

# Is the End Nigh for the Islamic Republic?

*By Bernd Kaussler*

**T**HE BELIEF IN THE MAHDI IS AN ESSENTIAL PART OF THE SHIA FAITH that also influences contemporary political life in the Islamic Republic of Iran in important ways. In fact, Ayatollah Khomeini's revolutionary doctrine on Islamic Government was grounded on his novel interpretation of Shiite millenarian teachings about the Mahdi or Hidden Imam. Shiism has traditionally held that the Mahdi has entered into occultation, or hiding, but that one day, just before the end of time, this Imam will return to lead the Shia and establish on earth a just and perfect Islamic State. Shia eschatology remains somewhat unclear about what exactly will happen to mankind once the Hidden Imam returns and the world comes to an end. However, classical sources do make clear that the returned Imam will be especially ruthless toward existing religious establishments (which the messianic sources frequently depict as corrupt or deviant) and that the era of the Imam's rule will "cause a sharp and total break with existing Islamic norms."<sup>1</sup>

Traditionally, Shiite messianism attached very little importance to politics or to other temporal affairs, and this helps to explain Shiism's historically apolitical or quietist character. In practice, Shiism conventionally called for the withdrawal of the clergy from public affairs, which were seen as intrinsically corrupting and sinful. This quietism derived in large part from messianic doctrine, which taught that the Mahdi, and the Mahdi alone, would reveal himself to create the perfect and just Islamic State. From this perspective, the pious were obligated to withdraw from worldly affairs and to spiritually prepare themselves and "wait" for the Imam's return. Direct involvement in politics by the clergy was seen as an illegitimate attempt to usurp the

Messiah's rightful role. Because of this, among other, orthodox beliefs, Shiite scholars historically played an active role in controlling and suppressing millenarian activity and teachings that deviated from political quietism. Thus, as the scholar Ze'ev Maghen has put it,

Mahdism has thus been for centuries the inveterate enemy of Shiism, and the Twelvers have proven exceptionally talented at suppressing this enemy. From the burning of medieval *ghulat* to the shooting of 19th century Babis, no one puts down messianic movements like orthodox Shiites. Any time in history that a door has been opened that purportedly led to the Hidden Imam—or through which the Hidden Imam was slated to re-enter our world—the Shiite *ulama* have done everything in their power to slam it shut. And practice makes perfect: They are better today at subduing such “*motamahdiyan*” than ever before in their history, having honed their methodology down to a science.<sup>2</sup>

Despite this history, orthodox Shiism has not always been successful at controlling political messianism. While clerical quietism contributed to an historical separation in Iranian society between religious and political authority, this separation also provided religious institutions and actors with an unusually large degree of autonomy and independence from direct political control. As such, the Shiite clergy did from time to time give rise to millenarian movements which came to challenge the political status quo. During the 1905-1907 Constitutional Revolution, for example, the Shiite clergy effectively provided Iran's revolutionary elites with the means to communicate with and mobilize the masses. Because of the lack of popular political awareness, the revolutionary discourse on rights and the rule of law championed by political elites would have found little traction among ordinary people were it not for the support of the clergy and their political use of Shiite symbolism and mythology.<sup>3</sup>

Likewise, Ayatollah Khomeini's revolutionary movement exploited the clergy's autonomy and legitimacy to lead a messianic crusade against the temporal authority of the Shah.<sup>4</sup> Khomeini's revolutionary doctrine was rooted in his radical revision of Shiite doctrines on messianism. In his theory of *velayat-e faqih*, or the rule of the Islamic jurist, Khomeini claimed that during the period of the Mahdi's occultation the highest and most learned jurist in a Muslim country could legitimately administer government and implement the provisions of the Sharia.<sup>5</sup> In some respects, Khomeini's doctrine resembled certain streams of Christian millenarianism whose aim is to create a messianic kingdom in anticipation of the Messiah's Second Coming. Khomeini's doctrine demanded the immediate establishment of an Islamic society and government

through revolution prior to the actual end of days.<sup>6</sup> In effect, the revolutionary leader claimed a God-given mandate for Islamic scholars to exercise political rule and to prepare the world for the return of the Hidden Imam.

The power and appeal of Khomeini's teachings derived in large part from his political manipulation of popular Shiite messianic beliefs and rhetoric. By rejecting traditional jurisprudence and quietism, Khomeini was effectively able to use the potent concepts of Shia eschatology and theodicy to mobilize the Iranian masses and achieve revolutionary political ends. For example, the manipulation of Shiite notions of injustice and suffering and of the unceasing struggle of believers against worldly oppression and tyranny proved to be an effective tool of revolutionary mobilization—and especially in what was, at the time, one of the most unequal and impoverished societies in the world.<sup>7</sup> Moreover, while Khomeini never claimed that he himself was the Mahdi, he did accept the title of Imam. By the standards of traditional Shiism, this was essentially an act of blasphemy which deviated sharply from accepted practice and jurisprudence. By claiming the title of Imam, Khomeini effectively claimed for himself an authority on par with the Mahdi—and thus a position above all other religious and political authorities. By successfully arrogating this authority, Khomeini was ideally situated to propagate his revolutionary propaganda and harness messianic fervor to overthrow the Shah and create the Islamic Republic of Iran.<sup>8</sup>

In recent years, the Islamic Republic has experienced a country-wide resurgence in messianic activity and rhetoric that, in terms of its sheer volume and intensity, has not been seen since the revolutionary era over thirty years ago. This resurgence in messianism has had profound implications for Iranian political life, which have included exacerbating existing divisions between contending factions in the regime and across Iranian society as a whole. At its core, this messianism presents a direct challenge to clerical authority and to the Khomeinist principle that jurists should rule. In fact, today, millenarian politics and rhetoric constitutes a direct threat to the future of the Islamic Republic itself.

## The Return of Political Mahdism

IN THE ISLAMIC REPUBLIC'S FORMATIVE YEARS, MESSIANISM WENT HAND-IN-HAND with revolutionary zeal, and both shaped the radical agendas of Iran's domestic and foreign policies. Yet, with the end of the Iran-Iraq War in 1988, a relatively more pragmatic group of Shiite clerics and bureaucrats rose to political power. Under the helm of President Ali Akbar Rafsanjani, Iran's international conduct became comparatively

less revolutionary. Iranian diplomats began to call for détente with the West, while the country's technocrats, who catered to the interests of the mercantile bourgeoisie, sought the reintegration of Iran into the international economy. In the years from 1997 to 2005, Iran's new pragmatic orientation appeared to further deepen when President Mohammad Khatami called for an end of dogma in the Islamic Republic and undertook to promote civil society, human rights and the rule of law. Khatami saw Islam as the "handmaiden of democracy," and he called for a new "Dialogue of Civilizations," which attempted to build bridges between the Islamic Republic and the West.<sup>9</sup> ("The West," for its part, remained deeply divided over how to respond to the Islamic Republic's new orientation, in large part because of Iran's continued support for movements that employed terrorism.)

The Khatami era reformists met with stiff resistance and were eventually rebuked by revolutionary hardliners and conservatives within the clerical establishment. Faced with a severe political backlash, the reform movement ultimately failed to implement any lasting changes. The hardliners and conservatives, meanwhile, were reinvigorated; claiming to be the true heirs of the 1979 Islamic Revolution, the hardline candidate Mahmoud Ahmadinejad was elected president in 2005. As the former mayor of Tehran, Ahmadinejad was the first non-cleric to be elected president in the Islamic Republic. It is during Ahmadinejad's tenure as president that the country has experienced a dramatic resurgence of revolutionary messianic ideology.

In 2005, when Ahmadinejad was still the Mayor of Tehran, he purportedly ordered the construction of a direct train link to the holy city of Qom in order to make the mosque in Jamkaran more accessible to pilgrims. The City of Tehran also printed a pamphlet, which clearly showed the route that will be taken by the Mahdi.<sup>10</sup> Later, in 2005, Ahmadinejad designated \$17 million for the renovation of the mosque in Jamkaran which houses the well from which, according to Shiite belief, the Mahdi will one day ascend.<sup>11</sup> In 2007, state television aired a series entitled "The World Toward Illumination." Transcripts of the show, which were posted on the state-run Islamic Republic Broadcasting website, describe the coming "messianic age to be inaugurated by the Mahdi":

[The Madhi] is to begin his uprising in Mecca, and then march on Iraq, where he will establish his "seat of world government" in the city of Kufa and subjugate the current world powers. This will be an age of unparalleled happiness; there will be completely new technologies at mankind's disposal, and "corruption, war, and rebellion will no longer exist." Neither will "liberal democratic civilization."

...How beautiful and auspicious will be the day when the world is cleansed of deceit and mischief and the government of justice is established throughout the world

...when he reappears, peace, justice and security will overcome oppression and deceit and one global government, the most perfect ever, will be established. He will make the earth prosper in a way in which no ruins will remain.<sup>12</sup>

Ahmadinejad's personal belief in the Mahdi's imminence has been manifested in numerous presidential speeches and interviews as well as in the policies that he has championed. Throughout his presidency, he has sought especially to merge messianic rhetoric with populist nationalism. He has claimed, for example, that the Mahdi is not only alive and directly informing government policy, but that the Iranian nation plays a special and unique role in the world at this time, when the Madhi is beginning to reveal his rule:<sup>13</sup>

Thanks to our people's decision to follow the path of the imamate today our nation has become a model nation; it has turned into an ideal nation for the *ummah* and an exemplary nation for other people. And it deserves such a status. A nation which follows the Prophet and his descendants, a nation which follows the remnant of God on earth [the Hidden Imam], such a nation deserves to become a model and an exemplary nation. This is because this nation's Imam is himself an exemplary imam and a witness.<sup>14</sup>

The world has become most familiar with Iran's millenarian nationalism through the president's speeches and Iran's assertive foreign policies. In Ahmadinejad's infamous address to the UN General Assembly in 2007, for example, the president combined references to the Mahdi with a blistering Third-Worldist ideological attack on "Western imperialism" and "Zionism."<sup>15</sup> The president and his followers have also sought to portray Iran as a chosen nation and veritable "superpower," uniquely blessed "by the special favors of the Lord of Age" [Hidden Imam] to lead a global mission against political injustice.<sup>16</sup> Such millenarian nationalism has been clearly on display in Iran's defiance of western demands to make concessions on uranium enrichment, as well as in the recent efforts by Iranian leaders to claim that the 2011 uprisings of the "Arab Spring" were fundamentally inspired by Iran's 1979 Islamic Revolution.

The contemporary resurgence of messianism has probably had its greatest impact

on Iran's domestic political life. Early on in Ahmadinejad's administration, regime hardliners sought to use messianic nationalist rhetoric to rollback the reformers and to pursue what they portrayed as a return to the original principles of the Islamic Revolution. This, in turn, became a pretext for the further deterioration of human rights standards in Iran as well as a "Second Cultural Revolution," which has attempted to purge public life and academia of all non-Islamic influences. In 2009, for example, Supreme Leader Khamenei made it clear that professors who lack a "practical commitment to the velayat-e faqih" would be dismissed. Subsequently, Basij militias increased their presence on university campuses, and students and faculty members across the country were arrested, forced to step down, and had their salaries reduced or entire departments terminated.<sup>17</sup> In a manner reminiscent of Khomeini's campaign against "West-toxification," Khamenei called on academics to fulfill their duty to defend the Islamic Republic against the West's cultural onslaught and demanded in September 2009 an end to study of all disciplines in the humanities and social sciences. The Supreme Leader's main concern was the fact that almost two-thirds of enrolled students were seeking degrees in the humanities and liberal arts (*oloom ensani*). In his view, academics were no longer "believing in the Islamic world view."<sup>18</sup> After a March 2011 speech by Ayatollah Jafar Sobhani, which called for changing the social sciences curricula "so that students learn less about kings and more about the Prophet and his successors," President Ahmadinejad urged the Supreme Council of the Cultural Revolution to likewise pass extensive reforms.<sup>19</sup> Study of several social science disciplines was soon halted in universities. The head of Iran's judiciary, Ayatollah Sadeq Larijani, defended the government's decision, claiming that it strove not to eliminate the social sciences but rather to bring their foundations in line with faith.<sup>20</sup>

The further deterioration of human rights in Iran has, in recent times, largely been connected to the regime-driven backlash against the grassroots Green movement that emerged during the contested 2009 presidential elections. However, the regime's repression is not simply a function of its autocracy, but also motivated by religious and millenarian ideas. The plight of the Baha'is is an illustrative case in point. Millenarian ideology has shaped anti-Baha'i propaganda and persecution since the Islamic Republic's founding. While the Bab (1819-1850) and Bahauallah (1817-1892) (the prophet-founders of the Babi and Baha'i Faith, respectively) both emerged out of Shiite messianic traditions, both claimed to represent new Manifestations of God and thus to have fulfilled the religious messianic expectations of the past.<sup>21</sup> This belief was, of course, anathema to Twelver Shiite messianic doctrine on the Hidden Imam, and the clerical regime which came to power in 1979 has thus systematically worked to suppress this messianic "heretical sect." In 2006, for example, a fatwa by clerics in Qom called the killing of Baha'is a "meritorious act," and argued that the very

existence and teachings of the Baha'is are preventing the return of the Hidden Imam.<sup>22</sup>

With approximately 350,000, the Baha'is are Iran's largest non-Muslim religious minority. They have been subject to state-sponsored political violence and defamation since the Islamic Republic's founding. For example, the 1991 "Golpayegani Memorandum," which was sent by the Revolutionary Cultural Council to intelligence and security agencies and co-signed by Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei, represented a state-led plan for a concerted effort to repress of the Baha'i community. Among other things, it mandated routine surveillance of the Baha'is and imposed severe restrictions on the practice and public expression of the Baha'i faith.<sup>23</sup>

Discrimination of Baha'is has increased dramatically during Ahmadinejad's tenure. A 2005 directive from the chairman of the Command Headquarters of the Armed Forces instructed security personnel to ramp up surveillance of all Baha'is. In 2006, the Ministry of Science ordered all universities to prevent Baha'is from enrolling at higher education institutions and further demanded that all Bahai's be expelled.<sup>24</sup> Under Ahmadinejad, concerted efforts to intimidate, imprison and physically attack have been carried out by security forces, paramilitary groups and ordinary citizens with impunity. Baha'i cemeteries and holy places have been desecrated and believers have been denied welfare benefits and the right to work or had their businesses destroyed or confiscated. A March 2012 report by the UN Special Rapporteur for Iran described the "systematic persecution" of Baha'is and claimed that over 474 Baha'is have been arrested since 2004. The rapporteur also noted that since 2010 at least 440 instances of slanderous speech against Baha'is were published or broadcasted in the Iranian media. For example, a *Rasa News Agency* article from March 8, 2011 accused the Baha'i community of "attempting to subvert Islam."<sup>25</sup>

Over eighty Baha'is are now in Iranian prisons because of their beliefs, including the entire leadership, all of whom were sentenced to twenty years in prison in 2009 on charges including "insulting religious sanctities" and "corruption on earth."<sup>26</sup> In May 2011, authorities raided thirty-nine homes associated with the Baha'i Institute for Higher Education (founded in 1987 to provide university education to members of the faith) and, according to Amnesty International, sentenced at least seven Baha'is to lengthy jail sentences after convicting them of "membership in the deviant Bahaist sect, with the goal of taking action against the security of the country."<sup>27</sup>

Because of Ahmadinejad's messianic rhetoric and the regime's stepped-up efforts to harass Baha'is, there has been speculation in Iranian and Western media about the re-emergence of the secretive messianic anti-Baha'i society known as the "Hojjatieh." Founded by Shaykh Mahmoud Tavallai in 1952 to rid Iran of the Baha'i faith, the Hojjatieh had initially supported the Islamic Revolution in 1979, but the group was eventually forced to dissolve after Khomeini attacked its messianic beliefs, which

were not in accord with the revolutionary millenarianism of the Khomeini era. The Hojjatieh's ideology requires that believers wait in anticipation of the return of the Imam. Until that time, the group favors collective leadership of the clergy and opposes the involvement of religion in politics. However, it has also been alleged that the group believes that the Imam's return can be hastened by the creation of political chaos and thus, that the group is presently conspiring to create disorder on earth.<sup>28</sup> It may seem unlikely that Ahmadinejad is a member of such a messianic society, but the Iranian president's claims that true Islamic government can only come with the return of the Hidden Imam, as well as his government's concerted efforts to effectively eradicate the Baha'is, are clearly in keeping with fundamental Hojjatieh beliefs.

For these, among other reasons, Ahmadinejad's messianic fervor and his nationalist zeal has increasingly drawn criticism from the clerical establishment. Moreover, Ahmadinejad's penchant for eschatological rhetoric and his professed closeness to the Mahdi himself are coupled with the ascendancy of the Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps (IRGC), the Basij and hardliner clerics who share a totalitarian interpretation of the velayat-e faqih. The resurgence of political messianism has introduced new dynamics and created new fault-lines in Iranian politics which present an array of new challenges to the clerical regime itself. Ahmadinejad was Supreme Leader Khamenei's preferred candidate for president in 2005, and Khamenei and the conservative clerics ultimately backed Ahmadinejad again in 2009 in an effort to purge reformists from the political scene. Today, however, Ahmadinejad's ideology, in particular his eschatological hermeneutics, is seen by the conservative religious establishment as an intolerable challenge to their continued rule.

Domestically, reference to the Hidden Imam served as populist tool to rally the conservative grass roots against the clerical status quo. So, when Ahmadinejad talks about society's deprivation of the 12th Imam, it effectively is a vote of no confidence in the establishment:

We read that the Hidden Imam represents the vitality of the age. Today, human society feels his absence more than ever. Today, human society is even more enthusiastic than before, it seeks his school of thought and his ideology and leadership. Today, one can see quite clearly his coming. The era is the era of resurrection [of the Hidden Imam] and we all have to want him with every fibre of our being. We have to pray for his coming and for the bringing about of the conditions for the establishment of his world rule.<sup>29</sup>

Thus, the focal point is less Ahmadinejad and his millenarian penchant but rather an entire generation of conservative war veterans, who the president aims to represent, who feel alienated with the existing power structures:

This generation increasingly personifies everything that Iran's clerical establishment is not; they are seen as young and confident; as the real reason for Iran's revolutionary survival and at the heart of a dissipating mistrust of the West in the wake of the Iran-Iraq war. Above all, they represent a belief system predicated on Iranian self-reliance and self-sufficiency. [...] To that end, they believe that the Islamic Republic has become corrupt and deviated from the true path of the 1979 Revolution.<sup>30</sup>

After the fallout between Ahmadinejad and Khamenei in 2010 (which is directly linked to Ahmadinejad's challenge to the religious and political primacy of the Supreme Leader), the embattled President continued to lash out against his opponents, centering his counter-offensive on disclosing corruption amongst the elite and openly questioning the religious legitimacy of the clergy. Just before the March 2012 parliamentary elections, supporters of the president shouted at a rally: "Ahmadinejad the idol breaker, shatter the great idol!" A website close to the Majlis Speaker, Ali Larijani, claimed that Ahmadinejad replied to the crowd, "Velaayat [rule of the jurist consult] belongs to humanity, and does not belong to a particular person [i.e. Ali Khamenei]."<sup>31</sup>

## The Coming is Near

THE ARAB UPRISINGS OF 2011 TOOK THE IRANIAN REGIME, MUCH AS THEY DID THE rest of the world, by surprise. As Iran's leaders adjusted their strategy and diplomacy to the new realities of the Middle East, they made the audacious claim that the revolts against autocratic and secular governments in Tunisia and Egypt were inspired by Iran's own 1979 Islamic Revolution. To that end, in September 2011, the Iranian government convened a conference called "Islamic Awakening" which included scholars, clerics and religious activists from across the Muslim world. Khamenei's keynote address described the popular movements across the region as signs of an "Islamic awakening" because "such revolutions, principles, values and objectives exist not in prewritten manifestos of parties and groups, but in the hearts and minds of the masses."<sup>32</sup> Clearly, this was an effort by the Iranian regime to bandwagon with the popular Arab uprisings. The

regime also sought to downplay any similarities between the youth-led Arab revolts and Iran's own grassroots Green movement. But as the Iranian regime undertook to minimize the potential domestic impact of the Arab unrest, the clerical establishment soon faced another threat in the form of a homegrown millenarian movement.

Since the outbreak of the Arab Spring, there has been a new tide of millenarian activity and propaganda throughout Iran. A series of speeches by Iranian leaders as well as television programs and Iranian press accounts have all interpreted the turbulence in the Arab world as a sign of the Hidden Imam's imminent return. One especially noteworthy film in this vein was a "documentary" entitled "The Coming is Near." Directed by Ali Aghar Seihani, the film was distributed nationwide by a pro-regime institute based in Qom called the Mobasheran-e Mahdi, or "The Mahdi's Keeper." Ahmadinejad's administration seems to have been actively involved in making and distributing the propaganda film.

"The Coming is Near" depicted Iran as the epicenter of a globalizing messianic movement that was sweeping across the Middle East and preparing the way for the return of the Mahdi. The film issued stern warnings to world powers that the end of times was near. In addition to the uprisings in the Arab world, the film listed the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and the U.S. invasion of Iraq in 2003 as signs that the Mahdi's coming was fast approaching. Iraq was said to be the central conflict in the present era hastening the messiah's imminent return, and it was said the country would ultimately serve as the Mahdi's global capital.<sup>33</sup> Israel was also singled out, with the film alleging that the country now finds itself in the final stages of its existence.

The film expressly linked Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei, President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad and Hezbollah leader Hassan Nasrallah to prophecies in the Hadith, with all of these leaders portrayed as key figures in the movement to hasten the return of the Hidden Imam. Khamenei was compared to the scriptural figure Seyyed Khorasani, who, when backed by the might of Iran's military and the alleged resolve of millions of willing martyrs, has been prophesied to be "victorious in the intense wars that will take place before the [Mahdi's] Coming." Referencing millenarian visions contained in the Hadith, the documentary claimed that,

A courageous man from Bani Hashem will rise from the province of Khorasan with black flags and has a sign in his right hand. Seyyed Khorasani is from the province of Khorasan. Seyyed Khorasani has a sign or a disorder in his right hand. Seyyed Khorasani will prepare for the reappearance. Seyyed Khorasani will hand over the flag of Islam to the last messiah. Seyyed Khorasani has a strong and mobilized army. Seyyed Khorasani is a leader of the people who rise up from the East.<sup>34</sup>

The film also appeals to Iranian nationalist sentiments and speaks to the important role that the Iranian people will and must play in hastening the Mahdi's return. As it claims, "The reappearance has other conditions that require strong beliefs and pious leaders with a strong will [...] In the Hadith, they have been named as the preparers of The Coming, and will rise from Lebanon, Yemen and Iran."<sup>35</sup> The film contains footage of Iranian crowds chanting a saying from the Prophet: "A nation from the East will rise and prepare the way for the coming of the Mahdi." It also contains footage of Iranian soldiers during the Iran-Iraq War; their famous front-line recitations of *noha* (chants and prose depicting the martyrdom of Imam Hussein) by Haj Sadeq Ahangaran reinforce the theme that Iranians are effectively the chosen soldiers of the Mahdi.

President Ahmadinejad was likened in the film to Soheib ibn Soheib, the Hidden Imam's right-hand man who is said to conquer Jerusalem in preparation for the Mahdi's return. With reference to the Hadith, the film describes Soheib as the figure who will be appointed "commander of Iranian forces on the threshold of the coming."<sup>36</sup>

Unsurprisingly, such millenarian propaganda quickly struck a political nerve—and especially after the Iranian president himself began issuing pronouncements on the Hidden Imam's coming return. In a televised speech on March 11, 2011, Ahmadinejad reinforced the film's central message and claimed that the revolts in the Middle East were all signs of a "real movement" that was underway and which is readying the world for the Mahdi's imminent return.<sup>37</sup> The president further argued that believers should not wait piously for the Imam's return, as traditional Shiite practice and doctrine teaches. Instead, Ahmadinejad claimed that mankind must strive to realize the Hidden Imam's rule on earth, and he called on believers to go out and actively seek the Mahdi. As the president said,

There is a very important point about the connection between human beings and the messenger Imam, the Lord of the Age. Some think that waiting [for Imam Mahdi] means that we should wait until he comes. This perhaps is the most wrong interpretation of waiting. Waiting is a highly revolutionary action; waiting means that we should go and reach. The Imam is present [in this world]. The imam is the God's caliph. Even today he rules the world by God's allowance. Right today he is the mediator of all God's blessings. Right today any movement in the world is done by the Imam's permission. But me and you, and human society have been deprived from the Imam's ruling...<sup>38</sup>

Ahmadinejad's calls to realize the Hidden Imam's rule on earth along with the messianic resurgence across Iranian society more generally had the combined effect of

exacerbating existing ideological and political divisions among the Iranian political elite. In recent years, the Supreme Leader and the hierocracy as a whole have grown increasingly at odds with Ahmadinejad's policies and his overall stewardship of Iran's economy and foreign policy. But the president's use of messianic rhetoric was seen as an especially egregious affront to the clerical establishment's authority. Indeed, the president's calls on believers to actively strive to bring about the rule of the Hidden Imam was regarded as an implicit challenge to the authority and continued rule of the jurists—and indeed, to the very foundation of the Islamic Republic itself.

The president's challenge to the hierocracy subsequently led to a swift and severe crackdown on millenarian propaganda and activity. During a Friday prayer in the city of Mashhad, Ayatollah Ahmad Alamolhoda, a representative of the Supreme Leader, forcefully repudiated all claims of having contact with the Hidden Imam stating that, "any claims of contact with the Lord of the Time is a deviation, betrayal and blasphemous."<sup>39</sup> An editorial by Hossein Shariatmadari, a close confidant of Khamenei, called the "Coming is Near" documentary film "election propaganda for a deviated group"—a phrase usually reserved for members of the anti-regime Green Movement.<sup>40</sup>

Even Ayatollah Mesbah Yazdi—who is considered to be Ahmadinejad's spiritual mentor, and a well-known proponent of the belief that Mahdi's return is imminent—denounced the president's messianic propaganda as deviant, "unacceptable and dangerous." In the hardliner publication *Kayhan* (a mouthpiece of the Supreme Leader's Office) as well as in *Javan* (a paper owned by the IRGC), Ayatollah Yazdi described the very claim made by the president that the "Hidden Imam was running society" as a usurpation of the authority and power of the clerical establishment who rule the Islamic Republic.<sup>41</sup> More recently, in July 2011 Ayatollah Yazdi told an audience in Mashhad that, "Many deviations from the true path of Islam have begun by the false claim of being connected to Imam Zaman [...] We should not accept anyone's words at face value, even though he has performed some services."<sup>42</sup> The clear suggestion in this was that the Iranian President had effectively become part of the so-called "deviant current"—a term normally reserved for enemies of the Islamic Republic.

The Supreme Leader himself intervened in the feud, and publicly condemned what he deemed the "ignorant, unsubstantiated and delusionary" work on the concept of *mahdaviyat*—or belief in the reappearance of the Hidden Imam—which was spreading in the Islamic Republic. Khamenei argued that such "inexpert, unsubstantiated works, which are not based on authentic sources and are just based on dreams and illusions, will distance people from the real truth of waiting and paves the ground for lying and deceiving claimants."<sup>43</sup> He claimed that the clerical establishment's approach to the Mahdi was the sole acceptable interpretation of Shiite eschatology. He also took on the messianic movement's notion that believers can actively hasten the Imam Mahdi's

return, and he argued that the traditional practice of “waiting” piously for the Imam was in itself a deeply spiritual experience. As the Supreme Leader stated,

The issue of “waiting,” which is an inseparable part of *mahdaviyat*, is a key term in understanding religion and the fundamental, general and social movement of the Islamic *ummah* towards its lofty Islamic ideas. Waiting means getting close. It means expecting the advent of a definite event. This is the meaning of waiting. Waiting means: This particular event will certainly and positively happen in the future, particularly waiting for someone alive. It is not the case of waiting for someone to be born or someone to come into existence, no. It is about someone who already exists and is present among the people. Stories have it that people can see him [Imam Mahdi], just as he can see people, but they don’t recognize him. In some stories he has been likened to his eminence Joseph, who was visible to Muslim brothers and walked and sat among them but was unrecognizable to them. [...] The period of waiting is expected to be an atmosphere of justice, purity, righteousness, monotheism and piety.<sup>44</sup>

The clerical establishment made it clear that religious and political claims about the Mahdi’s imminent return constitute a red line which must not be crossed. Furthermore, to the hierarchy and to many mainstream conservatives, the millenarian propaganda offensive unleashed by the president and his supporters amounted to an attempted usurpation of the Islamic Republic. As Hojjatolislam Mohsen Gharavian, a cleric at Qom’s Theological Seminary, has put it, by “claiming that people can communicate with the Imam of the Age, the deviant current is trying to cut off the ties between the people and the clerics, the guardianship of the supreme jurist-consult, and the concept of the sources of emulation. This idea is extremely harmful to people, and to the young generation specifically.”<sup>45</sup>

## The Clerics Strike Back

THE BACKLASH OF THE CLERICAL ESTABLISHMENT AGAINST PRESIDENT AHMADINEJAD and his supporters marked the end of Khamenei’s political support for the president. The Supreme Leader had supported Ahmadinejad in the 2005 presidential elections, and then again in 2009, as the only candidate capable of safeguarding the Islamic

Republic against the reformist movement. However, as Ahmadinejad's loyalists have acquired more power and influence in the government and outside it, he has increasingly been seen by the clerics as a political threat. At first, Ahmadinejad's penchant for millenarian rhetoric may have been seen as a mere irritant to the learned clergy. But this rhetoric has since morphed into something else entirely. It now undergirds a politically ambitious movement which has challenged the hierocracy's authority and power, including the very institution of clerical rule.

The power struggle that has since emerged among Iran's ruling elite is essentially about the future direction and nature of governance in the Islamic Republic. In addition to challenging clerical authority, Ahmadinejad and his populist followers have also begun to rail against the crony-capitalist networks that support many regime conservatives and clerical leaders.<sup>46</sup> With their wealth and power in jeopardy, Ahmadinejad's populist millenarian revisionism is increasingly seen by conservatives, most of the clerical establishment, as well as some IRGC commanders as an indispensable part of what is widely perceived as the president's larger scheme to create an independent constituency to support his hardline agendas.

For his part, Ahmadinejad has attempted to purge supporters of the Supreme Leader from government ministries, and he has also challenged Khamenei in other ways. A public spat ensued following Ahmadinejad's dismissal of Heydar Moslehi, the intelligence minister, in April 2011. The Supreme Leader reinstated the minister, and then launched a crackdown against Ahmadinejad loyalists who were perceived to be part of the inner circle of the so-called "deviant current." Hojjatolislam Abbas Amirifar, the head of the President's Cultural Council who enthusiastically supported the production of the documentary film "The Coming is Near," was arrested and kept in solitary confinement for over forty days.<sup>47</sup> Sharif Malekzadeh resigned as Deputy Foreign Minister and was then arrested too. A number of presidential staff members and officials who were allied with Ahmadinejad's chief of staff Esfandiar Rahim Mashaei were also arrested on financial corruption charges.<sup>48</sup>

At least twenty-five other staff members in the president's office were arrested. These included Kazem Kiapasha, a close ally of Mashaei, and Abbas Ghaffari, who was described by the pro-IRGC *Ayandeh News* as "a man with special skills in metaphysics and connections with the unknown worlds." Several other allies of the president—including perhaps most notably Mashaei—have been charged with "sorcery."<sup>49</sup> Numerous derogatory Iranian press reports about Mashaei have described his alleged trance-like states to communicate with the Hidden Imam.<sup>50</sup> Further, the Administrative Justice Court barred Hamid Baqaee, a Vice President for Executive Affairs, from holding any public office for four years on charges that he broke the law when he was heading Iran's Cultural Heritage and Tourism Organization.<sup>51</sup> Meanwhile, Khamenei's allies in the parliament, the Majlis Speaker Ali

Larijani, his brother and the Head of the Judiciary Sadeq Larijani, as well as the powerful Guardian Council, all closed ranks behind the Supreme Leader and aggressively moved against what they perceived as presidential transgressions.<sup>52</sup>

Perhaps most significantly, IRGC Commander Ali Jafari also declared that his forces were now in charge of policing the “deviant current”—i.e., the political millenarians—within the regime. The commander made it clear that the Guards supported the Supreme Leader and understood themselves as obligated to act against all anti-clerical forces—whether reformist, hardliner, or millenarian.<sup>53</sup> Clearly, the IRGC (despite its own internal feuds and institutional corruption) has emerged as a formidable political interest group and arbiter in the Islamic Republic. Given the IRGC’s major stake in the national economy as well as their constitutional role of guarding the Islamic Republic, it is perhaps not all that surprising that they have (for the time being) supported the Supreme Leader against the populist millenarianism.<sup>54</sup>

The March 2012 parliamentary elections were important to the clerical regime for two reasons. First, high voter turnout was meant to boost the legitimacy which the regime had lost since the 2009 elections. Second, the elections were meant to further isolate Ahmadinejad and his faction.<sup>55</sup> With the reformists largely disqualified, voters were forced to choose from an assortment of conservative and hardliner factions. In the first round (190 out of 290 seats), the “United Principalist Front” and the “Stability Front,” conservatives loyal to the Supreme Leader, secured 120 seats. Ahmadinejad’s faction only gained 30 seats, and independents and reformists (only those who did not support the Green Movement were qualified to run ) won 13 seats. The elections thus brought to power in the Majlis a new generation of hardliners who are led by Ayatollah Mohammad Mesbah Yazdi, loyal to the Supreme Leader, and enjoy strong ties to the intelligence community and the IRGC. Because of this, Ahmadinejad’s millenarian visions for the future of Iranian politics seem to have been checked by the clerical and military establishments.<sup>56</sup> Ahmadinejad’s summons before the Majlis eleven days after the elections (but based on a motion passed in the outgoing Majlis) focused largely on his stewardship of the economy. But the president was also publicly questioned about his loyalty to the institutions of velayat-e faqih and his alleged ties to the “deviant current” which seeks to undermine the Islamic regime.<sup>57</sup>

## Iranian Islamism

THE POLITICAL USE OF MESSIANISM BY AHMADINEJAD AND HIS SUPPORTERS HAS served two essential purposes. First, millenarian propaganda is part of a larger effort by Ahmadinejad’s faction to create a new constituency for their hardline, national-

ist agenda that includes Iran's poor and its conservative nationalists. By combining messianic ideology—which is revisionist and anti-status quo, as well as populist—with Iranian nationalism, Ahmadinejad's new generation of non-clerical hardliners have been pushing to recreate a revolutionary Iran rather than an Islamic Republic. By making the Iranian nation the "very manifestation of faith," it seems that Ahmadinejad has aimed to redefine Iran's so-called Principlist faction (*Osulgarayan*) as anti-clerical hardliners with an independent nationalist as well as conservative populist base. The president's use of millenarian and nationalist rhetoric is meant to mobilize the conservative and less educated strata of society by combining religious myths with the socialist populism originally championed by the revolutionaries of 1979.

It is useful and important to understand Ahmadinejad's penchant for millenarianism in connection with this broader context of Iranian nationalism. On March 12, 2007, a new 50,000 Rial banknote was issued. The note featured an atomic symbol (apparently a reference to the country's atomic ambitions), as well as a quote from the Prophet Mohammed which read, "even if knowledge is at the Pleiades, the people from the land of Persia would attain it." By injecting Iran's pre-Islamic history (including Iran's traditional mythologies as embodied in the national epic the *Shahnameh*, as well the relics of Persepolis and Achaemenid Empire) into the government's official discourse, Ahmadinejad is effectively seeking to undermine the clerical claim to a monopoly on power and to nationalize Shiite Islamism.<sup>58</sup> This effort to nationalize Shiite Islamism has resulted in what could usefully be described as an "Iranian School of Islam."

Till now, millenarian propaganda, which is by its nature deeply antagonistic toward clerical establishments, has served as one of the most effective ways for Ahmadinejad and others to promote this new religious and political creed of "Iranian Islamism." By combining millenarian ideas with Iranian nationalism, the president and his circle have sought to undermine the principles and institutions of *velayat-e faqih*. The chief architect of this movement was Ahmadinejad's chief of staff, Mashaei. In numerous speeches and other pronouncements, Mashaei has touted the superiority of Iranian Shiism. He has called Iranian Shiism the "most perfect interpretation of Islam, as it is based on the guidance of the imams, that Iranians have always been monotheistic and so enriched Islam." He has also said that Iranians have a "pure understanding of the truth of faith," and that "Iran is the very manifestation of faith."<sup>59</sup> To Mashaei, Iranian nationalism represented "a supreme state of religious understanding," and he has gone so far as to claim that being Iranian itself is a "state of religious experience," calling the very word "Iran a mantra."<sup>60</sup>

When the president was summoned before the Majlis in March 2012, he was asked about whether he was promoting Iranian nationalism at the expense of the state's "Is-

lamic” identity and as an alternative to the clerical establishment.<sup>61</sup> Ahmadinejad’s defiant answer was effectively a confirmation of his nationalist and millenarian agenda:

I say, brother, my dear friend, throughout the entire world and throughout all of history, everyone knows that the Iranian nation is a big nation. The behavior of the Iranian nation, the view of the Iranian nation and the living of the Iranian nation are different. Not just me—everybody says so. The Iranian nation is the follower of the path of the beloved prophet of Islam, His Eminence Muhammad, the follower of the [Shi’i] imams, the follower of the sons of the Prophet, the follower of the perfect humankind joined in the sky. The Iranian nation is Imam Husayn’s worshipper and the follower of Ashura and the middle of Shaban [Islamic month].

Of course, when we say Iran we do not mean a geographic, racial or ethnic group. Iran is a garden of different ethnicities. Iran is a culture and hundreds of millions of people belong to this culture, and love and respect it. Iran means the shape of Ali’s Shii worshippers and the pure Islam of Muhammad.

Let me tell you something. I assure you that God also loves Iran indeed. If you want to be with God, you have to say [singing:] Iran, Iran, which does not have ethnic conflicts, and it is clear that Iran is withstanding the global powers and raises righteous talks, the talks of leadership and Imams.<sup>62</sup>

We are Iranians indeed. I swear to God that we are Iranians, and I announce it loudly so that it is fixed in history and in the world that I love and respect Iran, its history, culture, glory and people. There is nothing so that we hide it. You love Iran too. Do not cover it up. Just announce it. Indeed, loving Iran is the same as being revolutionary, being a member of the Party of God [“Hezbollahi”]. The Imam says they [Iranians] love the sacred fatherland. Iran is especially great. Let us assume that several people attack from different sides and put Iran aside. Where should they put it?

Ahmadinejad’s millenarian nationalist propaganda and, more generally, the resurgence of popular messianism have created new fault lines in Iranian politics. For the

time being, it appears that an irate clergy and the military establishment have managed to close ranks and join together, despite their ideological differences, for the purposes of suppressing this millenarianism and checking what they regard as the attempted efforts by the president to usurp political and religious power. While the clerics may have thrown their support behind Ahmadinejad to thwart a reformist comeback in the 2009 elections, the president's millenarian zeal and populist nationalism have proven as dangerous (if not more so) to the clerical regime as the Green Movement's call for democracy. As Iran is fighting battles at home and the country's economy continues to suffer under the most punitive international sanctions since the revolutionary era, the shadow of war looms large. Having consolidated his power, it is now up to the Supreme Leader and his allies to break the nuclear stalemate—either by coming to terms with the West, or by acquiring or demonstrating a “break out” capacity to manufacture a nuclear weapon. Should they fail to accomplish this, the clerical regime will soon face a new threat to its rule, one which will invariably spring from the “deviant currents” of either reformism or millenarian nationalism.

## NOTES

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2. Ze'ev Maghen, “Occultation in Perpetuum: Shiite Messianism and the Policies of the Islamic Republic,” *Middle East Journal*, Vol. 62, No. 2 (Spring 2008), p. 250. The stepped-up systematic suppression of the Bahais in Iran, the country's largest religious minority, by means of the most violent pogroms by security forces, judiciary and state-sponsored vigilante groups since the Revolution in 1979, also supports this claim.
3. See Ali Ansari, *Modern Iran Since 1921—The Pahlavis and After*, (Harlow, Pearson 2003), pp. 6-7.
4. See Said Amir Arjomand, *The Turban for the Crown—The Islamic Revolution in Iran* (Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2000), pp. 75-80.
5. It should be noted that Khomeini believed that a government under the rule of velayat-e faqih is entitled to make any laws it wishes as long as it serves the interests of the republic, which naturally coincide with those of Islam. Following Khomeini's line of thought, the Islamic Republic has witnessed the adoption of a bulk of laws, statutory instruments, and resolutions that have no demonstrable relationship to the sharia. As Mayer puts it “the *Shari'ah* requirements are becoming redefined according to what is politically expedient, intelligible and appealing to a mass audience. In the course of this ideologization and the politicization of the *Shari'ah*, the connection to the Islamic Sources is growing more tenuous.” Ann Elizabeth Mayer, “Law and Religion in the Muslim Middle East,” *American Journal of Comparative Law*, Vol. 35, No. 1 (1987), p. 155, quoted in Mehran Tamadon-

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  8. See Mehdi Mozaffari, *Fatwa—Violence and Discourtesy* (Aarhus University Press, 1998), p. 44.
  9. See Mohammad Khatami, *Islam, Liberty and Development* (Global Academic Publishing, 1998), pp. 149-151.
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  36. See *ibid.* It should be noted that the protests in Egypt were interpreted by Sunni clerics too as a sign of the Coming. MSNBC footage shows what allegedly depicts a green horseman sent by the Mahdi to judge whether the time is ripe for his return. See <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3UKz3GVrHI8> (August 20, 2011).
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