leaders of governments: "to serve the people ..." (2006) and then asks the American president to consider their mutual predicament — a world involving "the force of guns, intimidation, insecurity, disregard for the people, delaying the progress and excellence of other nations, and trampling on people's rights" (2006). "How much longer can the world tolerate this situation?" and "Where will this trend lead the world to?" (2006) are some of the questions which he invites his counterpart to consider with him. Thus, Ahmadinejad establishes his ethos as a diplomat with compassion for others.

In addition to seeking common ground in practical concerns, Ahmadinejad wants to establish common religious ideals. "According to divine verses, we have all been called upon to worship one God and follow the teachings of divine Prophets" (2006). The use of "we" promotes unity, which is the basis of all five principles of Shi'ism. "The first, divine unity, is a dynamic unification and a negation of polytheistic trends... This principle is the foundation of the other four. Because of this unity, one may condemn all human formations that oppress and divide people" (Keddie 2003: 210). In Islam, unity should be sought and division eschewed; the unity of God as one should be reflected in human society. Thus, Ahmadinejad represents himself as a good man seeking to end divisions. Acknowledging Bush's publicly promoted religious ethos, he says "I have been told that Your Excellency follows the teachings of Jesus (PBUH), and believes in the divine promise of the rule of the righteous on Earth" (2006). Then, seeking to establish unity, "We also believe that Jesus Christ (PBUH) was one of the great prophets of the Almighty. He has been repeatedly praised in the Koran" (2006). Ahmadinejad demonstrates his respect for God's prophets in his repeated use of prophets' names: Moses, Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Ishmael, Joseph, and Jesus Christ (repeated 9 times), with the phrase, peace be upon him (PBUH). Iranian history declares that when rulers are secular, they become selfish and their people suffer. The shahs of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries who tried "catching up with the West" caused Westernization efforts to be seen as the source of corruption and impiety (Keddie 2003: 173); now religious piety is expected of leaders. Ahmadinejad demonstrates piety while opening a dialogue for practical reasons. His careful presentation of himself as a man of faith, central to a good ethos in Islamic cultures, is an important factor in all his communications.

Ahmadinejad's displays his ethos in his concern for, and duty to, his people; as the author of this letter, he serves as a voice for others. This spokesman discusses "the undeniable contradictions that exist in the international arena — which are being constantly debated, especially in political forums and amongst university

students” (2006). Showing concern for the interests of his people, he questions actions such as a country occupied and “one hundred thousand people killed” (2006). He also declares his connection to his people: “... I live amongst the people and am in constant contact with them — many people from around the Middle East manage to contact me as well” (2006). Throughout his letter, Ahmadinejad establishes his ethos as a good citizen relying on faith and speaking with concern for others. He offers the American president an opportunity to demonstrate his own good intentions by entering into a dialogue so that problems can be resolved in accordance with God’s will and the peoples’ needs. “Undoubtedly through faith in God and the teachings of the prophets, the people will conquer their problems. My question for you is: ‘Do you not want to join them’” (2006). This is the final invitation which Ahmadinejad extends to Bush. Cicero declares that an audience will adopt the moral tone of the orator who uses vast knowledge and wisdom to elevate the moral tone, causing the audience to prefer the most moral solutions to problems (Bizzell and Herzberg, 2001: 36), and Ahmadinejad meets this standard by maintaining an elevated moral tone with his interest in cooperation and serving others (God and people). The concept of authorial ethos is not unfamiliar to Westerners because of Aristotle’s emphasis; however, the concepts of “authorial intention” and “audience as other” originated in the Middle East and were adopted by the Ancient Greeks nearly two thousand years later (Binkley 2004). The similarities in Western and Middle Eastern rhetoric on this point make it relatively easy for Westerners to see that Ahmadinejad presents a compelling ethos. While some of Ahmadinejad’s statements may be less clear without an understanding of the history and culture of Iran (requiring a commitment to faith in one God and the principle of unity) Ahmadinejad’s expression of a willingness to enter a dialogue for practical, political, and religious reasons should not be overlooked as insincere simply because Westerners are not familiar with Middle Eastern rhetoric. While Ahmadinejad’s ethos may be somewhat familiar to Westerners as well as Middle Easterners, he communicates significant information about his attitudes, values, and intentions in ways which are unfamiliar to Westerners.

5. Middle Eastern Arrangement of Content

Those influenced by Aristotle, Cicero, and Quintilian expect familiar formats and purposes in persuasive arguments, but Middle Eastern rhetoric violates these expectations. For Cicero, the proper task of the orator is to teach his audience the right course of action, please his audience into listening, and move his audience to act on what is right (Bizzell and Herzberg, 2001: 36). According Watts, Middle Eastern writing achieves persuasive effect by a “rhetorical strategy [which]

combine[s] three kinds of materials — stories, lists, and sanctions — to influence its audience's ideas and behaviors" (2004: 197). This strategy gives a narrative account of what has happened or how some circumstance came to be. Then a list of observations, donations, exemptions, titles, or deeds follows. Finally, a threatening curse against any who would violate listed prescriptions is delivered. The story, list, and sanction combination "seems to represent a rhetorical strategy adopted irregularly to enhance the persuasiveness of a text" (Watts 2004: 200). This pattern is seen in dedicatory inscriptions on monuments and temples as well as in ancient legal documents like Hittite treaties which typically narrate a history of the relations between the parties, then list the stipulations of the treaty, and end with curses or blessings being called down from the gods of both parties to enforce the contract (Watts 2004: 201). The Hebrew Bible exhibits this structure in the narrative of the exodus, the list of laws to be followed, and blessings and curses seen in Chapters 1–11, 12–26, and 27–30, respectively, of Deuteronomy (Watts 2004: 201). This arrangement is also seen in Ahmadinejad's letter which begins by narrating recent events of concern that prompted him to write his letter.

For sometime now I have been thinking, how one can justify the undeniable contradictions that exist in the international arena ... Many questions remain unanswered. These have prompted me to discuss some of the contradictions and questions, in the hopes that it might bring about an opportunity to redress them.

The purpose of such a narration is to "ground each text's contents and origin in the past actions of some authority..." (Watts 2004: 203). Ahmadinejad lists things after each narration; this structure is likely to confuse Western readers. In fact, "Condoleezza Rice, the US secretary of state, dismissed the letter from Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, saying it was not a diplomatic opening and just covered history, philosophy and religion" (Aljazeera.net 2006). The second and third sections of his letter describe a current situation regarding prisoners and secret prisons, then list the costs of establishing Israel, and, finally, imply sanctions against current actions based on the precepts of prophets and liberal values.

There are prisoners in Guantanamo Bay that have not been tried, have no legal representation, their families cannot see them and are obviously kept in a strange land outside their own country. There is no international monitoring of their conditions and fate. ...

European investigators have confirmed the existence of secret prisons in Europe too. I could not correlate the abduction of a person, and him or her being kept in secret prisons, with the provisions of any judicial system. ...

Young people, university students, and ordinary people have many questions about the phenomenon of Israel. I am sure you are familiar with some of them.

Throughout history many countries have been occupied, but I think the establishment of a new country with a new people, is a new phenomenon that is exclusive to our times.

Students are saying that sixty years ago such a country did not exist. They show old documents and globes and say try as we have, we have not been able to find a country named Israel.

I tell them to study the history of WWI and II. ... After the war they claimed that six million Jews had been killed.

...

I am sure you know how — and at what cost — Israel was established:

-Many thousands were killed in the process.

-Millions of indigenous people were made refugees.

-Hundreds of thousands of hectares of farmland, olive plantations, towns and villages were destroyed.

...

A regime has been established which does not show mercy even to kids, destroys houses while the occupants are still in them, announces beforehand its list and plans to assassinate Palestinian figures, and keeps thousands of Palestinians in prison.

...

Another big question asked by the people is “why is this regime being supported?” Is support for this regime in line with the teachings of Jesus Christ (PBUH) or Moses (PBUH) or liberal values?

In the fourth section of his letter, Ahmadinejad explains the attitudes of the people toward certain policies and then lists questions about the pursuit of technology. This is followed by sanctions against lying that exist in all cultures.

... I live amongst the people and am in constant contact with them — many people from around the Middle East manage to contact me as well. They do not have faith in these dubious policies either. There is evidence that the people of the region are becoming increasingly angry with such policies.

Why is it that any technological and scientific achievement reached in the Middle East region is translated into and portrayed as a threat to the Zionist regime? Is not scientific R&D one of the basic rights of nations?

You are familiar with history. Aside from the Middle Ages, in what other point in history has scientific and technical progress been a crime? Can the possibility of scientific achievements being utilized for military purposes be reason enough to oppose science and technology altogether? If such a supposition is true, then all scientific disciplines, including physics, chemistry, mathematics, medicine, engineering, etc. must be opposed.

Lies were told in the Iraqi matter. What was the result? I have no doubt that telling lies is reprehensible in any culture, and you do not like to be lied to.

Ahmadinejad narrates some history of South America and circumstances of Africa in the fifth section; lists of questions regarding rights of citizens and responsibilities of national leaders follow. Sanctions are suggested by the question: "Again, do such actions correspond to the teachings of Christ and the tenets of human rights?" (2006). He follows this structure regarding the current state of Afghanistan in the sixth section of his letter. As Matthew B. Stannard puts it, "Ahmadinejad catalogued anti-American grievances in Latin America and Africa as well as the Middle East" (2006). Then, in section seven, he describes America and its problems. He provides sanctions by the power of public opinion rather than appeals to gods. "Those in power have a specific time in office and do not rule indefinitely, but their names will be recorded in history and will be constantly judged in the immediate and distant futures. The people will scrutinize our presidencies (2006)." Ahmadinejad provides a long list of points on which leaders (Ahmadinejad and Bush) will be judged. Most of these items begin with "Did we" followed by some action that a leader should take.

Did we manage to bring peace, security and prosperity for the people or insecurity and unemployment?

Did we intend to establish justice or just supported especial interest groups, and by forcing many people to live in poverty and hardship, made a few people rich and powerful — thus trading the approval of the people and the Almighty with theirs?

Did we defend the rights of the underprivileged or ignore them?

Did we defend the rights of all people around the world or imposed wars on them, interfered illegally in their affairs, established hellish prisons and incarcerated some of them?

Did we bring the world peace and security or raised the specter of intimidation and threats?

Did we tell the truth to our nation and others around the world or presented an inverted version of it?

Were we on the side of people or the occupiers and oppressors?

Did our administrations set out to promote rational behavior, logic, ethics, peace, fulfilling obligations, justice, service to the people, prosperity, progress and respect for human dignity or the force of guns,

Intimidation, insecurity, disregard for the people, delaying the progress and excellence of other nations, and trample on people's rights?

The purpose of such lists is to "describe obligations that are imposed on readers in the present" (Watts 2004: 204). The story lays out the context from the past, but the lists describe what is expected now. Lists are his discussion points. Sanctions look

to the future, describing what will happen if readers adhere to or violate the lists' stipulations. Ahmadinejad concludes the aforementioned list "... they will judge us on whether we remained true to our oath of office — to serve the people, which is our main task, and the traditions of the prophets — or not?" (2006). Ahmadinejad invites Bush to consider many issues by providing contexts relevant to each, enumerating lists of questions/actions, then pointing out the consequences. The story — list — sanction strategy which Ahmadinejad abundantly exemplifies is pervasive in Middle Eastern rhetoric just as the thesis — arguments/counterarguments — conclusion strategy is taken for granted in Western rhetoric; the aim of both is to persuade audiences to change beliefs, attitudes, or behaviors.

6. Middle Eastern Invention and Style

Because the content of Ahmadinejad's letter does not follow standard Western rhetorical format and includes content that appears to be unrelated, it may be misunderstood by Westerners. Historical Iranian writing evinces a figured style which alters the "factual content" of texts and makes them difficult to discern because this style "involves such knotty issues as the meaning of meaning and the nature of metaphor" (Luther 1990:90–1). Luther notes that "a given length of running text in figured style will contain less 'factual detail' than an equivalent length of plain text" (1990:91). The tendency to expect an audience to read between the lines has a long history in Iran, partly because "it was always safer for an author to write on the surface for the widest possible audience and let those who would, read deeper" (Waldman 1980: 11). Historically, rulers' scribes had to be careful about expressing value judgments. Eventually, the invention of necessity (stylized means of hiding unsanctioned attitudes) was adopted as a style of taste, just as the style of Quintilian (motivated by Cicero's assassination for speaking out) became a standard for Western writers. Pre-modern Iranian historians frequently made use of allegory; "an anecdote from another time and place might be appended to a narrative account and to the perceptive reader say many things about that narrative account which are not said in the account itself" (Waldman 1980: 11). Juxtapositions reshape stories and endow them with mythic/symbolic meanings. Nietzsche is the most popular Western philosopher in Iran because of "the powerful poetic-aesthetic qualities of his 'rhetoric.' The latter easily connects to the Iranian intellectual traditions of mytho-poetic mysticism" (Matin-asgari, 2004: 6). Westerners can look for juxtapositions in narrations and concomitant symbolic meanings within Ahmadinejad's letter, since it is traditional in Iran to use poetic, literary, and mythic writing as political commentary (Keddie 2003: 172–173). One interesting juxtaposition in Ahmadinejad's letter involves the commentary about the existence of

secret prisons, followed by the lengthy discourse on the non-existence of Israel sixty years ago. Also, in the passage following his condolences concerning September eleven, Ahmadinejad moves back and forth with the terms “security” and “insecurity” repeatedly. Further, strategies used to select and arrange ideas impact the meaning of a text. The fact that most Westerners would consider Ahmadinejad's letter to be overly long lends credence to the notion that it contains figured language which serves a purpose beyond what the words, taken as plain text, might convey. Luther traces the beginnings of figured prose in Iran to the “Persian chancery prose under the influence of Arabic” in the twelfth century among scribes who displayed their rhetorical talents to prove their worth (1990: 93–4). It became a tradition among Iranians to ornament communications with a style that conveyed semantic content beyond the meaning of the words themselves. Just as Westerners follow arrangement and ornamentation tactics that were prescribed by ancient orators, so too, Iranians follow traditional standards to make writing more meaningful and beautiful by their reckoning.

Western rhetoric follows a structure which feels natural to Westerners because they have been exposed to it in nearly every document they have ever read. James A. Herrick explains how the Roman rhetorician, Quintilian, divides a good speech into five sections. First, the *exordium* is designed to dispose an audience to listen; then the *narratio* makes a statement of the facts that are essential to understanding the issue; next, the proof, or *confirmatio*, offers evidence to support claims; the *confutatio*, or refutation, is where counterarguments are addressed; finally, the *peroration*, or conclusion, repeats the full strength of the argument (2005: 109–110). Modern college students are taught to begin with an appealing thesis, follow it with a clear statement of the context within which the thesis is to be judged, then add a full exploration of the evidence for the thesis along with refutations of any counterarguments that might arise; finally, the essay is to end with a concluding paragraph summarizing the main points. On the other hand, Persian rhetoricians believe that “a letter should have an overall purpose (*maqṣūd*) which relates to the character of the exchange between the communicating parties” (Luther 1990: 94). The flow of the discourse and the employment of metaphorical constructions must be carefully considered and made to serve the *maqṣūd* which might be investing an individual with a post, offering congratulations or condolences, making a request, or extending an invitation (Luther 1990: 94–5). In addition to serving the overt purpose, letters also served the more covert agendas of the scribes who wrote them — to establish their ethos and show their worthiness for higher positions. It is thus possible that Ahmadinejad has a secondary purpose in the writing of his letter to Bush. Perhaps he intends to display Iranian learning so as to foster trust in his credibility. He may be displaying himself not only as a good, pious person, but also as a learned leader who can be trusted to espouse opinions

conceived only after wise discernment. Thus, Ahmadinejad might be viewed as one who is demonstrating his skills as a thinker and problem solver to Bush, to America, and perhaps to the rest of the world, just as the ancient Persian scribe, Rāvandī, used his history of the Saljūqs to display his rhetorical skills and solicit a position with the powerful Rum Saljūq Sultan. The underlying *maqṣūd* of Ahmadinejad may never be fully revealed; however, one thing should not be ignored: Ahmadinejad shows himself to be a skilled intellectual, versed in Middle Eastern eloquence, who might be willing to contribute to an ongoing conversation with the United States if its leadership can respond to him appropriately in well-crafted prose. Alternately, Ahmadinejad might be keen to overshadow American credibility in the Middle East by a poignant demonstration of his own intellectual and political worth. “Patrick Martin of the Globe and Mail commented on Studio 2’s foreign affairs panel that this letter wasn’t addressed as much to Bush as it was addressed to the ‘Arab Street’” (Frandroid Atreides 2006). In either case, failure to respond appropriately could harm the American ethos in the Middle East and possibly throughout the world. Americans should first discern the judgments and values expressed by Ahmadinejad with rhetorical alacrity. Waldman notes that pre-modern Muslim historical writings traditionally were written so that “it is the structure of the work that often bears the brunt of communicating the author’s values. Elements of structure — organization, pace, arrangement, focus, selection, repetition, juxtaposition, omission, and emphasis — can convey the attitudes of the author. The attitudes thus conveyed are often not found in, or reinforced by, any explicit declarations” (1980: 12). The structural elements of Ahmadinejad’s letter, therefore, are worth examining.

Looking at repetition in Ahmadinejad’s letter provides insights. He repeats the word “God” twelve times, and the words “question(s)” and “value(s)” are reiterated nine and six times respectively. “Iran/Iranian” and “America/American” grace the letter’s pages eight and six times, respectively. Interestingly, “Christ/Christian” appears eleven times, while “Islam” appears only three times and the name of the Prophet Mohammad is never mentioned. “East” is seen three times and “West/Western” appears four times. What might this repetition of some concepts and the omission of others mean? Repetition indicates focus of attention; repeating themes show areas of interest. In pre-modern Iranian texts, statements of fact “often served as the raw material of problem-solving, or at least of problem-raising. The reader must be prepared to assess whether the issues involved in the material selected for treatment fall into any pattern of repeating themes and motifs” (Waldman 1980: 9). The current Iranian presidential letter exhibits significant repetition. The first section (from the first “Mr. George Bush” to the next “Mr. President”) focuses on “WMDs” and “contradictions” and “questions” as the repeated terms. The second section repeats the terms “values” and “new” with a focus on the creation

of Israel. The third section continues to discuss the formation of Israel and emphasizes "values." The next section continues with the Israeli story but adds the plot twist of other Middle Eastern countries becoming angry over Western policies that support Israel in spite of Israel's damaging neighboring countries. The letter turns then to the issue of nations developing science and technology, saying "Is not scientific R&D one of the basic rights of nations?" (Ahmadinejad 2006). Telling "lies" is reiterated three times in the final sentence of that section. Section five turns abruptly to "Latin America" and "Africa" as well as "Iran" in the midst of repeated references to the "rights" of countries and human rights. Ahmadinejad implies that interference from the West impedes the social development and economic success of other nations. The sixth section focuses on the West, the USA, and the author's feelings of sympathy (over September eleven) and regret (over Western media's disregard for principles). The concepts of "security" and "insecurity" are mentioned fifteen times throughout the letter, and seven of those repetitions occur in this sixth section which focuses on America, its war and fear producing actions in response to September eleven, and its media which "only intensified the climate of fear and insecurity" (2006). It seems significant that the section which explores Ahmadinejad's "deep regret about ... Western media" and their role in promoting insecurity in the US ends with the question: "Will the truth not be lost in a contrived and deceptive climate?" (2006). Given that Iranian rhetorical style often places meaning outside of the plain prose statements, Ahmadinejad could be implying a threat that should give Americans a reason to feel insecure or that America should feel secure with no reason to attack Iran as it did Afghanistan out of fear concerning weapons of mass destruction. Interestingly, the repeated theme shifts from "lies" about Israel in section four to "truth" about Iran in section six. Section seven continues with the theme of "security/insecurity" along with "rights, ethics, and peace" as does the following section which poses numerous questions concerning the benefits of spending money on war as opposed to the alleviation of poverty and illness. Section nine begins with an overt declaration: "Mr. President, it is not my intention to distress anyone" (Ahmadinejad 2006), which may be straight-forward or may indicate the exact opposite of its face value considering the juxtaposition of "security" and "insecurity" throughout sections six and seven. This letter, placed within the broader context of Iranian politics and Ahmadinejad's public statements, points to possible interpretations. Motives and attitudes can be belied by one's words, but they are displayed more clearly in one's actions.

Recently, Christopher Hitchens has found unsettling "Iran's complete lack of embarrassment at being caught, time and again, with nuclear enrichment facilities that have never been declared to the inspectors from the International Atomic Energy Agency" (2006). Ahmadinejad's letter refers to the rights of nations to pursue scientific research without interference from other national powers. In light

of current events, Ahmadinejad may intend to justify Iran's pursuit of "the bomb" despite official professions of intentions to pursue only nuclear power. Many have expressed concern that the Iranians intend to use nuclear weapons against Israel.

As it races to acquire nuclear weapons, Iran makes clear that if there is any trouble, the Jews will be the first to suffer. "We have announced that wherever [in Iran] America does make any mischief, the first place we target will be Israel," said Gen. Mohammad Ebrahim Dehghani, a top Revolutionary Guards commander. Hitler was only slightly more direct when he announced seven months before invading Poland that, if there was another war, "the result will be ... the annihilation of the Jewish race in Europe." (Krauthammer 2006).

Current actions may indicate that Ahmadinejad has inserted his letter into the political arena as (among other things) a warning to the Western supporters of Israel. Other possible purposes of Ahmadinejad's letter include: requesting certain actions from various powers in the world that support Israel's continued existence so as to avert a war that will devastate all involved and many innocent bystanders; issuing a threat (empty or not) in order to encourage the West to stop interfering in the affairs of other countries; or inviting participation in a dialogue so that a mutually acceptable resolution to potential hostilities can be discovered. The only way to determine the real purpose of the overture is to engage with its author.

7. Conclusion

Textual analysis identifies authorial ethos, organization, and thematic emphasis, but questions remain, making dialogue a better tool for discerning intentions. Questions to ask Ahmadinejad include: What can be done to ensure security for all nations? What can be done to resolve the conflict between Jewish and Muslim peoples? How can the Middle East and the West work together to mitigate conflicts and allay fears and mistrust? Ahmadinejad's letter uses repetition to place significant emphasis on the themes of security (repeated 15 times), rights (14 times), values (6 times), and religion (God 12, Christ/ian 11, Jesus 9, and Islam 3 times). Thus, American officials might enter a productive dialogue by emphasizing our mutual desires for security, mutual agreement on human rights and state rights, and mutual belief in certain values and religious ideals.

A message of unity is embodied in the Ahmadinejad's letter, and a similar message should continue the diplomacy. Ahmadinejad ends the ninth section of his letter and begins the tenth with scripture from the Koran which highlights the topic of unity.

“Do you not think that if all of us come to believe in and abide by these principles, that is, monotheism, worship of God, justice, respect for the dignity of man, belief in the Last Day, we can overcome the present problems of the world — that are the result of disobedience to the Almighty and the teachings of prophets — and improve our performance?” (2006)

Ahmadinejad's question very likely reflects a trend in Iran, begun in the 1950s and 1960s by politico-religious thinkers like Mehdi Bazargan, toward a belief that separation of spiritual and temporal leads to decadence and that “[r]eligion must control and inspire politics, and not the contrary” (Keddie 2003: 199). It seemed natural in Iran “for many after 1960 to blame evils on Western ways and to turn for salvation to an idealized Islamic past” (Keddie 2003: 178). In keeping with the trend toward a return to Islam and away from Westernization, in the eleventh section of his letter, Ahmadinejad affirms his belief “that there is a higher power at work and all events are determined by Him” (2006). The final section of Ahmadinejad's letter closes with “Mr. President, Whether we like it or not, the world is gravitating towards faith in the Almighty and justice and the will of God will prevail over all things” (2006). According to Islam, God embodies perfect justice, so faith in God is a faith in His justice. Any response to Iran's president must show respect for the beliefs of Shi'ism and Islam in general. A diplomatic reply might also use emphasis to focus on Ahmadinejad's favored topics (security, rights, and a higher principle of justice) so that a sense of unity or willingness to cooperate will be demonstrated, no matter what other message is delivered.

Topics deserving of emphasis include: support for reform movements which lead to opening the country to outside interaction, though the U.S. must take care not to solely be identified with the reforms “because that would be to the reformists' detriment” (Chubin 2002: 115); recognition of “Iran's reasonable defense needs, some loosening of restrictions might make it easier to eschew reliance on some of the unconventional means it has resorted to in the past” (Chubin 2002: 116); and appreciation for Iran's historical sense of nationalism and its long tradition of religious freedom before the institution of Shi'ism as the state religion in 1501 (Keddie 2003: 2). Shahram Chubin, Director of Research at the Geneva Centre for Security Policy, argues that “engagement strengthens moderation and beneficially influences perceptions of security, [so] engagement is in the West's interests and acts as a means to achieve Iranian moderation rather than a reward to be offered after the event” (2002: 116). The key to any diplomatic response is first to do it, and secondly to ensure that it does not undermine future relations. Understanding Middle Eastern rhetoric can provide an advantage in achieving desired ends.

The American attitude toward Ahmadinejad's letter has not been positive. “Bush administration officials have said it is not a serious diplomatic overture”

(Hauser, 2006). One scholar, Reza Aslan, called the letter “unquestionably the inane ramblings of an apocalyptic man,” yet he still recognized it as an opening to dialogue (Stannard, 2006). If Ahmadinejad’s letter is examined as plain prose, then it appears to have a rambling structure lacking concrete substance; however, viewed as a rhetorical device aimed at establishing Ahmadinejad’s credibility and designed to focus attention on issues of interest, the letter is a successful invitation to dialogue.

A viable analysis of Ahmadinejad’s letter to Bush provides an understanding of the underlying purpose (*maqṣūd*). Vali Nasr, professor of Middle East and South Asia Politics at the Naval Postgraduate School in Monterey says of the letter: “it is the first sentence in a conversation” (Stannard, 2006). Some believe that Ahmadinejad’s goal is to establish Iran as a power in the Middle Eastern region or in the world. “A person-to-person letter to the leader of the world’s most powerful country, addressed as to an equal, helps further that goal, no matter what the letter actually says, said Shlomo Aronson, professor of political science at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem” (Stannard, 2006). Several experts say that “the United States should not simply ignore Ahmadinejad’s overture. Even a similarly vague, philosophical response might open the door for further negotiations, first over Iraq, then over nuclear issues...” (Stannard, 2006). A response should aim to accomplish, at a minimum, the same goals as Ahmadinejad’s letter, ensuring that its author appears as a credible person to garner respect. The response should also place emphasis on commonalities so as to invite further participation. The idea is to keep the conversation going. Typically, war begins only when talking ends.

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