

Akan Malici and Allison Buckner (forthcoming, 2008) Empathizing with Rogue Leaders: Mahmoud Ahmadinejad and Bashar al-Asad. *Journal of Peace Research* 45(6).

ABSTRACT

The conventional wisdom regarding Iran and Syria is that these are belligerent states headed by hostile leaders. However, rarely do policymakers and international security analysts make an effort to imagine how international politics are perceived from the Iranian or the Syrian perspectives, or consider how these perceptions are part of an interactive security dilemma in which the West, and the U.S. in particular, may be implicated as deeply as the vilified regimes in Tehran and Damascus. In this paper we investigate the United States' ongoing security dilemma with Iran and Syria from the vantage point of their leadership. Our central research questions are general and recurring in the psychologically informed literature on international conflict resolution: What kind of leaders are Mahmoud Ahmadinejad of Iran and Bashar al Asad of Syria? More specifically, what are their cognitive diagnostic beliefs *of* the ensuing conflict and their prescriptive beliefs *toward* them? What is an appropriate strategy for the U.S. towards Iran and Syria? The answers to these questions speak to the conventional wisdom of Ahmadinejad and al Asad as simply hostile and propose strategies for averting a dangerous escalation of the crisis. Our central goal in this paper is to develop towards Iran and Syria what the preeminent peace researcher Ralph White labeled "realistic empathy" as we share his argument that realistic empathy stands as "the great corrective for all forms of war-provoking misperception."