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**THE WALL STREET JOURNAL.**

WSJ.com

WORLD NEWS | JANUARY 5, 2009

## Public Outrage Gives Iran's Hard-Liners a Political Boost

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As Israel gambles on a potentially messy ground invasion of Hamas-controlled Gaza, Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad also has a lot at stake in the outcome of the fighting.

Mr. Ahmadinejad's history of criticizing Israel, and his recent condemnation of the Gaza assault, has helped to garner a measure of popular respect across the region. That comes as more moderate Arab states, especially Egypt, draw rebuke for failing to act forcefully enough to stop the violence.

Condemnation of the Israeli offensive has become a rallying cry for thousands of Iranians. If the ground invasion drags on, anti-Israel outpourings in Tehran could become a convenient distraction for Mr. Ahmadinejad, who faces criticism over his economic policies ahead of presidential elections this year.

Last week, Mr. Ahmadinejad introduced a series of economic reforms aimed at reducing fuel and other subsidies. Economists say the move is necessary to relieve fiscal pressure on Tehran amid falling oil prices. The measures, if enacted, are expected to be unpopular among Iranians.

Demonstrations in Tehran are tightly controlled by the Iranian leadership. Some analysts suggested recent demonstrations -- including the brief storming of the British diplomatic compound in Tehran on Tuesday -- could be a subtle way for hard-line supporters of Mr. Ahmadinejad to send a message to more moderate politicians considering a presidential challenge.

On Friday, a crowd of about 6,000 marched from prayers at Tehran University to Palestine Square, chanting "Death to Israel" and "Death to America."

Regionwide, the fighting is the latest chapter in a competition for influence in the Mideast between moderate, Western-aligned Arab leaders on one side, and Iran and Syria on the other. Key to Tehran's recent regional ambitions is its backing of Hamas and of Lebanese political and militant group Hezbollah.

Last year, Hezbollah took to the streets of Beirut in a show of force that ultimately won the group a bigger say in a new power-sharing government with Western-leaning politicians. The move boosted Tehran's standing considerably as a regional power broker, at the expense of the U.S., which designates Hezbollah and Hamas as terrorist organizations.

If Hamas manages to bog down Israeli troops during the invasion, Tehran stands to gain. Similarly, if Israel delivers a crushing blow to Hamas, Iranian officials could see one of their most effective irritants against Washington and Israel degraded.

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Printed in The Wall Street Journal, page A6

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