

# Apocalyptic Politics

## On the Rationality of Iranian Policy

Mehdi Khalaji



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Front cover: A painting by Abbas al-Musavi of the Battle of Karbala, which took place on October 10, 680 A.D., in present-day Iraq. The battle pitted the large army of Umayyad Caliph Yazid against seventy-two soldiers attached to Imam Hussein, a grandson of the prophet Muhammad. Imam Hussein, who became the foremost symbol of martyrdom in Shiism, was killed during this battle. Copyright Brooklyn Museum/Corbis.

# **AGENDA: IRAN**

## Apocalyptic Politics

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# Executive Summary

APOCALYPTIC POLITICS in Iran originates from the failure of the Islamic Republic's initial vision. The 1979 Islamic Revolution began with a utopian promise to create heaven on earth through Islamic law and a theocratic government, but in the past decade, these promises ceased to attract the masses. Faced with this failure, the Islamic government has turned to an apocalyptic vision that brings hope to the oppressed and portrays itself as an antidote to immoral and irreligious behavior. This vision, which is regarded as a cure for individual and social disintegration, appears in a period when the Islamic Republic does not satisfy any strata of society, whether religious or secular.

Evidence of the Islamic Revolution's path from utopianism to apocalypticism can be seen in the unprecedented social inclination toward religious rituals, such as the pilgrimages to Mecca, Medina, and the Imams' shrines, and also in the re-creation of the Jamkaran Mosque. When the Iranian government failed to deliver its promises, many Iranians looked for alternatives and found the cult of the Mahdi—the Messiah or the Hidden Imam—to establish a world government. The number of people who claim to be the Mahdi himself, or in direct connection to him, has increased remarkably in both urban and rural regions. Taking refuge in this primitive form of religion has created a new world of meaning where people have power and significance, and not just religious concepts.

## **Khamenei and Ahmadinezhad on the Apocalypse**

The primitive version of religion not only encompasses social behavior but also constitutes an important element in the process of policymaking. In this regard, two major political figures are particularly noteworthy: Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei and President Mahmoud Ahmadinezhad.

Khamenei belongs to the school of Mashhad, which is substantially different from the interrelated schools of Najaf and Qom. In the twentieth century, the Mashhad seminary was the center for arcane sciences and

occult groups, and was under the influence of anti-rationalist and anti-philosophy theologians who did not believe in the use of reason in the interpretation of religious texts. In this religious climate, a true worshiper thought that the Shiite Imams, rather than human reason, could solve the world's problems. Therefore, this city became a significant place for the idea of the Hidden Imam and the apocalypse. In Khamenei's background, rational thinking does not occupy a legitimate place, and a "superstitious" version of religion is dominant instead. It is the prevailing view that the Supreme Leader makes decisions based on certain superstitions such as bibliomancy—randomly choosing pages of holy text to decide on what course of action to take—or special prayers to "divine men" who are connected to the Hidden Imam.

Ahmadinezhad is from a completely different genre of worshiper-politicians. He apparently belongs to a secret society that believes in the imminent return of the Hidden Imam. This group does not give much credit to the clerics or the clerical establishment, since few of its members have the theological training and ability to read and understand the religious texts in Arabic. The group considers itself to be the authentic representative of Islamic teachings, with the prophetic mission to change Iranian society—all in preparation for the coming of the Mahdi. In this group's apocalyptic ideology, advanced technology can be used to hasten the return of the Hidden Imam. It is very difficult to know precisely what this secret society believes, but some rumors suggest it is eager to control the country's nuclear program. It has been said that Gholam Reza Aqazadeh, head of the Organization for the Atomic Energy of Iran, is affiliated with this society. Some people around Ahmadinezhad have a background in neo-Nazi groups in Germany, such as Muhammad Ali Ramin, who is the head of the Holocaust Foundation, the secretary of the Holocaust conference in Tehran, and the president's advisor. It seems that the ideology of Ahmadinezhad's group is a mixture of socialism and Nazism in the framework of Islamic fundamentalism.

This ideology has two main international slogans: anti-Zionism and anti-Americanism.

Apocalypticism has little influence in the seminaries of Qom and Najaf, and it has been always a marginal trend within the clerical establishment. The return of the Hidden Imam means the end of clerical establishment, because the clerics consider themselves as the representatives of the Imam in his absence. Hence, they do not propagate the idea that the Hidden Imam will come soon. But in the military forces, especially in the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) and the Basij militia, apocalypticism has a very strong following. It is very difficult to assess to what extent the members of the IRGC believe in apocalypticism and which version of it. But it seems that Ahmadinezhad's followers, who believe in apocalypticism, are linked to an influential group of the IRGC that has responsibility over Iran's nuclear program. There are two major elements in this group's agenda in preparation for the Hidden Imam's return: an ideological military and nuclear power.

### **Apocalyptic Thinking and Policymaking**

Although the Supreme Leader has final say on all fundamental domestic and diplomatic issues, he does not have exclusive authority over the decisionmaking process because other officials and political forces restrict him. Therefore, the power equation between these interconnected forces plays a very important role. If democratic or moderate forces were marginalized, Khamenei would see no constraint to his totalitarian ambitions. If the political scene develops into a more dynamic interaction between different fronts, Khamenei becomes more cautious, prudent, and apt to relinquish his objectives under pressure. For example, in Khamenei's theological view, waging war against infidels is completely legitimate. He is on record disagreeing with most contemporary Shiite scholars by saying that any offensive war by the Islamic government is a defensive war because by conquering non-Islamic territories, the ruler of the Islamic country defends the principle of God's unity and Islam. For Khamenei, going to war is a political decision because it is always

justifiable on religious grounds. But the fact that he yields to internal political pressure as well as international pressure makes him cautious about waging war against neighbors.

In Iran's political structure, the president has limited executive power and does not have any say over the military, the national radio and television stations, and many economic organizations. Nevertheless, Ahmadinezhad became a popular figure with a third of Iranians through his populist economic promises and religious propaganda, and has tried to use this popularity to influence Iran's diplomacy and nuclear policy. However, it seems that as Ahmadinezhad's popularity in Iran declines, his influence over the nuclear program also diminishes. Ali Akbar Rafsanjani, the man Ahmadinezhad resoundingly defeated in the 2005 presidential election, has reemerged as a major power player. He was recently elected speaker of the Assembly of Experts, which elects the Supreme Leader if the post becomes vacant or if the Supreme Leader is removed. Rafsanjani's rise has made the rationale used by Iran's former nuclear negotiation team—namely, stall and appear reasonable to the West—popular once again. If Ahmadinezhad's influence over the nuclear program were unchallenged in Iran, there would be little doubt in the international community about the goals of the program and its function for the warmongering apocalyptists.

However, Khamenei is much less apocalyptic than Ahmadinezhad. His position as the representative of the Hidden Imam makes him concerned more about the stability of the government than the "chaos" which is necessary for the return of the Hidden Imam. Not one of his speeches refers to any apocalyptic sign or reveals any special eagerness for the return of the Hidden Imam. As the theory of the Guardianship of the Jurist requires, the most significant task of the Supreme Leader is to safeguard the regime, even by overruling Islamic law. Therefore, it seems that Khamenei, unlike the Iranian president, does not welcome any military confrontation with the West, the United States, or Israel.

Khamenei also does not follow a revolutionary ideology like that of Ahmadinezhad. His continual compromises with different groups, from the clerical

authority to moderate bureaucrats, show that the preservation of the government's political, domestic, and regional power is the Supreme Leader's ultimate aim. In a conflict between political ambition and the vital

interests of the regime, the Supreme Leader would stand for the latter. Unlike Ahmadinezhad, Khamenei does not want to realize his dreams and ambitions at the price of chaos.

# Introduction

WESTERN SUSPICION of Iran's nuclear program and the ineffectiveness of current diplomacy to stop it have heightened concern over the objectives of Iran's leaders. In particular, the West worries about the rationality of these leaders or, at least, the character of their reasoning. A major reason for this unease has been the emergence of an Iranian president who frequently speaks about preparing the way for the imminent return of the "Hidden Imam." If such a leader has a measure of authority over the

nuclear program, what would be the consequences of an apocalyptic vision equipped with nuclear weapons?

To answer this question, this paper looks at five issues: messianism in Shiite tradition before the Islamic Republic; the role of Mashhad and its extremists; messianism under the Islamic Republic; the religious views of Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei and President Mahmoud Ahmadinezhad; and the status of ideology in Iranian politics.

# Messianism in Tradition and Before the Islamic Revolution

“Islam probably began as an apocalyptic movement, and it has continued to have a strong apocalyptic and messianic character throughout its history, character that has manifested itself in literature as well as in periodic social explosion.” —David Cook<sup>1</sup>

AS IS TRUE WITH MANY other religions, apocalypticism is a marginal trend within Islam. However, there is consensus among Islamic scholars that the apocalypticism within the “Twelver” sect of Shiism is the most important component of the Islamic apocalyptic tradition because it is fundamentally associated with the notion of the twelfth, or Hidden, Imam—something that is absent in the Sunni theological system.<sup>2</sup> Although Muhammad, according to Islam, is the last messenger of God, Shiites regard the Imamate as a continuation of his prophecy, since they believe humans should not be abandoned without divine guidance. The Imam is in charge of the affairs of the Shiite community as relates to both this world and the next, until the end of days.<sup>3</sup>

Meanwhile, the apocalyptic current in Twelver Shiism is a marginal trend as well. All Twelver Shiites believe that the Hidden Imam will return before the end of time, but expecting him is not necessarily an important aspect of the daily religious life.

## The Mahdi and the Hidden Imam

Messianism is associated with the Mahdi, a title for the Muslim savior who will appear before the end of time

and establish a just world government.<sup>4</sup> (Basic Shiite traditions about the Mahdi are described in Appendix 1, “Apocalypse, the Mahdi, and the Hidden Imam in Shiism.”) For Shiites, the Mahdi was born in 868 AD as the twelfth Imam, and went into minor occultation for nearly seventy years and then into major occultation, which will last until God decides to make him appear. In Shiite classical tradition, any attempt to establish a legitimate religious government before the return of the Hidden Imam is heretical, since only he has the religious right to rule in the traditional paradigm.<sup>5</sup>

One of the signs of the Hidden Imam’s return is a deviation from Islam. According to the Quran, God sent the world Christianity because Jewish religious leaders altered the Torah and the teachings of Moses. The Quran also states that after Christian religious leaders altered the Bible and deviated from the true mission of Jesus Christ, God sent Islam and made Muhammad its prophet. Today, messianists believe that after centuries of hegemonic rule, Islam is corrupt and the Mahdi has to return in order to bring the authentic interpretation of Islam. According to the apocalyptic tradition, when he returns and introduces the “true Islam,” people will think it is a “new religion,” and the Islamic scholars will oppose him, giving the Mahdi no choice but to behead them.<sup>6</sup>

In one hadith, the fifth Shiite Imam said that when the Mahdi appears, “like Muhammad the God messenger, he will destroy everything that was before and

1. David Cook, *Contemporary Muslim Apocalyptic Literature* (Syracuse, N.Y.: Syracuse University Press, 2005), p. 1. This book treats the question of contemporary apocalyptic trends in the Muslim world and, as the author points out, it deals basically with Sunni trends rather than Shiite trends and with Arabic sources rather than Persian sources. It seems that no such study has been done for current apocalyptic trends in the Shiite world, especially in Iran.
2. For a detailed account of the features of apocalypticism in Shiism see: David Cook, *Studies in Muslim Apocalyptic* (Princeton: The Darwin Press Inc., 2002), pp. 189-229.
3. The term “Imam” is a Quranic word used by all Muslims, including Sunnis. But Shiites use it in a very different theological way. For Quranic meanings of the term see: Yusuf Imtiyaz, “Imam” in *Encyclopedia of Quran*, ed. Jane Dammen McAuliffe (Leiden: Brill, 2002), 2:502-504.
4. The real name of the twelfth Imam is Muhammad, but Shiites believe that for security reasons, the name should not be mentioned, since the early Islamic rulers wanted to kill him. Therefore, the twelfth Imam is mostly known within the Shiite community by titles such as the Mahdi, the Lord of Age (*Imam-e Zaman*), the One who Rises (*Qaim*), and Proof (*Hujjat*).
5. The traditionalists’ opposition to the notion of the “Islamic Republic” is comparable to the Jewish opposition to Zionism and the reestablishment of Jewish rule in Israel by human agency.
6. “Fight those who believe not in God and the Last Day and do not forbid what his Messengers have forbidden—such men practice not the religion of truth, being of those who have been given the Book—until they pay the tribute out of hand and have been humbled. The Jews say, ‘Ezra is the Son of God;’ the Christians say, ‘The Messiah is the son of God.’ This is the utterance of their mouths, conforming with the unbelievers before them. God assail them! How they are perverted! They have taken their rabbis and their monks as lords apart from God, and they are perverted! They have taken their rab-

resume Islam from the beginning.”<sup>7</sup> For apocalyptists, the history of Islam is nothing more than a process of decline and decadence. For fundamental apocalyptists, Medina, Muhammad’s government, is the worthiest example of ideal Islamic society and politics. Since Muhammad could not achieve everything he wanted, the Mahdi will return to accomplish what Muhammad left uncompleted.

Despite the fact that the Quran depicts the events of the end of days and portrays the chaos that will occur in natural order, it is very difficult to extract a consistent image of what would happen before the end of the world. In many cases, references to the cosmic chaos come without any mention of the end of time. In general, a reader of the Quran and the hadiths finds that the end of world is imminent, but knowledge of when the world will end is reserved exclusively to God—even Islam’s prophet cannot foresee it. For this reason, classical Muslim scholars did not comment or elaborate much on religious apocalyptic texts, and considered the determination of when the world will end an impossible task. Prominent scholars of the Islamic world are confined mostly to the simple narration of signs and features of the apocalypse without trying to apply it to a specific time. For example, in a few of their books, these scholars wrote on the minor and major signs that would accompany the end of days (the books are entitled *al-Malahim wa al-Fitan*—Disturbances and Turmoil or The Battle of Trials and *al-Fitan wa Ashrat As-Saab*—The Turbulent and Conditions of the Last Hour, a book pertaining to the turmoil and portents of the last hour).<sup>8</sup>

It is worth noting that the Shiite apocalyptic tradition has bloody visions about what will happen when the Hidden Imam returns. According to the tradition, when the Mahdi appears, there will be two kinds of death, red and white, each claiming a third of the world’s population. The red death will be from the Mahdi’s sword and the white will be from the plague, leaving only a third to survive.<sup>9</sup> In some hadiths, the Mahdi will kill two-thirds of the world’s population, and he “will clean the earth from nonbelievers and deniers [of Islam]...he will continue to kill the enemies of God until God is satisfied.”<sup>10</sup> The Mahdi “will order his twelve thousand solders to kill anyone who does not believe in your religion.”<sup>11</sup>

There are many contradictory hadiths that deal with Jews and the Mahdi. According to one hadith, a young person with a short beard and pale look will rise with a few soldiers, carrying the flag of Mahdi, and conquer Iliya, the city of Jerusalem,<sup>12</sup> while another hadith states he will destroy it.<sup>13</sup> Another hadith states when the Mahdi returns, most Jews will convert to Islam.<sup>14</sup> However, there are many hadiths in Shiism that state Jews will be killed: “When the Mahdi returns he will fight with Jews and kill all of them. Even if a Jew hides behind a rock, the rock speaks and says O Muslim! A Jew is hidden behind me. Kill him!”<sup>15</sup> It is worth noting that these sorts of hadiths are Arab-centrist; that is, the Mahdi in this tradition is an Arab leader who confronts Jews, Persians, Turks, and other ethnicities. The ethnic nature of this tradition is manifested in the deep concern about the power of Persians before the return of the Hidden Imam: “God’s Messenger said that the God will make

bis and their monks as lords apart from God, and the Messiah, Mary’s son—desiring to extinguish with their mouths God’s light; and God refuses but to perfect His light. His light, though the unbelievers be averse.” *Quran*, 29-32 from A.J. Arberry, *The Koran Interpreted* (New York: Touchstone Books, 1955), p. 210.

7. Sayed Sadral-Din Sadr, *Al-Mahdi*, ed. Sayed Baqir Khusroshani (Qom: Daftar-e Tablighate slami, 2000 [AHS 1379]), p. 236.

8. Among Sunni classic scholars, see Emad al-Din Abul Fida Ibn Kathir, *Albidayah wa al-Nehayah Etana biha Hassan Abdu al-Mannan* (Beirut: Bayt al-Afkar al-Dowliyah, 1997).

9. Sadr, *Al-Mahdi*, pp. 195-196.

10. Muhammad Baqer Majlisi, *Behar al-Anwar fi Dorrar-e Akhbar al-Aima al-Athar* (Tehran: Al-Maktabah al-Islamiyah, 1993 [AHS 1372]), 52:283. Dehsorkhi Isfahani Sayed Mahmoud Ibn Sayed Mehdi Moussavi, *Yati Ala al-Nas Zaman* (Qom: Entesharat-e Mir Fattah, 2004 [AHS 1383]), p. 659.

11. Dehsorkhi Isfahani, *Yati Ala*, p. 659.

12. Sayed Ibn Tavoos, *Al-Malahim wa al-Fitan fi zohoor-e al-Ghaib al-Montazar*, trans. Sayed Mehdi Ayatollahi (Tehran: Entesharat-e Jahanara, 2006 [AHS 1385]), p. 142.

13. *Ibid.*, p. 204.

14. *Ibid.*, p. 200.

15. Ali Ibn Hessam al-Din Mottaqi Hindi (Beirut: Moassasah al-Resalah, 1409), 14:204.

Persians superior to Arabs soon. Persians will hunt you like a lion then kill you and confiscate your properties”<sup>16</sup>; “When the Mahdi reappears, all Turks will be either captured by him or killed.”<sup>17</sup> In brief, most of the apocalyptic wars would be between Arabs and non-Arabs rather than Muslims and non-Muslims.

While some hadiths describe the events that take place before the Mahdi returns and others describe what the Mahdi will do when he appears, both sets are descriptive and do not urge the worshiper to do anything to hasten his return. The only duty of a Shiite worshiper, according to the classic apocalyptic tradition, is to pray for the health of the Mahdi and pray that the worshiper will be alive when the Mahdi returns so as to fight under his commandship.

Apocalyptists, who form a marginal trend in religious society, tend to transform the passivity of the worshiper into active identification of the signs of the Mahdi’s return. Apocalyptists try to match the events, heroes, and anti-heroes of apocalyptic scenarios to the events and people of their own time. This is problematic for orthodox Shiite because in the Islamic tradition, it is prohibited to foretell the future. Imams have forbidden Shiites to determine the time of the Mahdi’s return, and it is not permitted for anyone to claim to have seen the Mahdi or have had contact with him. Shiites, accordingly, are bound to deny anyone who brings such a claim. But history does not always correspond with theological creeds because in the course of Islamic history, many people have claimed a relation with the Mahdi, gaining both respect and credit with worshipers. Since the appearance of the Mahdi has been delayed, many Shiites have had no other choice but to prove that he is alive and justify the possibility of such a long age for an ordinary human being. Therefore, claims regarding meeting the Mahdi became justified and, in many cases, necessary in order to assure that the community would not lose faith in him.

## Messianism and the Islamic Revolution

The major Shiite institutions in Iran are the product of the country’s modern history, and their interpretation of Islam’s messianic message is the result of their interaction with modern times. (How these institutions arose is described in Appendix 2, “The Twentieth-Century Clerical Establishment”).

Messianism was not an important political force during the period of Muhammad Reza Shah (1941–1979) except for the anti-Bahai attitude of its clerics. They insisted that the shah reassert traditional Shiite messianism to reject the Bahai faith’s messianic claims. The Babi movement and the Bahai religion claim their origins from Ali Muhammad Shirazi (1819–1850). He first claimed to be the gate to the Hidden Imam and then later proceeded to declare himself the returned twelfth Imam.<sup>18</sup> By claiming to be the twelfth Imam, Bahaiism was not only challenging the legitimacy of the clerics as the official source of exegeses for Shiite texts, but also defying the legitimacy of the king as a Shiite sultan. Clerics had no other option but to rejuvenate the idea of the Hidden Imam in order to oppose any claim with regard to his appearance. Under Reza Shah, Muhammad Hossein Broroujerdi, the cleric who held undisputed authority as leader of the Shiite community, explicitly asked the shah to demolish the Bahai temples and prevent the faith’s members from gathering or being employed by the government.<sup>19</sup> This form of messianism reflected the traditional view of Shiites about the Hidden Imam and his return—a vision that matches the typical clerical stance in supporting the shah’s regime. For them, a sultan is the only legitimate ruler before the return of the Hidden Imam.

Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini’s approach to politics and religion was a turning point. Armed with the theory of *Velayat-e Faqih*, or Guardianship of the Jurist, Khomeini appeared as an anti-messianic Shiite jurist who believed that waiting for the Mahdi did not

16. Ibn Tavoos, *Al-Malahim*, p. 466.

17. *Ibid.*, p. 100.

18. Moojan Momen, *An Introduction to Shii Islam: The History and Doctrines of Twelver Shiism* (London: Yale University Press, 1985), p. 231. Also, for a short account of the history of Bahai faith see: Moojan Momen, *Bahai Faith: A Short Introduction* (Oneworld, 1999).

19. Ali Davani, “memoirs” in Karbaschi, Gholam Hossein, *Tarikh-e Shafahi-e Enqelab-e Eslami-e Iran* (Qom, Bonyad-e Tarikh-e Enqelab-e Eslami, 1995 [AHS 1374]), 1:151-154.

require political passivity, but rather a need for religious government. For this reason, Khomeini fought ideological groups such as Hojjatiya, who advocated the traditional view of Shiism, even through the last years of his life. The very essence of Khomeini's revolutionary message was the rejection of messianism: he insisted that an Islamic government be instituted in the present, without waiting for the Hidden Imam. His theory stated that a jurist can rule in the name of the Hidden Imam and that believers need not stay out of politics before his return. A strong parallel can be drawn between Khomeini's vision of religious government and the Marxist philosophy of history—that humans must act to bring about utopia.

Islamic ideologues in the 1960s and 1970s, such as Ali Shariati, paved the way for the Islamic Revolution by reinterpreting traditional concepts in a new ideological framework.<sup>20</sup> For instance, Shariati rejected the classic perception of “waiting for the return of Hidden Imam” and transformed it into an active one. In a famous speech “Awaiting: The Religion of Protest,” Shariati advocated the idea of “Islam as an ideology” rather than “Islam as a culture.” He explained that there are two kinds of expectations, negative and

positive. In his view, “negative expectation is the cause of decay and positive expectation is the most important factor in movement and ascension.” The first leads to the recognition of status quo and abjection while the latter motivates for progress and futurism. He held that “expecting means protesting” against the existing situation. He thought that waiting was the “determinism of history,” a global revolution that would not take place just by praying and passivism, but by “flag, sword, chain mail, and jihad.” Shariati said that such a movement would triumph “because I believe in the determinism of history, not in an accidental and historical rupture.” He reinterprets the anti-Christ (*dajjal*) not as a real man who will appear at the end of days, but as a “symbol of the cultural, spiritual, and anti-human regime that will dominate humans at the end of time.” He concluded that “the religion of waiting is a positive philosophy of history,” a “determinism of history,” a “philosophical optimism,” an “intellectual and spiritual factor that generates movement, commitment, and responsibility,” and finally, a philosophy of “protest” against the “status quo” and “denial of existing values and regimes throughout history.”<sup>21</sup>

20. Shahrough Akhavi and Hamid Dabashi, “Ali Shariati,” in *Expectation of the Millennium, Shiism in History*, ed. Sayed Hossein Nasr, Hamid Dabashi, and Sayed Vali Reza Nasr (New York: State University of New York Press, 1989), pp. 368-400. For the influence of Marxist ideology on Shariati's philosophy of history see: Abbas Amanat, “The Resurgence of Apocalyptic in Modern Islam,” in *The Encyclopedia of Apocalypticism* (New York/ London: Continuum International Publishing Group, 2000), 3:252-255.

21. Ali Shariati, *Entezar Mazhab-e Eteraz*, (Tehran: Hisseiniyeh-e Ershad). For an account on Shariati's perception of the concept of Hidden Imam see: *Expectation of the Millennium; Shiism in History*, edited, annotated with an introduction by Seyyed Hossein Nasr, Hamid Dabashi, and Sayed Vali Reza Nasr (New York: State University of New York Press, 1989), pp. 368-401. For criticism on Shariati's views see: Abdulkarim Soroush, “Mahdaviyat va Ehya-ye Din,” *Aftab*, no.12 (2002). Also available online at [http://www.dr.soroush.com/English/By\\_DrSoroush/E-CMB-TheSaviourAndReligiousRevival.html](http://www.dr.soroush.com/English/By_DrSoroush/E-CMB-TheSaviourAndReligiousRevival.html).

# Mashhad and Its Extremists

TO UNDERSTAND MESSIANISM in contemporary Iran, one has to examine the influence of the Mashhad seminary on the religious, social, and political life of Iranians. Particularly noteworthy is that Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei was raised in Mashhad and most of his theological study has taken place in that city. Mashhad has also been the home for several millenarian religious movements.

Since the 1979 revolution, Iran has had three capitals: the official capital Tehran, the ideological capital Qom, and the socio-economic capital Mashhad. Mashhad is the holiest city in Iran and its name derives from Mashhad-e Reza, or “martyrdom-place of Reza.” It is a reference to Ali ibn Musa a-Reza, the eighth Shiite Imam, who was poisoned and killed—in the eyes of Shiites—by the order of Abbasid Caliph Mamun.<sup>1</sup> Imam Reza’s shrine in Mashhad is the largest and most luxurious shrine in the Shiite world, attracting millions of pilgrims every year. The Safavid dynasty, which made Shiism the official religion of Iran, expanded the shrine<sup>2</sup> and encouraged people to donate their property, cash, jewelry, and works of art for its betterment.<sup>3</sup> As a result, the Shrine has thousands of endowments throughout the country, from industrial factories to agricultural lands, and the *Astan-e Qods-e Razavai* (the Reza Holy Precinct) is an administrative body in charge of the Shrine’s companies, factories, farms, refineries, and other properties.<sup>4</sup> Today, “it is not only Iran’s most sacred religious site but also by some reckoning the Islamic republic’s biggest and richest business empire.”<sup>5</sup>

## Mashhad’s Religious Ambience

Mashhad’s *madrasas*, or religious schools, were built centuries ago, but only in the twentieth century did they start to flourish and attract religious students from all around the country. Historically, Khorasan was the center of Sufism, mysticism, and Islamic philosophy, while Mashhad in the twentieth century has become a center for exoteric interpretation of Islamic texts and pious Islam.

Mashhad’s centuries-old role as a religious city is not as well known to Americans as that of Qom, whose seminary was only built in the Pahlavi period.<sup>6</sup> Despite the anti-clerical policies of Reza Shah, Qom benefited from his support as the center of Shiite authority transferred from Najaf to Iran. His policies also prevented the interference of Najaf clerics in the domestic political process, as experienced during the Constitutional Revolution in 1906. In the course of the Constitutional Revolution in Iran, influential Najaf clerics who had a quite remarkable number of followers in Iran were supporting constitutionalists against the king. Even before the Constitutional Revolution, fatwas from Najaf, Karbala, and Samarra sabotaged the process of the Iranian shah’s decisionmaking, most notably in the Tobacco Protest of 1891.

Sheikh Abdul-Karim Haeri Yazdi and Muhammad Hossein Boroujerdi, the first two heads of the Qom seminary, were in direct contact with the Pahlavi shahs and developed the seminary only by their indirect approval. Unlike in Najaf, where studying Islamic

1. For a brief account of the life of the eighth Shiite Imam see: Moojan Momen, *An Introduction to Shi’i Islam: The History and Doctrines of Twelver Shi’ism* (London: Yale University Press, 1985), pp. 41-42.
2. The Safavid government was active in constructing all the Shiite shrines in Iraq (Najaf, Karbala, Samara, and Kazemine) as well as Iran. But historians hold that the Safavids were cultivating Isfahan and Mashhad “as rival learning and pilgrimage centers for political and economic reasons”: Meir Litvak, *Shii Scholars of Nineteenth-Century Iran: The ‘Ulama’ of Najaf and Karbala* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), p. 17. On the contemporary political history of Khorasan from the constitutional movement to the Iranian revolution see: *Taqwim-e Khorassan, az Mashrootiyat ta Enqelab-e Eslami*, ed. Gholam Reza Jalali (Tehran: Markaz-e Asnad-e Enqelab-e Eslami, 1998 [AHS 1377]).
3. For a historical view on the economic and political aspects of endowment in Iran see: Ann K. S. Lambton, *Continuity and Change in Medieval Persia: Aspects of Administrative, Economic and Social History, 11th-14th Century* (New York: The Persian Heritage Foundation, 1988), pp. 131-157.
4. For a historical overview on Astan-e Qods-e Razawi see: *Encyclopedia of Iranica*, vol. 2, ed. Ehsan Yarshater (New York, Mazda Publishers, 1997).
5. Andrew Higgins, “Inside Iran’s Holy Money Machine,” *The Wall Street Journal*, June 2-3, 2007.
6. For the religious historical background of Qom see: Hajj Sayed Javadi, Sayed Kamal, “Appearance of First Mosques in Iran” in *Religious, Cultural and Social (Bimonthly)* no. 36 (Feb-Mar 1998), accessed at <http://imp.lss.wisc.edu/~aoliai/historypage/appearanceoffirstmosques.htm>; Mohammad Hassan ibn Mohammad Qommi, *Tarikh-e Qom*, ed. Sayed Jallal Al-Din Tehrani (Tehran: Majlis, 1933 [AHS 1312]).

philosophy was not a regular or easy job, a seminary student in Qom could study other Islamic branches with less difficulty. The last representative of Islamic philosophy, Muhammad Hossein Tabatabai, lived in Qom and taught dozens of philosophy students. Boroujerdi himself was trained in Islamic philosophy. To be sure, studying philosophy was considered almost heterodoxy; in an open letter to the clergy in the last year of his life, Khomeini mentioned that he suffered from humiliating remarks from other clerics because of his attempt to teach philosophy.<sup>7</sup> But if a religious student wanted to study Islamic philosophy, Qom was the best place. In addition, clerics in Qom could read non-religious books and newspapers or listen to the radio news easier than they could in Mashhad or Najaf. In the latter cities, some clerics considered reading newspapers or non-clerical books inappropriate or illegal (*haram*).

Khomeini never had a close relationship with grand ayatollahs from Mashhad except for Sayed Hassan Qomi, who was in jail with Khomeini for a short while before the revolution. Shortly after the revolution, Khomeini ordered him to be put under house arrest because he was an outspoken critic of *Velayat-e Faqih*. Qomi spent nearly three decades under house arrest.

It was not only the anti-philosophy atmosphere that made Mashhad different from Qom. In general, decades before the revolution, Mashhad was a better place than Qom for studying Arabic literature. Studying Arabic literature for a minimum of four years was only the beginning of one's training in a seminary at that time. Given the fact that Khorasan was historically the center of mysticism and Persian literature, and the place of Rumi and Ferdowsi's birth, literature was taken very seriously in the Mashhad seminary. In last century, many prominent Iranian literature professors were trained there.

In clerical typology, jurists study jurisprudence for many years and become able to issue fatwas. Preachers, who are not highly knowledgeable of Islamic theology but know enough about the history of Islam and

tradition in order to fulfill missionary work, are usually skillful in oration and the Persian language. There is another type of cleric that is neither a jurist nor a preacher; they are known among *momenin*, or worshipers, as *moqaddassin*, which means sacred men. They are usually very charismatic, respectful, and influential. But the term *moqaddassin* can be used in a derogatory way to refer to clerics who did not study well and do not have the ability to preach, but are masterful at pretending that they are ultra-pious and responding to the spiritual needs of worshipers.

Moqaddassin, who sometimes pretend to know arcane science, usually become famous by doing minor miracles (*keramaat*), bibliomancy, or other such practices. Moqaddassin usually do not appear in public often and try to avoid crowds. Each one has a circle of *khavass* (favored individuals) and accordingly does not socialize except with them. This practice helps them distinguish themselves from ordinary people. It is customary to describe the Mashhad seminary as a seminary that is in the hands of the moqaddassin. Even Mashhad's jurists are influenced or controlled by them. In such an atmosphere, some moqaddassin succeed in creating a conceptual framework for their exoteric approach to religious texts under the name of *maktab-e tafkik*, or the separation school.

### **Mashhad-Rooted Extremists: Separationists, Hojjatiya, and Velayatis**

Mashhad has been important in the development of several groups of religious extremists. Three groups that have been important for revolutionary Iran: the separationists, the members of the Hojjatiyah society, and the velayatis.

**Separationists.** Muslims discovered philosophy and other Greek sciences in the early period of Islam. Many Muslim theologians tried to understand Islamic teachings within a philosophical and rational framework while others opposed the use of reason in the hermeneutics of the sacred texts. The quarrel between the

7. Ruhollah Khomeini, *Sabih-e Noor*, vol. II (Tehran: Vezarat-e Ershad-e Eslami, 1999 [AHS 1378]).

rational and religious approach to Islam remained one of the fundamental elements in the development of Islamic thought throughout its history.

In the 1920s, Mirza Mehdi Gharavi Isfahani (d. 1946) was a cleric who immigrated from Najaf to Mashhad and founded a new school of theology that lately has become known as the “Separation School.” Isfahani held that in the period of major occultation of the twelfth Imam, some people could be honored by his visit. Isfahani’s disciples believed that he met the Hidden Imam personally and that the Imam approved Isfahani’s theological views.<sup>8</sup> Isfahani strongly believed that philosophy and logic were foreign sciences and therefore un-Islamic. To him, the logic of people who have to resort to religious texts was fundamentally opposed to the logic of the Greeks, which is based on philosophy and human knowledge. He explicitly rejected the causality principle and Greek logic.<sup>9</sup> For him syllogism does not lead the human mind to the correct deduction because the human mind is unable to understand cause and effect without divine guidance. In his view, the syllogism of proof is the act of the devil; human reason is incapable of knowing the world without divine guidance.<sup>10</sup> In his major books, *Abwab al-Hoda* (The Doors of Guidance) and *Mesbah al-Hoda* (The Light of Guidance), he states that through comprehensive and subtle research, he could achieve “pure Islamic truths.” Mashhad’s cultural and religious ambience was under heavy influence of the separationist, anti-rational, and anti-philosophy approach. In the period of Isfahani, most clerics in Mashhad regarded philosophy as “something anti-Islam and separated

from Islam.”<sup>11</sup> Isfahani trained many disciples, such as Sheikh Mojtaba Qazvini, Sheikh Hashem Qazvini, Zein al-Abedein Tonkaboni, Mirza Javad Aqa Tehrani, Sheikh Mahmoud Halabi, Hasan Ali Morvarid, and Sheikh Abdullah Emami Torbati, all of whom became well known and widely respected in Khorasan, the Iranian province whose capital is Mashhad.<sup>12</sup>

Among them, three Hakimi brothers, Muhammad, Ali, and Muhammad Reza, became popular outside the seminary due to their mastery of Arabic and Persian literature, and their outstanding prose, which was something completely new in the field of disseminating Islamic thought. In 1971, Muhammad Hakimi published *Dar Fajr-e Sabel*, “In the Shore’s Dawn,” which had a huge impact on spreading Shiite messianism before the revolution.<sup>13</sup> The Hakimi family continued to influence religious culture and politics after the revolution by writing different books and articles about Islam, social justice, and Mahdism. Hassan Rahimpour Azqadi, a hardline fundamentalist cleric and son-in-law of Muhammad Hakimi, is an unofficial but influential cultural advisor of the Supreme Leader and an outspoken critic of the modernity in Iran.<sup>14</sup>

One person who was influenced heavily by the separationists was Ali Shariati. Muhammad Reza Hakimi revealed the connection between the anti-philosophical approach of Mashhad separationists, Mashhad, and Shariati, who was a significant Islamic ideologue of the 1979 revolution.<sup>15</sup> Shariati was very fascinated by arcane science. When he was a professor at the University of Mashhad, especially between 1967 and 1968, “word got out that Shariati was a

8. Muhammad Reza Hakimi, *Maktab-e Tafkik* (Tehran: Daftar-e Nashr-e Farhang-e Eslami, 1991 [AHS 1370]), p. 23.

9. Mirza Mehdi Isfahani, *Mesbah al-Hoda*, p.6.

10. Ibid., p. 11.

11. See Muhammad Reza Mohami, “memoirs” in Karbaschi, Gholam Hossein, *Tarikh-e Shafahi-e Enqelab-e Eslami-e Iran* (Qom, Bonyad-e Tarikh-e Enqelab-e Eslami, 1995 [AHS 1374]), p. 69. Mohami adds that the Mashhad seminary is still under the overwhelming anti-philosophy influence of Mirza Isfahani.

12. Ibid., pp. 67-70.

13. Muhammad Hakimi, *Dar Fajr-e Sabel* (Tehran: Sherkat Sahami-e Enteshar, 1971 [AHS 1350]).

14. For more information about the Separation School see: Muhammad Moussavi, *Aein va Andisheb, Barrasi-e Mabani va Didgab-ha-ye Maktab-e Tafkik* (Tehran: Hekmat, 2003 [AHS 1382]); Khalil Mansouri, *Ayat-e Erfan* (Qom: Nashr-e Lahiji, 2000 [AHS 1379]); Sayed Baqer Mir-Abdollahi and Ali Poor-Muhammadi, *Negabi be Maktab-e Tafkik* (Tehran: Entesharat-e Hamshahri, 2006 [AHS 1385]); Sheikh Mojtaba Qazvini, *Bayan al-Forqan*, 5 vols. (Mashad, 1955 [AHS 1334]); Mirza Hassan Ali Morvarid, *Howl al-Mabda wa al-Maad Maleki Mianji*, and Muhammad Baqer, *Towbid al-Imamiyah* (Tehran: Vezerat-e Farhang Va Ershad-e Eslami, 2004 [AHS 1383]).

15. Shariati was under pressure “to give full power to Muhammad Taqi Jafari and Muhammad Reza Hakimi to criticize and correct his work to Motahhari’s taste. As it turned out, Shariati gave such a power only to Hakimi.” Ali Rahnama, *An Islamic Utopian, A Political Biography of Ali Shariati* (New York: I.T. Tauris, 2000), p. 354.

psychic involved with occult practices,” and on many occasions, Shariati told his students and friends that he could summon spirits.<sup>16</sup> Interestingly, Ayatollah Khamenei, Iran’s current Supreme Leader, was a close friend of Shariati and largely influenced by him. Their friendship started when both regularly participated in a poetry circle in Mashhad between 1957 and 1958. This friendship lasted until Shariati’s death.<sup>17</sup> Even after the revolution, Khamenei praised Shariati while most of the clerics hated and condemned him as a heretical writer.

**Hojjatiya Association.** The religious ambience of Mashhad generated different circles and associations devoted to defend “authentic” Islam. Among them, the Hojjatiya Association (*Anjoman-e Hojjatiya*) rapidly attracted the consent and support of both the clerics and the shah. The Charity Mahdavidist Association of Hojjatiya (*Anjoman-e kheiriyā-ye Hojjatiya-ye Mahdaviyya*) was founded in the aftermath of the 1953 coup by the charismatic cleric Sheikh Mahmoud Zakerzadeh Tavallai, also known as Sheikh Mahmoud Halabi (1900-1998).<sup>18</sup> Halabi was a direct disciple of Mirza Mehdi Isfahani, the founder of the Separation School.<sup>19</sup>

The explicit mission of the Hojjatiya Association was to confront the “threat of Bahaism” and its expansion. In Bahai teachings, Islam had been superseded by the Bahai faith when the Mahdi emerged in a previous time. Therefore, Hojjatiya sought to defend Shiite Islam by emphasizing the concept of the Hidden Imam by insisting that he was still alive and awaiting for God’s order to reappear.

Mahmoud Sadri, a former member of the Hojjatiya Association, points out that “between the early 1950s

and early 1970s, a great number of the future elite of the Islamic Revolution had their ideological development provided by Hojjatiya.” This Shiite association, according to Sadri, “emulated a number of Bahai idiosyncrasies such as secrecy with respect to its bureaucracy and original literature, and the unhindered access to modern means of communication.”<sup>20</sup>

The political theory of Hojjatiya was the same as the traditional view of Shiism, which recognizes non-religious government and forbids any attempt to overthrow it. In a public speech, Halabi stated “An Islamic government is a good idea, but first find an infallible leader who can lead society by the virtue of his infallibility. People’s blood, property, honor, and women cannot be handed to somebody who may make mistakes or follow his instincts. It must be handed to the infallible Imam.”<sup>21</sup>

Halabi, under the influence of the 1953 coup, was extremely cautious about getting involved in any political activity and was eager to keep his associations far from any kind of political militancy. One of the association’s principles in its mission statement was “the association would not interfere in political affairs by any means. It would also not take any responsibility for the political activity of the affiliated persons of the association.”<sup>22</sup>

Halabi’s view on the Hidden Imam belongs to the traditional perception of Shiites, in which every Shiite worshiper has no other duty but to wait and pray for the Hidden Imam. Accordingly, any attempt to establish a religious government was illegal on religious grounds. That explains why Hojjatiya as an organization did not participate in the revolution and its passivity was interpreted as cooperation with the shah’s regime as well as its animosity with Khomeini.

16. Ibid., p. 184.

17. Ibid., pp. 77-78.

18. Mahmoud Sadri, “Halabi,” in *Encyclopedia of Iranica*, 11:581-3.

19. Mohami, Muhammad Reza, “memoirs” in Karbaschi, p. 68.

20. Mahmoud Sadri, “Hojjatiya,” in *Encyclopedia of Iranica*, 11:427.

21. Baqi, Emad al-Din, *Dar Shenakht-e Hezb-e Qaedin-e Zaman, Tarikhcheh, Mavaze va Andisheb-ha-ye Anjoman-e Hojjatiya* (Qom: Daftar-e Tablighat-e Eslami-e Howzeh-ye Elmiye-ye, 1983 [AHS 1362]), p. 37. The book contains important documents about the Hojjatiya association but, as the author admits, the book was written when he had a pro-Khomeini bias towards the association. He tried to publish a revised version of the book but the Iranian government did not permit it. See: Emad al-Din Baqi, *Barrasi-e Enqelab-e Iran* (Tehran: Nashr-e Sarai, 1991 [AHS 1370]), p. 27.

22. Mission Statement of the Hojjatiya Association, Article 9, Amendment 2.

According to a Hojjatiya publication, the responsibility of Shiites during occultation is to know that:

1. All worshipers have to wait for the infallible Imam
2. All worshipers have to emulate a religious authority (*mujtabid*)
3. All worshipers have to grieve in the absence of the Imam
4. All worshipers have to pray to God for the speedy return of the Imam
5. All worshipers have to cry for being separated from the Imam
6. All worshipers have to obey the Imam's will, for only he knows the best time for his return
7. All worshipers have to give alms for the sake of the Imam's health and wellness<sup>23</sup>

What was new in Hojjatiya was not its ideology but its modern and lay organizational structure. Before Hojjatiya, all religious-oriented organizations were

either clerical or traditional religious associations (*heyat*).<sup>24</sup>

Emad Baqi, a historian of the Hojjatiya association, mentioned that its discourse changed because of the revolution's influence. While the concept of revolution was absent in Hojjatiya discourse by principle, in two books published by the association, *The Last Ambassador of the Revolution and Waiting* and *Seed of Revolution*, the Hojjatiya tried to prove that the Mahdi was a revolutionary leader. But unlike the revolutionaries, members of Hojjatiya before the revolution believed that a *montazer* (a Shiite who waits for the Mahdi's return) has to conceal his true views (*taqqieh*)<sup>25</sup> and remain ready to fight when the Mahdi returns.<sup>26</sup>

Khomeini opposed Hojjatiya during the course of the revolution for its ideological refusal to support the Islamic government, although he financially supported them in their fight against Bahatism by allocating religious taxes to them.<sup>27</sup>

On the threshold of the revolution, many young members of Hojjatiya left and joined Khomeini and his revolution. Figures such as Ali Akbar Velayati, former minister of foreign affairs and current diplomatic advisor of the Supreme Leader; Kamal Kharrazi, former minister of foreign affairs; Ali Akbar Parvaresh, former minister of education; Gholam Ali Haddad

23. Baqi, Emad al-Din, *Dar Shenakht-e Hezb-e Qaedin-e Zaman, Tarikhcheh, Mavaze va Andisheh-ha-ye Anjoman-e Hojjatiya* (Qom: Daftar-e Tablighat-e Eslami-e Howzeh-ye Elmiye-ye, 1983 [AHS 1362]), p. 131.

24. Heyat is a traditional association that is formed by the spontaneous volunteer participation of ordinary people with a complex connection to the religious authorities. It can have different forms according to the time and place. It can be a local neighborhood association (*heyat-e mahalleh*), or can be based on common professional interests (*heyat-e senfi*) with designated titles or distinct names that indicate the members' profession, geographical origin, their particular aspirations and type of religious sentiment and motivations in forming these heyats. Since the Safavid period, heyats have become one of the most functional and significant socio-religious institutions in Iran which have been used by both political and social authorities. During the revolution and its aftermath, heyats remained one of the important tools for mass mobilization in Iran. The heyat is based on oral and unwritten culture and a traditional hierarchy that does not follow the rules of a modern party or organization. For more on heyat see: Said Amir Arjomand, *The Turban and Crown, The Islamic Revolution in Iran* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988), pp. 91-93; Fardad Kazemi, *Poverty and Revolution in Iran: The Migrant Poor, Urban Marginality and Politics* (New York: New York University Press, 1980), pp. 63, 92-96; Gustav E. Thaiss, "Religious Symbolism and Social Change; Drama of Hussain," in *Scholars, Saints and Sufis*, ed. Nikki R. Keddie (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1972), pp. 349-366.

25. Taqqieh is an Islamic theological term that refers to the dissimulation or complete concealment of one's true feelings not only from authorities but also from most ordinary people in order to reduce risk. Historians and cultural anthropologists of the Middle East have stressed the importance of Taqqieh and the presence of this attitude of mind and behavioral trait in Muslim society in general, even in the present time. See: Gustav Thaiss, "Unity and Discord: The Symbol of Hussain in Iran," in Adams, Charles J. ed. *Iranian Civilization and Culture, Institute of Islamic Studies* (Montreal: McGill University, 1973), pp. 111-119. In Shiism, taqqieh was ordered by the Imams for Shiites more often when they were in the minority and under the suppression of the Sunni Caliphs.

26. "Third interpretation of Hojjatia Society" (*Bardshat-e sevvom as anjoman-e hojjatia*), an interview with Emad Baqi, is available online at <http://shahrvandemroz.blogfa.com/post-331.aspx>.

27. After an inflammatory speech from Khomeini on August 12, 1983, in which he did not mention the name of Hojjatiya but harshly criticized them, the Hojjatiya association issued a statement announcing the termination of the association. In the statement, Hojjatiya revealed that before the revolution, Khomeini has issued the permission for the use of religious taxes in service of the Hojjatiya missions. See Rasoul Jafarian, *Jaryan-ha va Sazman-ha-ye Mazhabi-Siasi-e Iran, Az Rooye Kar Amadan-e Muhammad Reza Shah ta Pirooz-ye Enqelab-e Eslami 1320-1357* (Tehran: Markaz-e Asnad-e Enqelab-e Eslami, 2004 [AHS 1383]), pp. 181-182.

Adel, speaker of the parliament; Mostafa Chamran, former minister of defense; and Abdul Karim Soroush, former member of the Committee of Cultural Revolution (now a modernist theologian and critic of the regime) became Khomeini's favorites and took positions in the government.<sup>28</sup> Many Hojjatiya members obtained Khomeini's trust only after explicitly proving their ideological distance from Hojjatiya. (As Abdul Karim Soroush mentions, many of Hojjatiya members like Mehdi Abrishamchi and Jalal Ganjeh-i left and joined Mojahedin-e Khalq Organization.<sup>29</sup>)

After the revolution, Khomeini established a relationship with the repentant members of Hojjatiya who were known as the regime's conservatives. Nevertheless, Khomeini continued to believe that Hojjatiya ideology was against the revolution.<sup>30</sup> In 1983, the Hojjatiya Association officially terminated its activities after Khomeini's speech against it. In his speech Khomeini implicitly stated that Hojjatiya's belief of hastening the return of the Hidden Imam would spread corruption throughout the country. Khomeini said, "do not move against this wave [the wave of revolution] otherwise your hands and feet will be broken."<sup>31</sup> Khomeini believed that the Hojjatiya provoked the criticism that came from religious strata of the society. Right after Khomeini's speech, Sayed Ali Khamenei, who was president at that time, divided the political tendencies of the Hojjatiya into two: "In my point of view, there are some people within the Hojjatiya association who are revolutionary elements, worshippers, honest sympathizers of the revolution, believers in the Imam [Khomeini] and velayat-e faqih, and in the

service of the country and the Islamic Republic. There also people among them who are pessimists, heretics, non-believers, and who nag and contest. Hence, in terms of political thought and revolutionary dynamism, there is a broad spectrum within the association and it is not limited to a restricted circle."<sup>32</sup> In Khomeini's last year, in a public message to the nation, he called Hojjatiya members stupid and "so-called moqaddassin" who believed in separation of religion from politics, and who forbade the struggle against the shah yet criticized the Islamic republic for not respecting Islamic law.

In recent years, there have been some reports from the Ministry of Intelligence or sources close to it that Sayed Hassan Eftekharezadeh, who was a disciple of Sheikh Mahmoud Halabi, has restored the society and reactivated it.<sup>33</sup> Reportedly, this society opposes the ideology of the Islamic republic and still believes in the separation of politics and religion.<sup>34</sup> The society publishes unauthorized pamphlets in which they propagate the notion of the Imamate and fighting the Sunnis. The ministry of intelligence announced that some of them have been arrested or are under surveillance.<sup>35</sup>

**Velayatis.** There was a historically deep-rooted religious trend within the Shiite community in Iran known as the "velayatis," which literally means the ones who advocate the authority of the Imam and the theory of Imamate. But in practice, velayati is another name for Shiite extremists who believe an Imam is a divine, supernatural being that possesses limitless knowledge and has power of disposal over the universe.<sup>36</sup> This

28. Abdul Karim Soroush was appointed by Khomeini as a member of Committee for the Cultural Revolution after universities were shut down by Khomeini's order. Soroush left the Committee after nearly one year and did not accept any political position later. In an interview with *Jameh* newspaper, Soroush explained how he and his followers were recruited by the Hojjatiya Association. See: Abdul Karim Soroush, *Siasat Nameh* (Tehran: Entesharat-e Serat, 1998 [AHS 1377]), pp. 185-187.

29. Ibid., p. 186. See also: Ali Akbar Mohtashami, *Khaterat* (Tehran: Daftar-e Adabiyat-e Enqelab-e Eslami, 1997 [AHS 1376]), 1:77-79.

30. Ali Muhammad Guerami, *Khaterat*, edited by Muhammad Reza Ahmadi, Markaz (Tehran: Asnad-e Enqelab-e Eslami, 2002 [AHS 1381]), p. 358.

31. Khomeini, *Sabih-ye Noor*, 10:222.

32. Khamenei's speech is available online at <http://baztab.com/search.php?sq=%D8%AD%D8%AC%D8%AA%D9%8A%D9%87>.

33. See interview with Abbas Samili Namin, the director of the Center for Study on the History of Iran. It is available online at <http://www.aftabnews.ir/vdcfyjd6jdjv.html>.

34. To understand to what extent the Iranian regime is concerned about the Hojjatiya see: <http://www.baztab.ir/news/29070.php> and <http://www.baztab.ir/news/24433.php>.

35. For the defiance of the Hojjatiya ideology to the Islamic Republic and its role in shaping the political configuration in the first decade of Iranian current regime see: Abbas Vali and Sami Zubaida, "Factionalism and Political Discourse in the Islamic Republic of Iran; the case of the Hujjatiyeh Society," *Economy and Society* 14, no. 2 (1985), pp. 139-173. See also another source containing useful documents along with pro-regime bias and analysis: *Gozaresh-e Hojjatiya*, ed. Bashgah-e Andisheh (Tehran: Markaz-e Asnad-e Enqelab-e Eslami, 2005 [AHS 1384]).

36. For the history of the emergence of Shiite extremists see: Hossein Modarressi, *Crisis and Consolidation in the Formative Period of Shiite Islam* (Princeton:

movement consisted of a hierarchically lightweight group of preachers (*voaz*) such as Sheikh Ahmad Kafi, a famous Tehran preacher from Mashhad, as well as other teachers from the Mashhad seminary. These preachers and teachers hold a very strong social power base, sometimes more than many high-ranking clerics, and appeal to the mosque-going, non-intellectual Shiite worshipers. This trend is very sensitive about the principle of the Imamate and considers it the real essence of the unity of God. Therefore, most velayatis regard Sunnis as non-Muslims.<sup>37</sup> They are traditionally considered clerics who oppose the rational interpretation of the sacred texts and who are loyal to literal exegeses.

The velayatis' ideology was very similar to the ideology of the Hojjatiya. Both believed that the establishment of any religious government before the return of the Hidden Imam is religiously illegal, and that every

worshiper has to await his return by praying and fighting other ideologies, such as Bahatism, Sunnism, and especially Wahhabism. Unlike Hojjatiya, whose members were mostly non-clerics, velayatis were mainly clerics. For this reason, velayati clerics considered themselves superior to the Hojjatiya movement that was under the supervision of Halabi, who was a cleric of low rank.

One of the main differences between velayatis and the Hojjatiya in the period before the Islamic Revolution was their manner of organization. While the Hojjatiya Association relied on a more modern, strict notion of organization, and had an agenda for recruiting middle class students from high schools and universities, the velayatis had a more traditional organizational structure and were more favored by the trade and working classes. Velayati institutions were similar in character to *heyats*.

The Darwin Press, Inc., 1993), pp. 19-51.

37. For information about velayatis and their criticism of Ali Shariati, see: Ali Rahnama, *An Islamic Utopian: A Political Biography of Ali Shariati* (London: I.T. Tauris, 2000), pp. 266-270.

# Messianism under the Islamic Republic

THE ISLAMIC REVOLUTION'S ideology promised Iranians worldly happiness and salvation through the implementation of religious law. This ideology claimed to be the best alternative to the secular ideologies, such as Marxism and liberalism, which, according to Islamic ideology, had proved their impotence with regard to the basic needs of human beings. The emergence of an apocalyptic president is not a sign of the return of the Iranian revolution's ideals but rather an indication of their failure. The Iranian revolution was anything but apocalyptic because it undermined the imminent reappearance of the Hidden Imam and assumed that by giving legitimacy to a jurist, the Shiite community had to manage worldly affairs by itself.

The revival of messianism in recent years appears to be a response to economic corruption, social oppression, and cultural decay. While some of the messianism in Iran today is passive and apolitical—manifested by the revival of the Hojjatiya—most is of the revolutionary apocalypticism strain that is associated with President Ahmadinezhad.

In both apolitical and political versions of messianism, prominent clerics play little role. For instance, Hojjatiya members before and after the revolution were mostly non-clerics. In the messianic trend led by Ahmadinezhad, the only exception is Muhammad Taqi Mesbah Yazdi, who among the Qom seminarists is theologically respected but politically isolated. There is a profound ideological mistrust of messianists from prominent clerics and theologians because messianists believe Islam is in a crisis and the Islamic traditional institutions have deviated from the “right path” of Islam and are therefore unable to perform their duties. The messianists think they represent true authentic Islam, while clerics are only the formal and traditional interpreters of Islam. For apocalypticists, the history of Islam is nothing but a process of decline and decadence.

The main difference between apolitical messianism and the new political trends can be formulated as follows: first, Hojjatiya members look to the future with hope, while the new political trend sees utopia in the past and wants to revive the Shiite tradition; second, Hojjatiya members believe in the evolution of society and progress (indeed, many were influenced by the ideas of Darwin and Spencer), while the new messianists emphasize revolution rather than evolution; third, Hojjatiya members typically come from the educated modern middle class and are not necessarily as socially conservative as the followers of the new political messianic trend, which appeals to those from the traditional strata of the society; and finally, Hojjatiya ideology is deterministic and believes that the Imam will appear at the end of time, while the new messianic revolutionaries think that taking certain actions will hasten his return.<sup>1</sup>

Another form of messianism in Iran is secular messianism, which looks for a hero to miraculously solve all of Iran's problems. Waiting for a savior, saint or worldly, became the main element of apocalyptic heroism. This sort of messianic expectation for a worldly savior leads to political indifference in the face of the disturbing events that take place in politics and society.

## The Mahdi Cult and Superstitious Religious Practices

An apocalyptic vision relies on Islamic rituals more than culture, knowledge, and reason. Hence, it rejects the traditional methods of understanding Islam as practiced in Islamic philosophy or Islamic law. It deals more with religious mythology than abstract theological concepts, and uses customs and rituals to provoke the imagination and generate social dynamism in favor of the apocalyptic vision. In the Iranian social imagination, notions like sacrifice and hope are associated with the idealized image of pre-Islamic heroes embodied

1. Said Hajjarian, “az anjoman-e hojjatia ta madoon-e anjomaniha,” is available online at <http://norooznews.ir/note&article/note/3928.php>.

in Shiite Imams. Contemporary apocalyptists use this social image in order to mobilize people for apocalyptic purposes. Therefore, apocalyptic visions are attractive to ordinary people and can be spread easily in society.

Messianists are usually clerics with low theological training or non-clerics with little knowledge of Islamic theology. Most apocalyptists believe that when the Mahdi comes, he will discredit the hegemonic interpretation of Islam and bring a true interpretation. Apocalyptists constantly seek new interpretations of the sacred texts to bolster their convictions. Hence, conservative traditional clerics are usually anti-apocalyptists because they are committed to preserving the established tradition. Traditional theologians do not tend to apply the apocalyptic tradition to their own time period by involving themselves in damage control and not in radical change. It is no accident that prominent seminarian publication houses do not publish new apocalyptist books.

The dominant ideological approach of the apocalyptists is the exoteric hermeneutics of the religious texts and the reliance on the literal meanings of words. They reject the use of reason in interpreting the religious texts and the reference to words to their figurative sense. Hence, apocalyptists in general are accused of advocating a superstitious religion.

One of the most important aspects of this approach is the credit given to prophecy and arcane science. A *moqaddas*—a revered man who may not be a cleric—foresees the future and the destiny of individuals. In the recent century, Shah Nemat Allah Vali, also known as the Iranian Nostradamus, made predictions for world events up until the end of time. Another practice is to ask permission from a moqaddas to use one of God's

names. If a worshipper repeats one of God's names with the permission from a moqaddas, that name would gain a special spiritual force and would serve the worshipper's intentions so he could get everything he wanted by the force of that name. This practice is called *zeker* and some mystics believe that certain zekrs, which are called *esm-e aazam* or "greatest name," can even move mountains. They hold that the "greatest name" is a secret and that only true believers can know because the moqaddas would not issue the permission to somebody whose heart was not fully dedicated to God.<sup>2</sup>

Muhammad Taqi Bahjat, the mentor of Muhammad Taqi Mesbah Yazdi, is an Imam of the Fatemiyeh mosque in Qom and also a moqaddas who attracts many people from around the country. Interestingly, Bahjat also played an important political role. In order for Khamenei to become the Supreme Leader, he had to have the minimal credentials to be certified to be a cleric in order to make clerical judgments (*ijtihad*). Khamenei had great difficulty getting an *ijtihad* certificate because he had not been much of a clerical student. Despite the fact that Khamenei was not his student even for one day, Bahjat issued Khamenei the certificate.<sup>3</sup> Many clerics in Qom say that Khamenei frequently visited Bahjat in the past two decades and asked for zekrs. Bahjat has the reputation for issuing *zeker* permissions only for *khavass*, or special individuals. It is a common perception that Khamenei believes Bahjat is one of the most credible current moqaddassin.<sup>4</sup>

Apocalyptists are particularly prone to *estekharez*—an Arabic word which means to seek good—which is a religious term for the practice of consulting God for guidance.<sup>5</sup> A worshiper can utilize *estekharez* for almost everything, but it is commonly used for mar-

2. For the "greatest name" see: Muhammad ibn Hossein Bahai, *Kashkool* (Tehran: Zarrin, 1998 [AHS 1377]). One of Mashhad's moqaddassin is Shiekh Hassan Ali Nokhodaki. He was well known for authorizing zekrs. See: Ali Meqdadi Esfahani, *Neshan az bi Neshan-ha* (Qom: Jonhoori, 2007 [AHS 1386]); and Muhammad Ali Tavallai, *Shemneh-I az Keramaat-e Marboom Hajj Sheikh Hassan Ali Esfabani* (Mashhad: Zamen-e Ahoo, 2002 [AHS 1381]). For another of Mashhad's moqaddas, Hassan Ali Morvarid, see: Muhammad Elahi Khorassani, *Morvarid-e Elm va Amal* (Mashhad: Bonyad-e Pazhoohesh-ha-ye Eslami, 2007 [AHS 1386]).

3. For the difficulty Khamenei had in obtaining the *ijtihad* certificate, see Montazeri's memoirs. Montazeri was one of Khamenei's teachers before the revolution: Ali Hossein Montazeri, *Khaterat* (Berlin: Entesharat-e Enqelab-e Eslami, 2001), pp. 361-370.

4. From Bahjat's interview with the author in March 2007.

5. One of the oldest sources on *estekharez* is a monograph entitled *Fath ol-Abwab bayn zawel albaab wa bayb rabbe al-arbaab* (opening the doors between human beings and Lord of lords) written by Abi al-qasem Ali ibn Musa ibn Tavoos al-Hasani al-Helli (H 589-664). This book explains in a very detailed way the religious foundations of *estekharez* and its various methods as well as its place in the Islamic tradition. The book is available online at <http://www.rafed.net/books/hadith/fateh/abw005.html>.

riage. A family that receives a marriage proposal from a man often goes to a cleric and asks him for *estekhareh*. If the result is good, the girl's family accepts. Methods for *estekhareh* vary from necromancy, divination, augury, sortilege, and bibliomancy. But the most common method nowadays is by a string of beads (*tasbeeh*) and—most importantly—by the Quran (bibliomancy). The practitioner of *estekhareh* takes the Quran in both of his hands and reads some prayers. Then he opens the book and reads the first line on the right page, and must give his impression of what God recommends to do.

Some people in Qom and Mashhad are famous for their special ability to do *estekhareh*, and receive requests from all around the country by phone, fax, and e-mail. One of the best known people for this arcane practice is Muhammad Ali Guerami, a Qom-based ayatollah. In his memoirs, Guerami considered himself a spiritual mentor who influenced the destinies of many of his disciples. He said that “there are some people that I personally took care of their spiritual training and now they are in the high-level of spiritual state and even can travel [from Qom] to Karbala and Najaf in one second.”<sup>6</sup> This practice is called *teyyo al-arz*, literally “folding up of the earth,” an Islamic term for teleportation.<sup>7</sup> He also claims that he met with Hazrat-e Massomeh, the daughter of the seventh Shiite Imam who died in 817 AD, regularly.<sup>8</sup>

In his memoirs, Guerami explains his views on *estekhareh* and considers it one of the miracles of Shiism.<sup>9</sup> “Many people ask me for *estekhareh*,” Guerami said, “even sometimes for important issues of the country. Once, I got an *estekhareh* phone-request from Ahwaz. I told them I did not have time. They said it was not personal but that some oil wells had caught on

fire and the national wealth was burning up. They said they had some plans to control the fire but they needed *estekhareh* to choose one. I did *estekhareh* for them and fortunately their work was a success.” The ayatollah adds that even judges request *estekhareh* for issuing juridical orders.<sup>10</sup>

Since the presidency of Ahmadinezhad, *estekhareh* has become a religiously prestigious way to make decisions, preferring divine consultation to human decisionmaking. Ahmadinezhad is known for asking for *estekhareh* in critical situations. The practice became so popular that Rassoul Jafarian, a fundamentalist cleric, wrote an article criticizing the leaders of country for using *estekhareh* or other arcane techniques as a decisionmaking tool. Jafarian explicitly mentions the statements about the destruction of Israel and writes that these kinds of statements, which give an exact date for the destruction of Israel, are based on divination and cannot be true. He also implicitly accuses Ahmadinezhad for not taking the U.S. military threat seriously because some arcane scientists told him there would not be any attack on Iran. Jafarian quoted “one of the great practicers of *estekhareh*” who said that he is in charge of half of the country's affairs because the authorities come to him and ask for *estekhareh*.<sup>11</sup>

### The Islamic Republic's ambivalent stand on Messianism

A cynic would note that the Supreme Leader's rule is based on the absence of the Hidden Imam, on whose behalf he rules. Once the Hidden Imam reappears, the Supreme Leader is out of a job. For that matter, if every devout believer can be in direct contact with the Hidden Imam as Ahmadinezhad often proclaims himself

6. Muhammad Ali Guerami, *Khaterat*, edited by Muhammad Reza Ahmadi (Tehran: Asnad-e Enqeleb-e Eslami, 2002 [AHS 1381]), p. 388.

7. The first Shiite source that mentions the practice of *teyyo al-arz* is probably *Usul al-Kafi* by Koleini, one of the four main Shiite hadith books. The book explains that this miracle was first practiced by Shiite Imams. Then in the course of history, many sufis and Islamic philosophers were believed to be able to perform it. From a Shiite view, Mahdi, the twelfth Imam, regularly performs *teyyo al-arz* and travels all around the world in a blink of an eye. Also, 301 of the Mahdi's believed 313 companions have the knowledge of *teyyo al-arz*. Therefore if somebody practices or pretends to practice *teyyo al-arz*, people will hope that he will become one of the Mahdi's companions. For more information see: Muhammad ibn Yaqoub Koleini, *Usul al-Kafi*, tahqiq Ali Akbar Ghaffari (Tehran: Dar Al-Kotob Al-Eslamiyah, 1986 [AHS 1365]), 2:413. See also *Keramat-ha-ye Hazrat-e Mahdi Alayh asslam*, Vahed-e Tahqiqat-e Maqjed-e Jamkaran (Qom: Entesharat-e Masjed-e Jamkaran, 2001 [AHS 1380]).

8. Guerami, p. 390.

9. *Ibid.*, p. 76.

10. *Ibid.*, p. 78.

11. Rassoul Jafarian, “Al'ajab kollol ajab bayn al-jamadi warrajab,” available online at <http://www.baztab.com/69606.php>.

to be, then what need is there for a jurisperit to tell the believers what to do in the Hidden Imam's absence? In short, messianism undercuts the Supreme Leader's powers and position.

Since the Islamic Republic faces a real problem encouraging people to become more religious, it has an ambivalent attitude about messianism. The political and economic crisis of the regime caused mistrust among ordinary people about the use of Islam by the government. At the same time, the Islamic Republic's ideological approach has theoretically discredited Islamic traditional theology.

To overcome the crisis of faith in the last decade, the state media and other official communication channels and institutions, such as the Ministry of Culture and Islamic Guidance, are trying to popularize Islam by promoting a simple version of the religion as manifested in the rituals. Government officials campaign for religious days and ceremonies, and spend a huge portion of the state budget on religious places and institutions. The result has been the drastic flourish of the Mahdi cult in the country. For instance, the Jamkaran mosque on the outskirts of Qom—where tradition says that the Hidden Imam appeared in the dreams of a pious man in the eleventh century—did not occupy any special religious meaning for Iranians until the past few decades. It has been transformed from a very small and modest mosque to a colossal holy shrine, and according to government statistics, this mosque has millions of pilgrims every year, and has unique regulations, rituals, prayers, and customs.<sup>12</sup> There is a well in the mosque with two entrances, one for men and one for women, into which needy or sick people drop petitions and money for the Hidden Imam to grant them their prayers. In recent years, technology has been used in the service of these rituals as Shiite worshipers can send their petitions or money through the Jamkaran Mosque website. Also, worshipers can email their

petitions and transfer money to the Imam Reza Shrine in Mashhad.<sup>13</sup>

But the Islamic Republic is not always satisfied with the people's resort to such rituals because the management of such rituals is out of the control of the state and the traditional clerics. A new class of *maddah*, religious singers who are not clerics and have no theological training, has emerged and been welcomed by Iranian society, especially by the young generation. They are propagating a version of Islam that is not ideological, and they use modern music and melodies, popular poetry, and erotic and romantic images to praise the Shiite Imams. The young women who attend the religious ceremonies of the new maddahs wear make-up and clothes that do not meet the Islamic Republic's official standards.

This puts the government's control of religious affairs under threat, and can imperil the government's use of Islam for its own purpose. People are reluctant to go to mosques and listen to a cleric preach, but many of them are eager to participate in religious ceremonies that are run by a maddah. Not only the religious authorities in Qom, but also Khamenei and members of his office, such as Akbar Nateq Nuri, the former speaker of the Majlis and a prominent conservative, warn about the untrue Islam promoted by maddahs and the spread of superstition by people who claim they are in direct contact with the Hidden Imam.<sup>14</sup> Many people who bring such a claim tell their followers that the Hidden Imam is angry with the Islamic Republic and its leaders.<sup>15</sup>

Said Hajjarian, a reformist theoretician and a former intelligence official, stated that in the period of former president Muhammad Khatami, nearly twenty messianic sects appeared in Iran and their members were arrested in government crackdowns. One of these groups claimed responsibility for the terrorist attack on Ali Razini, an intelligence and judicial official of the regime.<sup>16</sup> In recent years, a dozen people in Iran

12. Ayatollah Abul Qassem Wafi, the custodian of Jamkaran mosque, told ISCAN news that in past years, the number of Jamkaran pilgrims increased to sixteen million. This interview is available online at <http://www.iscannews.ir/fa.ShowNewsItemID=154100>.

13. <http://www.aqrazavi.org>.

14. See the full text of Khamenei's speech on this on his official website: <http://Khamenei.ir/FA/Speech/detail.jsp?id=840505A>.

15. For instance, see Nateq Noori's speech during Ramadan at the Shrine of Khomeini: <http://shahrvandemroz.blogfa.com/post-238.aspx>.

16. Said Hajjarian, "az anjoman-e hojjatia ta madoon-e anjomaniha," available online at <http://norooznews.ir/note&article%20/note/3928.php>

have claimed they have seen the Hidden Imam and received special instructions from him. According to the original apocalyptic tradition of Shiism, everyone who claims to have met the Hidden Imam should be denied. But after the delay in the return of the Hidden Imam, many Shiites have started to doubt his existence and cannot believe that a human being could live for

so many centuries. Ironically, many Shiite theologians, such as Mirza Hossein Noori, wrote books about people who have seen the Hidden Imam in different mosques or holy places in order to prove that he exists and is still alive.<sup>17</sup> Therefore, while it is religiously unacceptable to claim to have met the Hidden Imam, such claims are well received by many Iranians.<sup>18</sup>

17. Mirza Hossein Noori, *Al-Najm a-Ssaqeb fi Ahwal al-Imam al-Hojja al-Ghaib*, trans. Yassin Mousavi (Qom: Lisan a-ssedq, 2007 [AHS 1386]). See also: Mirza Hossein Noori, "Jannat al-Mawa fi Zekr-e man Faza bi leqa-e al-Hojjah Alayhe a-ssalam ow Mojezatohoo fi al-Gheybat al-Kubra," in *Majlisi*, ed. Muhammad Baqer, 53:199-336 and 52:1-77.

18. For some claims in recent years of meeting the Hidden Imam and their social consequences, see Muhammad Rahbar's report "kessi dar jazireh-ye khazra nist." It is available online at: <http://shahrvandemroz.blogfa.com/post-323.aspx>. See also the speech of Masid Mohajeri, the director of the conservative newspaper, on October 2007. It is available online at <http://www.tabnak.ir/pages/?cid=588>.

# The Religious Views of Khamenei and Ahmadinezhad

THE RELIGIOUS VIEWS of Khamenei and Ahmadinezhad differ in many important respects, including their attitudes about messianism and the apocalypse. Notwithstanding, both are strongly influenced by the non-rational approach to Islam and the folk religious practices that were rejected by Khomeini.

## Khamenei's Background

Born on July 15, 1939, in Mashhad, Ali Hosseini<sup>1</sup> Khamenei was the second son of Javad Khamenei, an ordinary, pious, and poor cleric.<sup>2</sup> He went to *maktab* (traditional religious school) from the age of four to learn reading and writing, and afterward started to learn Islamic theology at the Mashhad seminary. When he was eighteen years old, he traveled to Najaf and decided to stay there and follow his theological education in that city, but his father asked him to come back to Iran. He returned to Mashhad after a short while, but then went to Qom to study theology. He stayed in Qom from 1958 to 1964 and was introduced to Khomeini. From 1964 until the 1979 revolution, Khamenei was in Mashhad except for religious sermons and few years of jail time in Tehran and exile in Baluchistan. In Mashhad, he resumed his study and started to teach in the seminary, eventually becoming the prayer Imam in Keramat Mosque.

Khamenei's educational background was not conventional. Under the influence of the Mashhad seminary, he became fascinated with Persian literature and started to write poems when he was very young. He frequently socialized with Mashhad's literary circles and became acquainted with modern literary genres. He loved to read novels, and according to the personal accounts of his old friends, he has read more than two thousand Iranian and foreign novels. Some analysts

believe that his fear of a velvet revolution in Iran and the role of intellectuals is based on the literary works of Eastern European writers such as Vatslav Havel. Even now, Khamenei shows an interest in poetry by having poetry gatherings in his office. In such gatherings, pro-government poets gather and read their poems before him, and he later gives his comments.

Persian literature is not the only thing that distinguishes him from other clerics in Qom. His religious training in Mashhad affected his worldview because of its anti-philosophy climate that gives more credit to religious rituals than to abstract concepts. Reportedly, he is fascinated by arcane sciences and moqaddassin. State television frequently shows Khamenei in public receiving people who give him their *kafiyah* (the white checkered cloth mostly worn by Palestinians) to be blessed. The *kafiyah* used to be a sign of support for Palestinians, but is now a symbol of the Basij militia. To make a blessing, he eats from a plate and leaves the rest of the meal for his followers to eat. Khamenei also resorts to *estekhareh* to make critical decisions for the country at times. Rumor has it that he especially relies on *estekhareh* when he is depressed.<sup>3</sup>

What makes Khamenei unique is his political experience. He spent more of his life in politics than in the seminary, and has involved himself in politics since he was twenty-four years old. Khamenei says that the 1951 speech of Sayed Mojtaba Navvab Safavi, the leader of Fedayeen-e Islam, about the implementation of Islamic law (*sharia*) and the "deceits of the shah and Britons," influenced Khamenei and motivated him to become politically active.<sup>4</sup> Perhaps through Fedayeen-e Islam, Khamenei got introduced to ideology of the Muslim Brotherhood. He translated some of the works of Sayed Qutb, *The Future Is for Islam* and *Against the*

1. "Hosseini" is a genealogical title that indicates that he is a descendant of Hossein ibn Ali, the third Imam of Shiism and consequently a descendant of Muhammad the Prophet. For the importance of such a genealogy, see Mehdi Khalaji, *Last Marja* (The Washington Institute, 2006). It is available online at <http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/templateC04.php?CID=250>.

2. Unlike most of political ayatollah in Iran, Khamenei so far has not published any memoirs or official biographies. His reluctance could stem from several reasons, such as his desire to keep his past vague and obscure, and also not to provoke controversy about certain political and social actors.

3. From the author's interview with one of Khamenei's relatives in April 2007. He resides in Qom and prefers to be anonymous.

*Western Civilization*, and other fundamentalists such as Abdul Monem Namri Nasr, an Indian Islamist, into Persian. From the very beginning of the Islamic Republic, he became one of its major figures and a close ally of Khomeini. He co-founded the Islamic Republic Party and his main governmental positions were the following: deputy minister of defense, acting commander-in-chief of the Revolutionary Guard, the Supreme Leader's representative in the Supreme Council of Defense, member of the Majlis, the head of the Council of Cultural Revolution, the head of the Expediency Council of the regime, the head of the council for revision of the constitution, national president, and Supreme Leader. One can say that among politicians and clerics of the Islamic Republic, no one has such political and military experience.

Khamenei can hardly be identified as a new apocalypticist because Mahdism is not a main focus of his speeches. Rather, his speeches focus on the Hidden Imam as a source of future hope that will eventually end the world's injustice. Khamenei's discourse is very close to the traditional Shiite perception of the Hidden Imam in that he believes the Mahdi neither directly shapes a believer's worldview nor affects daily life. According to him, a true believer is one who practices Islamic law and makes an effort to implement it in life and society. Khamenei does not even use revolutionary terms in order to describe the Mahdi's government.<sup>5</sup> Another sign of his more traditional approach is how he identifies himself with the Mashhad clerics who have mastered the arcane sciences, perform minor miracles, and are in touch with the Hidden Imam. According to some unofficial reports, Khamenei regularly meets "mediators" of the Hidden Imam to receive directions. In short, Khamenei does not hold a political messianic set of ideas, but his religious mentality,

mixed with his five decades of political experience, makes him an ambiguous and ambivalent character whose decisions can stem from political calculations as well as esoteric consultations.

## Khamenei and the Mashhad Establishment

Khamenei was raised in Mashhad and most of his theological study took place in the city. Since he came to power, Khamenei has traveled to Mashhad every *nowrooz* (the beginning of spring in the Iranian calendar) and makes a public speech at Imam Reza Shrine. Iranians usually hear stern speeches from the Supreme Leader, but his supporters say that when he is in Mashhad, he benefits from the grace of the Imam and becomes more courageous and determined. Critics of regime believe that when he is in his hometown, he tries to satisfy his traditional and conservative supporters.

Mashhad is dominated by the Holy Precinct, which is "not only Iran's most sacred religious site but also by some reckoning the Islamic Republic's biggest and richest business empire."<sup>6</sup> The shrine of Imam Reza, which is far bigger than Vatican City, is not accountable to the government and all its exports and imports are not subject to tax. Some economic experts estimate that the annual budget of the Holy Precinct is around \$2 billion.<sup>7</sup> Iran's leaders have long appointed the custodian of the Holy Precinct—the shah before the revolution and the Supreme Leader since.<sup>8</sup> Due to the special economic nature of the Holy Precinct and its exclusive accountability to the Supreme Leader, it has become the place for secret economic activities and rent seeking. Also, according to certain intelligence reports, the Holy Precinct is one of the Iranian foundations that financially support Hizballah in Lebanon.<sup>9</sup>

4. Khamenei's biography is available online at <http://Khamenei.ir/FA/Biography/index.jsp>.

5. For a collection of Khamenei's speeches, see <http://www.Khamenei.ir/FA/Views/mahdi.jsp>.

6. Andrew Higgins, "Inside Iran's Holy Money Machine," *The Wall Street Journal*, June 2-3, 2007.

7. Suzanne Maloney, "Agents or Obstacles? Parasitical Foundations and Challenges for the Iranian Development," in *The Economy of Iran, Dilemmas of an Islamic State*, ed. Parvin Alizadeh (London and New York: I.T. Tauris, 2000), p. 149.

8. Iran's shahs, especially Muhammad Reza Shah Pahlavi, have made tremendous efforts to develop the Shrine and expand its economic organizations and properties. For instance see: Amir Asadollah Alam, *Yaddasht-ha-ye Alam* (Tehran: Entesharat-e Moin, 2003 [AHS 1382]), 1:336.

9. "Action From Knowledge," Intelligence Security Diary, ed. George Holdron, David Rubin, January 2007, available online: <http://www.gowlings.com/resources/isd/January2007.pdf>.

Khamenei has a close relationship with Vaez Tabassi, who has been the custodian of the Holy Precinct since 1979. After coming to power in 1987, Khamenei converted Tabassi's position from a temporary post to a permanent one. Tabassi, born three years before Khamenei, was also raised and studied in Mashhad. And according to his website biography, Tabassi, like Khamenei, started his political activity under the influence of Navvab-e Safavi's speech in Mashhad in 1951.<sup>10</sup> The lifetime friendship between Khamenei and Tabassi goes back to the 1960s when the two clerics used their sermons as a tool to mobilize people against the shah. Although the Mashhad seminary was overwhelmed by non-political clerics at that time, Khamenei and Tabassi led a minor political circle of the clerical establishment.<sup>11</sup>

Tabassi is one of the founders of the Revolutionary Guard in Khorasan province and is still considered an influential figure inside the military. Sardar Gholam Reza Naqdi, one of the hardline commanders of the revolutionary guard, was once his bodyguard and still is very close to him. Tabassi has been the representative of the Supreme Leader in Khorasan and a member of the Assembly of Experts since the beginning of the revolution in 1979, and in 1996, Khamenei appointed him as a member of the Expediency Council.

Given the fact that the Holy Precinct is the richest economic organization in Iran and is under the direct supervision of the Supreme Leader, the Imam Reza Shrine has been a powerful political center that played an incontestable role in the political developments of the past two decades. This organization had an especially important role in empowering Khamenei when he took office, considering he was a mid-ranking cleric who was not able to collect religious taxes. Also in the Islamic Republic's constitution, there is nothing that mentions the financial resources of the Supreme Leader. Therefore, foundations and organizations, which are out of the government reach—and above all

the Holy Precinct—help him financially and logistically to establish and expand his power. Hence, Tabassi, as the major financial provider of the Supreme Leader, as well as of the political organizations and campaigns of traditional conservatives, has remained one of the most influential clerics in Iran. Tabassi has expressed his full faith in the Supreme Leader and recognized his right to dissolve parliament, a right that is not constitutionally admitted.<sup>12</sup>

Many within Iran's political circles believe that Khamenei is under the influence of Tabassi. According to some reports, in the Assembly of Experts meeting after the death of Khomeini, Tabassi led a group of members to vote for Khamenei as Supreme Leader against those who wanted to form a leadership council rather than a single successor. The influence of the Holy Precinct over Khamenei raises the issue of how much he shares the views of some of the Mashhad-based extremists discussed earlier, especially since he is sympathetic to some of the superstitious practices often favored by them.

### Religious Views of Ahmadinezhad

Various statements of Ahmadinezhad and those of his associates suggest that he and his faction are faithful to a set of esoteric ideas and apocalyptic notions that are being applied to strategic planning and diplomacy.<sup>13</sup> This faction believes that unique Shiite teachings make modern science unnecessary. As noted earlier, this is a very different approach from that of the Hujjatiya, whose members are typically not opposed to modern science.

The idea that Shiite thought makes modern science irrelevant first appeared after the 1979 revolution from Sayed Monir al-Din Hosseini Shirazi, former member of the Assembly of Experts and a radical fundamentalist cleric. He founded the Academy of Islamic Sciences in Qom in 1981 and attracted many clerical followers. According to the academy, Hosseini founded an

10. Available online at <http://www.vaeztabasi.com/Waez.html>.

11. One of the sources that reveals the relationship between Muhammad Reza Shah and Ayatollah Milani is the memoirs of Amir Alam, the shah's prime minister and then minister of court: Amir Asadollah Alam, *Yaddasht-ba-ye Alam*, 5:108.

12. His 1990 speech is available online at <http://www.vaeztabasi.com/Waez.html>.

13. For more about Ahmadinezhad's political life see: Abbas Milani, "Pious Populist," in *Boston Review*, November/December 2007.

“Islamic philosophy and a model of social engineering on a global scale.” In his ideology, not only non-Islamic philosophy but also Islamic philosophy and theology were the target of criticism because they were under the influence of Greek thought. They argue that Islamic philosophy has been more influenced by Greek pagan philosophy than by Islamic teachings, so Islamic philosophy is not purely Islamic and true Muslims should avoid it.

In the academy’s ideology, Islam is the source of all kinds of science, whether exact, natural, or human. According to Shirazi, Muslims have to discover the capacity of Islamic teaching in order to produce a completely different civilization, and all principles of politics and diplomacy have to be deducted directly from Islamic texts. Also according to him, the only legitimate use of technology is for the expansion of Islam.<sup>14</sup> After his death, Sayed Mehdi Mirbaqeri, a fundamentalist cleric and a disciple of Shirazi and Mesbah Yazdi, became the head of the academy. The academy and its late leader were not respected religiously or intellectually within the traditional or modernist strata of the seminary. Most of clerics in Qom call Shirazi and his disciples the “academy guys.”

The academy’s influence increased when Khamenei became Supreme Leader in 1989. Beside the annual budget it receives from Khamenei’s office, it has influence with many commanders of the revolutionary guard and security forces. Many of the academy’s terms such as the “software movement” or the “production of science” enter Khamenei’s discourse. After Ahmadinezhad took office, many “academy guys” took positions in the government and their ideology became the backbone of Ahmadinezhad’s faction. For example,

Alireza Piroozman, the deputy of the academy, has been appointed as the cultural advisor of the Supreme Council for the Cultural Revolution, which is in charge of the Islamization of the universities.<sup>15</sup>

One year before the election of Ahmadinezhad, through the ideological and financial help from the academy as well as the government, the Bright Future Institute was founded in Qom.<sup>16</sup> The head of the institute, Masud Pur Sayed Aqai, a fundamentalist cleric, declared that the main mission of the institute was to elaborate the Mahdist foundations of Islamic society and government. When Ahmadinezhad came to office, the institute held its first international conference on the “Doctrine of Mahdism”—the study of and belief in the Mahdi—in Tehran in August 2005. The conference started with a speech by Ahmadinezhad, and he afterwards told journalists that “the goal of my government is the people’s satisfaction] and I have no doubt that the people of the Islamic Republic are preparing for the return [of the Hidden Imam] and, God willing, in near future we will witness his appearance.”

In 2006, in the introduction to the collection of articles discussing the international conference, Aqai wrote that Mahdism has theological, cultural, artistic, educational, mystic, political, social, economic, historical, anthropological, and psychological aspects, and that Shiites have to discover all the belief’s dimensions and potential. Mahdism, for him, can be a comprehensive strategic guideline for the “establishment of a global government.”<sup>17</sup> In other words, “Mahdism is the meta-nuclear weapon of Shiism in the conquest of the world.”<sup>18</sup> In an article presented to the conference by Maryam Moin al-Islam, entitled “Economic, Cultural, Political, and Social Outputs of the Doctrine

14. Sayed Monir al-Din Hosseini Shirazi was the son of Sayed Noor al-Din, the founder of Shirazi’s Brothers Party in the period of Reza Shah Pahlavi. For his party and political ideology see: Muhammad Baqr Vossooqi, *Hezb-e Baradaran be ravayat-e Asnad* (Tehran: Markaz-e Asnad-e Enqelab-e Eslami, 2007 [AHS 1386]). For the biography of Sayed Monir al-Din see: Sayed Monir al-Din Hosseini Shirazi, *Khaterat* (Tehran: Markaz Asnad-e Enqelab Eslami, 2004 [AHS 1383]) and also Dafrar-e Farhangestan-e oloom-e Eslami, *Yadi az Ostad* (Qom: Entesharat-e Fajr-e Velayat, , 2001 [AHS 1380]). For a brief account on the academy’s activities and ideology see: Daftar-e Farhangestan-e Oloom-e Eslami, *Zaroorat-e Mohandessi-e Ejtemai* (Qom: Entesharat-e fajr-e Velayat, 2001 [AHS 1380]).

15. For an interview he made with Shabestan news agency on the necessary changes he proposed for the universities see: <http://www.shabestan.ir/newsdetail.asp?newsid=86080515250164&code=6>.

16. *Baztab* website reported that Ahmadinezhad, when he was the mayor of Tehran, allocated one billion dollar to the Institute of Bright Future: <http://www.baztab.com/print.phpid=47589>.

17. *Ibid.*, p. 17.

18. *Ibid.*, pp. 18-19.

of Mahdist Government Compared to Globalization,” the author attempted to elaborate that Western civilization is on the threshold of decline and the only thing that can replace it is the Islamic civilization represented by Iran. She describes the Mahdist global government as an exclusive alternative to the existing globalization led by the West.<sup>19</sup>

When Ahmadinezhad came to power, he publicly announced that universities had to be cleansed of secular professors.<sup>20</sup> This statement among others is evidence of his loyalty to the idea of “pure Islamic sciences” promoted by the Academy and the Bright Future Institute. Ahmadinezhad has on many occasions stated that the West is experiencing a fundamental crisis and the only way out is through Islamic teachings and Mahdism. In every speech, Ahmadinezhad begins with a prayer to the Mahdi and asks God to grant that he return very soon. He repeatedly declares that “justice and the pioneer of justice are on its way.” It is safe to assume that Ahmadinezhad’s speeches on justice and peace refer to a Mahdi government.

Besides the theoretical efforts of the Academy and the Bright Future Institute, there is some evidence that the president belongs to an esoteric, secret, apocalyptic society whose activities and beliefs are publicly unknown. Apparently, this secret society started its work before the revolution without having a political mission. After the revolution, it continued its activities in four cities: Tabriz, Tehran, Isfahan, and Mashhad. This society reportedly has less than one hundred members, but since 1984, it has attracted political figures who defined missions for the group. Since then, the preparation of the country for the return of the Hidden Imam has become the group’s priority. The group has a “mediator,” currently a non-cleric called Allahverdy Khani, who says he is in direct touch with the Hidden Imam.<sup>21</sup>

According to Sayed Mehdi Imam Jamarani, one of Khomeini’s closet disciples, the group tried to approach the founder of the Islamic Republic. In an interview with *Baztab*, Jamarani narrated a story in which three people came to Khamenei and said that they represented the Hidden Imam and had to give some vital information to Khomeini. He told them that he would not listen to them until they answer three of his questions. He asked them to name something that he loves dearly, to tell him where he lost something important, and to describe the relation between the eternal (attribute of God) and the time-bound (attribute of creatures). Khomeini said, “go and ask these questions from the Lord of Time and bring me the answers.” A few days later, their answers did not satisfy Khomeini and he said, “You are liars. Get out of here.”<sup>22</sup> The same story was recounted by Masih Mohajeri, a hard-line cleric and director of the conservative newspaper *Jomhuri-e Eslami*, in a speech in October 2007. In that speech, he said “we always had people who claimed that they have seen the Hidden Imam and that the current government is the government of Hidden imam . . . these superstitions are dangerous and sometimes important people hold them.”<sup>23</sup>

The velayatis also have a great degree of influence with Ahmadinezhad. One velayati, Ahmad Jannati, is a powerful member of the Guardian Council and has been one of Ahmadinezhad’s passionate supporters from the very beginning. Admiring Ahmadinezhad’s speeches at Columbia University and the UN, describing them as speeches of a political and spiritual human being, Jannati thanked God for the existence of such brave people in Iran and said, “The situation is going to be ready for the return of Hidden Imam.”<sup>24</sup> There is another velayati cleric, Morteza Aqa Tehrani, who is close to Ahmadinezhad and reportedly attends his cabinet meeting every week. He published a book that gives instructions for meeting the Hidden Imam

19. Ibid., pp. 77-101.

20. From the author’s interview with two prominent clerics close to the government. They both reside in Tehran and prefer to be anonymous.

21. Two interviews with two political clerics who are close to Khamenei’s office and reside in Tehran, made by the author in April 2007.

22. Imam Jamarani’s interview with *Baztab* website is available online at <http://www.baztab.com/news/39944.php>.

23. A summary of Mohajeri’s speech is available online at <http://tabnak.ir/pages/?cid=588>.

24. A summary of Jannati’s speech is available online at <http://www.tiknews.net/display/?ID=45407&page=>.

and methods to petition the Mahdi at Jamkaran mosque.<sup>25</sup>

### Ahmadinezhad, the Hidden Imam, and Israel

Ahmadinezhad juxtaposes the preparation for the return of the Hidden Imam with the collapse of the state of Israel. In a June 26, 2007 speech, Ahmadinezhad talked about “the countdown for the fall of the Zionist regime” and addressed the leaders of Israel by saying that “today I declare by a louder voice, though your eyes and ears are closed, that all the world sees that you are going to be drawn, because justice and the pioneer of justice is on his way.”

Ahmadinezhad appears to be influenced by a trend in contemporary apocalyptic thought in which the killing of Jews will be one of the most significant accomplishments of the Mahdi’s government. The enthusiasm for killing Jews is falsely read back into the traditions. For example, *Al-malahim va al-Fitan* is a thirteenth century book by Ibn Tavoos about the end of days and the Mahdi’s government, and it does not give an important place to Jews in relation to the Imam. But a contemporary cleric, Sayed Mehdi Ayatollahi, translated the book into Persian and put a poem on the back cover that says when the Mahdi returns, he will “uproot Jewish Zionists.”<sup>26</sup> Obviously, this is an arbitrary use of apocalyptic traditions for political purposes. Another example is in the aftermath of the 2006 Israel-Lebanon war, when *Kayhan* newspaper published an article entitled “On the Qods’ Gates.”<sup>27</sup> In this article, the author quotes a hadith from the Prophet that says a person called Nasrallah will defeat the Jews. An Islamic scholar responded to the *Kayhan* article and proved that the hadith did not exist and that its author altered two hadiths and modified them in order to apply them

to the Lebanon crisis.<sup>28</sup> In fact, in Iran, anti-Israeli discourse appeared for the first time in the 1940s from the Fadayeen-e Islam, the first Islamic fundamentalist group in Iran that used terror as a religiously legitimate means for eliminating the “enemies of God.” Its leader was a young cleric named Mojtaba Navvab Safavi, who had close ties to the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood.

It seems that two contemporary anti-Semitic trends affected the president’s mentality more than anything else rooted in tradition. Both trends are indebted to Germany’s twentieth-century anti-Semitism. One of them is led by Muhammad Ali Ramin, who organized supporters for Ahmadinezhad in 2005 and was also the secretary of the president’s faction, “The Scent of Service” (*Rayeh-e Khosh-e Khedmat*). He heads the Islamic Community Organization as well as the Society for the Support of the Muslim minority in the West. Initially, Ramin was reportedly a student in Germany with leftist views, but became influenced by anti-Semitic trends there.<sup>29</sup> His anti-Semitic views are very primitive, as exemplified by a May 30, 2006 speech when he stated, “throughout history, Jews have been accused of many things. For instance, they were known as the reason for the spread of diseases such as the plague and typhus because Jews are very dirty human beings.”<sup>30</sup>

The conference entitled “Holocaust: A Global Perspective” was held in Tehran by the ministry of foreign affairs at the suggestion of Ramin.<sup>31</sup> In the conference, all sixty-seven participants unanimously voted for Ramin to become the secretary general of the newly founded International Holocaust Institute. This conference became controversial because of the president’s speech in which he stated, “Israel should be wiped off the map.” In an interview with *Baztab*, Ramin explained his views about the history of Israel. He believes that Jews were very influential with the Nazi government, and

25. Morteza Aqa Tehrani, *Sowday-e Rooy-e Doost* (Tehran: Ahmadiyah, 2005 [AHS 1384]).

26. Ayatollahi published his poetry on the back cover of his book: Sayed Ibn Tavoos, *Al-Malahim va al-Fitan fi zohoor-e al-Ghaib al-Montazar*, trans. Sayed Mehdi Ayatollahi (Tehran: Entesharat-e Jahanara, 2006 [AHS 1385]).

27. August 10, 2006.

28. Nayyereh Karami, “Dar pasokh be hadith-e bar darvazeh-haye Qods,” *Kayhan*, available online at <http://www.hadith.ac.ir/default.aspx?pageid=2491>.

29. *Baztab* published a brief note on Ramin’s background at <http://www.almazhab.com/siasi/27.htm>; the note was removed with a few days of being posted.

30. The excerpts of the speech can be found online at [http://www.bbc.net.uk/perisan/iran/story/2006/12/061214\\_mf\\_holocaust.shtml](http://www.bbc.net.uk/perisan/iran/story/2006/12/061214_mf_holocaust.shtml).

31. <http://aftabnews.ir/vdcb8fhrhzbga.html>.

Hitler helped them to migrate to Palestine. He explicitly describes how the Holocaust was a myth created by the Jews themselves.<sup>32</sup> In a response to the reporters, Ramin argued that it was the Zionists who caused the international community to conduct inquiries about Iran's nuclear activities. To counter-attack, and to put pressure on the Zionist regime, Ahmadinezhad decided to question the existence of the Holocaust.<sup>33</sup>

The other anti-Semitic trend that has been tremendously influential to Ahmadinezhad's outlook and to the post-revolutionary Islamic ideology in general is a trend led by Ahmad Fardid, a prominent Iranian philosopher (1939-1994). After the revolution, Fardid experienced a drastic ideological change from atheism to supporting Velayat-e Faqih and anti-Semitism. For him, Jews and Zionists produced all the ideologies of modern Western civilization, including the discourses on human rights and democracy.<sup>34</sup> Fardid was fascinated by the idea of the apocalypse and jihad against the West and the Jews. By using anti-humanist and anti-modern elements of Heidegger's philosophy, Fardid justified the most violent version of Islamic fundamentalism in Iran. As Ahmad Ashraf elaborates, "Fardid gained followers among a circle of people in seminaries and intelligence forces, as well as in the editorial staff of the major daily *Kayhan* newspaper, and in journals such as *Sura*, *Hawza-ye andipa*, and *Honar-e eslmi*."<sup>35</sup> While there is no direct reference to Fardid in Ahmadinezhad's speeches, Fardid's influence on him is undeniable for two reasons: first, the anti-modern and anti-Western content of his speeches is very similar to Fardid's ideology; and second, Fardid's followers include the editors of *Kayhan* newspaper who devotedly support Ahmadinezhad.

### The New Understanding of Human Action and the Mahdi's Return

The revolution has given a new understanding to the apocalyptic tradition in which worshipers are obliged

to take some action in order to hasten the return of the Mahdi. This new politicized apocalypticism is influenced more by modern ideologies, such as Marx's philosophy of history, than by theological tradition. Just as the Marxist tradition states that class conflict is necessary for the emergence of a classless society, new apocalypticists believe that fighting injustice is an obligatory step toward readiness for the appearance of the Mahdi.

The main mechanism that new apocalypticists use to give religious legitimacy to their political behavior is to find a correspondence between foretold signs of apocalypse, as given in Shiite apocalyptic literature, and the present time. They try to portray themselves as heroes and their enemies as the anti-heroes of the apocalyptic narratives, which are being acted out in the present day. In other words, apocalypticists find audiences only when they claim that the end of days is near and that they represent the force of good against evil. For example, according to the tradition, before the appearance of Mahdi, a group from the Orient will rise up and face the world's tyranny. Masud Poor Sayed Aqai, a close associate of Ahmadinezhad and the head of the Bright Future Institute, said that according to a hadith, "the people of Iran will rise up and pave the way for the return of Hidden Imam." Identifying today's events and political actors with the signs of apocalypse allows them to pretend that in order to hasten the return of the Hidden Imam, special people have special missions. Davood Ahmadinezhad, the president's brother and head of the Special Investigation Office of the President, likened Ahmadinezhad to Moses and Bush to the Pharaoh. He argued that just as Moses stood up to the Pharaoh and brought liberty to his people, so too is Ahmadinezhad standing up to Bush, heralding the imminent return of the Hidden Imam.<sup>36</sup>

New apocalypticists tend to parallel the emergence of Ahmadinezhad with the rise of vices such as prostitution, drug addiction, economic corruption, and

32. <http://aftabnews.ir/vdcb8fbrhzbga.html>.

33. His response to reporters is available online at <http://www.aftabnews.ir/vdcb8fbrhzbga.html>.

34. For an analysis on Fardid's thoughts see: Merzad Boroujerdi, *Iranian Intellectuals and the West: The Tormented Triumph of Nativism* (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 1996).

35. Ahmad Ashraf, "Islamic Political Movements in 20th Century Iran," in *Encyclopedia of Iranica*, vol. 2, ed. Ehsan Yarshater (New York: Mazda Publishers, 1997).

36. In his speech, Davood Ahmadinezhad calls the Iranian Supreme Leader "the Caliph of God," which is unusual in the Shiite tradition. His speech was

cultural decay. According to them, Ahmadinezhad came to power to pave the way of the return of the Hidden Imam by fighting internal and external “corruptors of the earth.” For Ahmadinezhad’s advisor, Muhammad Ali Ramin, the increase in most vices is part of a conspiratorial scheme for the “Jewish domination” over Muslims, exemplified by Israel’s occupation of the Muslim holy lands. The rise of vices is also due to the distortion of Islam’s sacred texts by agents of colonialism, especially the “Empire of America.” The United States in particular occupies a prominent place in this house of Western demons not only for conducting an unjust war in Iraq and supporting the heinous policies of a Zionist state but also for re-imposing colonialist rules over the Iranian people, pressing the country on its nuclear program, enacting economic sanctions, and mobilizing the world against the Islamic Republic.

However, it seems that neither the president nor his followers have any precise perception of which human actions would hasten the return of the Mahdi. In Ahmadinezhad’s speeches, the only kinds of acts he cites that would make the Hidden Imam appear are the implementation of Islamic law and his invitation to world leaders to accept the teachings of Islam. For instance, during the 2007 Hajj pilgrimage, Ahmadinezhad spoke to Iranian pilgrims in Mecca about the Hidden Imam. He stated there that “there is no mission in this time but the invitation to the [Hidden] Imam. . . . The Islamic Republic is the exercise for connection to the Imam. Without connection to the Imam, what would remain of the Islamic Republic?” Ahmadinezhad believes that the Hidden Imam has full control over the world and “the management of the world is in the hands of Imam.” In his view, a politician who is not

connected to the Imam and not expecting him “has no benefit from the truth.” He has stated that the Iranian nuclear program is running under the control of the Hidden Imam and that the Hidden Imam guided his speech at Columbia University in 2007. He did not mention in his Mecca speech any specific action required for hastening the reappearance of the Hidden Imam, but referred instead to the need to create justice and oppose oppression.<sup>37</sup>

Ahmadinezhad makes inflammatory statements about Israel and the West, but it is unclear if he is suggesting that believers should do something in this regard. Certain Shiite traditions state that the Imam’s return will come at a time of world chaos, and Ahmadinezhad seems at times to promote chaos for that end. However, given that Ahmadinezhad is not a theologian or even a political theoretician, he may not have a clear view about which human actions may hasten the Hidden Imam’s reappearance. This is especially true since there is no tradition he can draw on in this regard; Shiite apocalyptic literature explicitly says that the only human action that can speed up the Hidden Imam’s reappearance is prayer and obedience.

Despite his reported affiliation to a secret society, there is no clear sign that Ahmadinezhad is pursuing a secret agenda to accelerate the appearance of the Hidden Imam. If such a secret plan ever existed, there is good reason to suspect Ahmadinezhad’s political rivals would discover and exploit it to his detriment. They have strong reasons to be concerned about this matter; after all, if there were such a secret plan, it would touch on many domestic policy issues about which Ahmadinezhad’s opponents care more deeply than they do about foreign policy.

online at <http://isna.ir/Main/NewsViews.aspx?ID=News-1041262&Lang=P>, accessed November 27, 2007. This page was removed from the ISNA website a few days after it was posted.

37. The full text of Ahmadinezhad’s speech is available online at <http://www.fardanews.com/show/?id=43144>.

# The Status of Ideology in Iranian Politics

HAVING LOOKED AT the religious views of the key Iranian leaders, the question remains to what extent the ideology drives their political actions and decision-making. What is the relationship between the Islamic Republic's foreign policy and the religious convictions of its leaders? In other words, how important is Islamic ideology for the policies Iran adopts?

## Fragile Ideology

Some Western thinkers portray Muslims as one people with a fixed and common consciousness and identity. For instance, Bernard Lewis says, "They [Muslims] know who they are and what they are and what they want; a quality which we seem to have lost to a very large extent."<sup>1</sup> This sort of understanding of Islam is very similar to traditional Muslims' perception about Islam, namely, that it is a faith beyond history and far beyond the influence of worldly parameters. Other Western thinkers emphasize the interaction between religious belief systems and socio-historical realities; for instance, Max Weber argued, "the development of religious imagery is driven by a logic of interest, expressed in and eventually constrained by ideas."<sup>2</sup> This latter view is closer to reality. Islamic ideology is not monolithic and in each Muslim country, ideology reflects the country's material and concrete conditions. Therefore, any change in the socio-economic and political situations will tremendously affect ideology.

The crisis of ideology in Iran started shortly after the victory of the 1979 revolution. Along with his

populist economic policies that promised to provide all the people's basic needs, including water, electricity and transportation, Khomeini, the founder of the Islamic Republic, promised to implement Islamic law when he took power.<sup>3</sup> But after he saw the incompatibility of Islamic law, as it is in tradition, with the reality he faced, Khomeini used his theory of the Guardianship of the Shiite Jurist (*Velayat-e Faqih*) in order to free the hands of the ruling jurist from the bounds of Islamic law. Accordingly, a ruling jurist has the authority to overrule Islamic law if it is necessary for the safeguard of the regime. In a message to the members of the Expediency Council five months before his death, Khomeini wrote, "In this chaotic world, one of the crucial problems is the role of time and location [historical circumstances] in *ijtihad* and decisionmaking. The government determines how practically we can tackle polytheism, paganism, and internal and external dilemmas. The scholastic debates within the framework of theories are not only irresolvable but lead us to predicaments that would result [in] the violation of the constitution."<sup>4</sup> In a letter to then president Khomeini, Khomeini stated, "the government has the right to unilaterally terminate its religious contracts with the people, if those contracts are against the interests of the country and Islam. The government has the right to prevent anything, whether related to religious rituals or not, as long as it is against the interests of Islam. The hajj [pilgrimage], which is one of the important religious tasks, can be prevented temporally by the

1. Bernard Lewis, "The Third Islamic Wave," *World Jewish Digest*, May 2007.

2. Max Weber, *The Sociology of Religion* (Boston: Beacon Press Books, 1993), p. 12.

3. Many people in the West think Khomeini succeeded in mobilizing the Iranian people for his political purposes only based on his religious charisma and the ideological character of his message. Whereas in his speeches before and right after the revolution, Khomeini promised to provide people with perfect happiness in this world and salvation in the next. In February 1979, in his Behesht-e Zahra cemetery's speech, the same day he returned to Iran, Khomeini said, "In addition to providing you a rich satisfying life, we aim to improve the quality of your spiritual life as well. You need spirituality, which they [shah's regime] have taken away. Don't think it will be enough if we build a home for you. We will provide you water and electricity and bus rides free of charge. Don't be satisfied just by those. We will exalt your souls. We will give you the status of a true human being. They [shah's regime] degenerated you ... we will cultivate your world; this world and the other world." In general, one can say that without economic promises, Islamic ideology would not be as attractive to Muslims. In the case of Iran, one of the major elements of Khomeini's campaign against the shah's regime was that the shah allowed foreigners to "loot" the country's economic wealth. Accordingly, Islamic ideology comes to protect people's wealth. See: Asaf Bayat, *Street Politics, Poor People's Movements in Iran* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1997).

4. Ruhollah Khomeini, *Sabih-ye Noor* (Tehran: Vezarat-e Ershad-e Eslami, 1378), 11:619.

government if it regards it against the expediency of the Islamic Republic.”<sup>5</sup> He emphasized that if a ruling jurist had to make decisions based only on Islamic law, the religious government and his absolute authority would be meaningless. Therefore, the ruling jurist is not necessarily the jurist who understands Islamic law better than others, but he is the jurist who has the ability and authority to understand the interests of Islam and the Islamic Republic beyond the sacred text of Islamic law. The religious texts in themselves without interpretation are “silent Islam,” but the ruling jurist who has the exclusive right to understand the texts and apply them is “speaking Islam.”<sup>6</sup> In other words, Islamic texts alone have no meaning without a jurist who has the official right to interpret and implement them.

### Expediency as a New Element

Khomeini was the first to bring up the concept of “expediency” in Shiite political thought.<sup>7</sup> In classical Shiite theology, undermining the requirements of the religious texts for the public interest even temporarily was illegal. But according to Khomeini’s political theory, what a ruling jurist sees for the expediency of the regime is above all God’s commandments and orders. In a revision of the Islamic Republic’s constitution, the Supreme Leader forms the Expediency Council, whose main duty is to veto decisions made by the Guardian Council, which is responsible for examining the parliament’s adopted bills with the constitution and Islamic law. In other words, the Expediency Council, under the Supreme Leader, has the authority to overrule Islamic law or the constitution if it considers them against the interests of the regime. Khomeini stated, “Safeguarding the regime is a religious duty above all duties.”

Thus, the theory of the guardianship of the Shiite jurist is not designed to implement Islamic law but rather to give legitimate authority to the jurist to ignore it. This was exactly the reason behind the opposition of many Shiite jurists to Khomeini’s theory. They believed that by this theory, Khomeini creates a religious justification for ignoring religious law.

Based on this theory, Khomeini legalized many practices that were religiously illegal before the revolution, from the participation of women in elections to the trade of caviar. According to Khomeini’s interpretation of Islam, in principle there is no principle in Islam. The Imam and his representatives are the criteria themselves.<sup>8</sup> Khomeini not only legalized many religiously illegal acts but also put religion in many issues that were not subject to religious legislation. For instance, respecting driving rules is not a religious matter, but Khomeini issued a fatwa stating that it was. Paying taxes to the government, which was religiously illegal before the revolution, became a religious duty after it.

Therefore, Iranian political leaders after the revolution, especially in the past two decades, have been more concerned about concrete and practical interests than abstract and absolute Islamic ideals. Even the political, economic, and military investments for supporting the “Palestinian cause” or “Islamic cause” should not be understood as a policy merely driven by abstract religious motives, but it has to be contextualized within the historical and political conditions that shape the behavior of Tehran. Essentially, Iranian leaders are pursuing their own interests before God’s interests.<sup>9</sup> Iran’s attitude in the Nagorno-Karabakh crisis, in which it supported Sunni insurgent groups in Iraq as well as cooperated with some Wahhabist fundamentalists

5. Ibid., p. 462.

6. “Speaking Islam” is a term used by Ali ben Abitalib, the first Shiite Imam, to describe himself. In the theory of Velayat-e Faqih, the ruling jurist is the representative of the Imam. Therefore he has the same religious status and authority as Imam “unless an argument proves that this or that specific authority exclusively belongs to Imam, because of his personal nobility.” Rudollah Khomeini, *Kitab Al-Bay* (Qom: Matbae-ye Mehr), 2:296.

7. For an account on the importance of “expediency” in Khomeini’s political-theological theory see: Said Hajjarian, *Az Shahed-e Qodsi taa Shahed-e Bazari* (Tehran, 2001 [AHS 1380]), pp. 69-122. For a brief account on the status of the concept of expediency of public interest in the Sunni jurisprudence see: Wael B. Hallaq, *A History of Islamic Legal Theories: An Introduction to Sunni usul al-fiqh* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), p. 112; and also: Joseph Schacht, *An Introduction to Islamic Law* (Oxford: Clarendon Paperbacks, 1982), p. 37.

8. In fact in Shiite tradition, the Imam has described himself as the criteria for Sharia and the criteria of truth. See Koleini, *Usul al\_Kafi*, *Kitab al-Hojjah*.

9. Based on the official censorship policy of the Islamic Republic, all atheist, materialist, or even anti-religious books of Western philosophers such as Karl Marx and Friedrich Nietzsche are allowed to be published. But books on the history of the clerics or the contemporary history of Iran have to meet the ideological rules of the government.

in the region, is conclusive evidence that the Iranian regime is trying to expand and safeguard its power by any means possible, and that religion is only a tool for justification and not a rule to be bound by.

Iranian leaders, whether in theory or practice, have shown that in a conflict between the interests of government and religion, they will stand for the first over the second. But the establishment's understanding of the Islamic texts has provided for them the ability to justify every decision with Islamic ideology. During the Iran-Iraq war, the Iranian regime used all available elements, icons, and concepts from Islam to justify the war and recruit people for the military. Furthermore, Iran's compliance with the UN ceasefire resolution, which was supported by Khomeini, proved that Islamic ideology could justify both war and peace. In fact, one of the most important consequences of that ceasefire was an overwhelming doubt of the honesty of the regime's leader. This suspicion about the leader's true belief in Islamic and revolutionary ideals led to a deep depression among the war generation because Khomeini promised victory and considered it as God's promise to the people. Khomeini even said that whatever happens, Iranians would stand until the end.

### Islamic Thought and Nuclear Weapons

Iranian leaders have made many contradictory decisions in the past three decades and have all been justified by religious creeds. The Iranian nuclear program is not an exception to this rule. The nuclear policy of the Supreme Leader is probably not influenced by his religious belief. Khomeini's attitude on Iran's nuclear program is almost certainly driven by his political agenda, not by his religious views. Much attention has been given to his claim that the program does not aim to produce a nuclear bomb because Islam forbids the production of weapons that could kill innocent civilians.

However, there is serious reason to doubt that claim.

According to a verse in the Quran, "make ready for them whatever force and strings of horses you can, to terrify the enemy of God and your enemy, and others besides them that you know not; God knows them."<sup>10</sup> Muslims have to be armed with advanced weapons and apparatus to fight the enemies of an Islamic country as well as to guarantee internal security.<sup>11</sup> Contemporary jurists take "strings of horses" as a symbol to include "all modern military tools and weapons."<sup>12</sup> Some Shiite jurists believe that anything that frightens the enemy is good.<sup>13</sup>

It is very difficult to find a law in Islam that forbids Muslims from using any kind of weapon against the "enemies of God." One can claim that in Islam, killing civilians, innocent women, and children is forbidden. But this does not forbid the production of weapons of mass destruction if the ruling jurist sees that their production and possession would frighten the country's enemies. Hossein Ali Montazeri, a prominent Shiite jurist who was to be Khomeini's successor, writes, "Military preparation is not just for waging war. The Muslims' military duty is not limited to when an enemy exists and he is actually attacking Islamic countries; but the goal of preparation is to frighten and seriously intimidate potential enemies . . . this is what is called 'armed peace.'" <sup>14</sup>

Secondly, in Islamic jurisprudence, the distinction between civilians and combatants is very obscure when it comes to infidels. Allameh Helli, a prominent Shiite jurist in the fifteenth century, said that this subject is a matter of consensus among Shiite jurists, and that if beating the enemy requires attacking and killing women, children, and elders, then they have to be attacked and killed.<sup>15</sup> In an article entitled "Islamic juridical foundations of *Isteshbadi* [suicide] operation," published in *Hokoomat-e Eslami* quarterly, which is the Assembly of

10. *Quran*, 8:60 from A.J. Arberry, *The Koran Interpreted* (New York: Touchstone Book, 1955), p.204.

11. Montazeri's fatwa is available online at <http://amontazeri.com/Farsi/mabani/html/2072>.

12. <http://amontazeri.com/Farsi/mabani/html/2060>.

13. Abu al-Qassem ibn Muhammad Hassan Mirz Qomi, *Jame al-Shetat*, 1:393.

14. <http://amontazeri.com/Farsi/mabani/2055.htm>.

15. See Muhammad Hassan Najafi, *Javaher al-Kalam fi Sharh-e Sharae al-Eslam* (Beirut: Dar Ihya al-Torath al-Arabi, 1992), 21:71; Sad al-din Abul Qassem Ibn Barraj, *Al-Mohazzab* (Qom, 1406), 1:302; Fakhr al-Din Abu Abdullah Ibn Edris, *Al-Saraer Al-Havi li Tahrir al-Fatawi* (Tehran, 1901 [AHS 1280]), 3:7.

Experts' official magazine, Sayed Javad Varai, the editor of the magazine, demonstrates that according to Shiite juridical principles, suicide operations are not prohibited but are in fact virtuous. In response to a question about killing innocent people in the course of suicide bombing, he argues that "first, sometimes all members of the enemy, including women and men, young and old, are involved in the invasion ... hence the only way to deprive them of security is Isteshhadi operations. Second, it is possible that the enemy's women have been trained to fight along with their men, hence they are the enemy's soldiers and killing them is considered as killing enemy forces not innocent citizens. ... Third, when Islam's fighters conduct such operations, the killing of others [innocent citizens] seems to be inevitable. ... Fourth, even if [Islam's fighters] kill innocent citizens, it would be a legitimate legal retaliation. Is it illegal to reciprocate the actions of an enemy who kills youth and teenagers, women and men, elders and sick people and considers killing of children and women as a part of his creeds?"<sup>16</sup>

For many clerics in Qom and Najaf, infidel blood does not have the same respect as Muslim blood. Ayatollah Ahmad Jannati, who heads the powerful Guardian Council and is a close advisor to Khamenei, stated on November 20, 2005, "human beings, apart from Muslims, are animals who roam the earth and engage in corruption."<sup>17</sup>

In short, there does not seem to be much of a barrier in the religious views of Iran's leaders to the sort of mass casualties that a nuclear weapon would create.

Another way to approach Shiite theological views on nuclear war is to look at the concept of jihad, which is one of the controversial issues of Shiite jurisprudence in the time of occultation. The original idea was that ordering offensive jihad is an exclusive right of the infallible Imam, and in his absence, Shiites can only be

involved in defensive jihad. Since the time of the Safavids and after emergence of the theory that gives a partial amount of the Imam's authority to a Shiite jurist, some jurists started to discuss the legitimacy of offensive jihad. Khomeini's early view was that the order for offensive jihad was the exclusive right of the infallible Imam.<sup>18</sup> But he changed his view later and came to believe that "the Shiite jurist has all the authorities of the Imam except if there is religious proof that a specific right or authority of an Imam has to do with his personal identity and not his position as the head of the government."<sup>19</sup>

In a reply to a follower, Khamenei stated that offensive jihad can be ordered by a qualified jurist if it is in the interest of the Islamic Republic.<sup>20</sup> In the transcript of Khamenei's unpublished courses, he advocated the theory that gives legitimacy to the ruling jurist's order for offensive jihad. Ayatollah Hossein Ali Montazeri, the Supreme Leader's mentor in religious law, also believes in the same theory. In his view, all offensive jihads are in fact defensive. In his *Islamic Law Codes (Resaleh-ye Tozih al-masael)*, he writes, "the offensive jihad is a war that an Imam wages in order to invite infidels and non-monotheists to Islam or to prevent the violation of treaty of Ahl-e Zemmah. In fact, the goal of offensive jihad is not the conquest of other countries, but the defense of the inherent rights of nations that are deprived of power by the infidels, non-monotheists, and rebels from the worship of God, monotheism, and justice." He states that offensive jihad becomes an obligation for all Muslims when an infallible Imam or a ruling jurist orders it.<sup>21</sup> After quoting the Quranic verse, "Fight them [the unbelievers], till there is no persecution and [all] religion is [that of] God's entirely," Montazeri said, "this verse includes defensive as well as offensive jihad."<sup>22</sup> Jihad, like prayer, is for all times and is not limited

16. Sayed Javad Varai, "Mabani-e Fiqhi-e Amalyat-e Shahdat Talabaneh" in *Hokoomat-e Eslami*, no. 27, Spring, 2003 (AHS 1382).

17. Jannati's statements are available online at <http://www.entekhab.ir/display/?ID=9151&page=1>.

18. Ruhollah Khomeini, *Tabrir al-Vasileh*, vol. 2 (Qom: Daftar Tablighat-e Eslami, 1981 [AHS 1360]).

19. Ruhollah Khomeini, *Sabifeh-ye noor*, vol. 20, p. 27. See also Ruhollah Khomeini, *Sho'oun va Ekhtiarat-e Vali-e Faqih* (Tehran: Vezarat-e farhang va Ershad-e Eslami, 1995 [AHS 1374]).

20. This fatwa is available online at <http://www.Khamenei.ir/FA/Treatise/unitDetail.jsp?uid=6>.

21. His fatwas on jihad are available online at <http://amontazeri.com/Farsi/mabani/html/0201>.

22. *Quran*, 8:39; *The Koran Interpreted*, trans. A. J. Arberry (New York: Touchstone Books, 1955), p. 201.

to an early period of Islam, such as Muhammad, Ali, or the other Imams. Jihad is intended to defend truth and justice, help oppressed people, and correct Islam. In the Mahdi's occultation period, jihad is not to be abandoned; even if occultation lasts for a hundred thousand years, Muslims have to defend and fight for the expansion of Islam. Certainly, if in early Islam

the goodness was in the sword, in our time the goodness is in artillery, tanks, automatic guns and missiles ... in principle, jihad in Islam is for defense; whether defense of truth or justice, or the struggle with infidels in order to make them return to monotheism and the divine nature. This is the defense of truth, because the denial of God is the denial of truth.”<sup>23</sup>

23. Montazeri's statements are available online at <http://amontazeri.com/Farsi/mabani/html/02013>.

# Conclusion

IRAN'S SUPREME LEADER, Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, comes from the Mashhad seminary, which regards the rational approach to the interpretation of Islamic texts as a deviation from "true Islam." In Mashhad, using arcane sciences to help make crucial decisions is a common practice and is considered to be a sign of proximity to God's realm. Despite his primitive approach to religion, the Supreme Leader is not an apocalypticist who assumes the Hidden Imam's reappearance is imminent. Instead, his views on the Shiite Messiah seem to follow the traditional view that no one can predict the exact time of his return and no one can hasten his reappearance by a particular action.

Unlike the Supreme Leader, Iranian president Mahmoud Ahmadinezhad advocates a new version of apocalypticism, which states that human action is necessary to prepare for the Hidden Imam's return, if not to accelerate it. Ahmadinezhad's closest associates have described him as a religious missionary or "present time Moses" who fights the "pharaohs of the time" and paves the way for the reappearance of the Hidden Imam. The president hints that he believes in the imminent reappearance of the Shiite Savior and the special duties that Ahmadinezhad might do to prepare for the Imam's return. However, it is not clear if Ahmadinezhad has a clear concept of the appropriate human actions in question. When his advisors address the matter, they speak in broad generalities about fighting oppression, moral corruption, and the injustices caused by the United States.

The main difference between the president and the Supreme Leader is not their loyalty to different versions of apocalypticism; in fact, it is their political experience. While the Supreme Leader can be regarded as one of the most experienced politicians in the history of the Islamic Republic, Ahmadinezhad has no great political experience on his record. As many Iranian analysts point out, he does not believe in the scientific aspect of economic or political planning because he believes that the humanities are Western products and that Islamic sciences are autonomous and fundamentally different from Western ones.

While the survival of the regime is the most important priority of the Supreme Leader, the president's priority is to pave the way for the reappearance of the Hidden Imam. For the president, the Hidden Imam sanctions his aggressive and defying policy toward the West. More worryingly, certain Shiite traditions state that the Imam's return will come at a time of world chaos, and Ahmadinezhad seems at times to promote chaos for that end. Meanwhile, for the Supreme Leader, there is no theological or ideological restraint for producing weapons of mass destruction or waging offensive wars. While Iranian diplomats repeat that according to Islamic law it is prohibited to kill innocent civilians or produce nuclear weapons, the theological views of the Supreme Leader are not consistent with this claim.

Despite the fact that the Islamic Republic pretends to act on the basis of Shiite principles, the political system is secular rather than religious. The Supreme Leader, according to the theory of the Guardianship of the Jurist, has the right to overrule Islamic law in favor of the state's interests. To ensure that the state reigns supreme over Islamic Law, Ayatollah Khomeini formed the Expediency Council, which has the power to do what is necessary for the state's interests.

While in the past, Shiite apocalyptic literature was in the hands of hadith specialists, the new apocalyptic version has been developed by low-ranking clerics and non-specialists. Hence, this version does not give much credence to the predominant theological paradigm and its theologians and high-ranking clerics. The new apocalyptic version has an eclectic approach to the traditional apocalyptic texts. By using the existing socio-religious imagery of the Shiite community, it tries to interpret present-day events as heralds to an apocalyptic future—i.e., signs that the Hidden Imam is coming soon. The writings and speeches of the new apocalypticists are more political statements and slogans rather than theological content, and it is very difficult to discern their principles because of the secrecy they employ.

Contemporary Islamic fundamentalism in Iran—and even generally in the Islamic world—finds its representatives not in the traditional seminaries but among modern educated engineers and doctors. One of the remarkable consequences of this fact for Western policy makers is that while Shiite traditionalist

theologians are thinking and acting within a specific theological framework which makes their behavior highly predictable, the new fundamentalists do not follow any established theological system and model. Therefore, understanding their rationale as well as predicting their political actions becomes very difficult.

# Appendix A: Apocalypse, the Mahdi, and the Hidden Imam in Shiism

APOCALYPSE IS A theological term that refers to the end of days. Its use in this sense derives from the title of the last book of the New Testament, which tells of the final battle between good and evil, of the coming judgment, of the thousand-year reign of Christ, and of the end of this world and its replacement with a new heaven and earth.<sup>1</sup> Writing about the apocalypse became a popular genre in early and medieval Christianity, and it is also recognized retroactively in Jewish writings of the Hellenistic period.<sup>2</sup>

Messianism in Islam is associated with the Mahdi, a title for the savior of Muslims who will appear at the end of days and establish a just world government. In Shiite apocalyptic tradition, there are some similarities between the Mahdi and Jesus as presented in Islamic tradition, which portrays Jesus quite differently than does the Christian tradition, including the story that the Mahdi started to speak right after his birth.<sup>3</sup> Also in some hadiths, the name of the Mahdi's mother is Maryam (Mary).<sup>4</sup> The spiritual position of the Mahdi is higher than that of Jesus in Shiism, but Jesus will appear when the Mahdi rises.<sup>5</sup> According to the tradition, Jesus will: perform jihad under the Mahdi's commandership and kill Dajjal—the Muslim concept close to that of the Christian Devil;<sup>6</sup> invite people to Islam, killing Christians and destroying churches;<sup>7</sup> and also die before the Mahdi.<sup>8</sup>

There are also some similarities between the Mahdi and Moses as presented in the Muslim tradition, which

depicts him rather differently than in the Jewish tradition. Like Moses's mother, the Mahdi's mother was afraid the ruler of the time would kill her sons. So with God's instruction, Moses's mother put him in the Nile, while the Mahdi's mother put him in a well in Samarra, Iraq. In both cases, their pregnancy was hidden from the eyes of people.<sup>9</sup> Physically, the Mahdi is like an Israelite (Bani Israel), tall and with a strong body.<sup>10</sup>

## Who Is the Mahdi?

For Twelver Shiites, the Mahdi is believed to be the twelfth Imam. They believe he was born in 868 AD, went into minor occultation or hidden life for nearly seventy years, and since then has been in major occultation, which will last until God decides to make him appear, rise, and establish a just world government at the end of days.

In Twelver Shiism, Muhammad is not only a prophet but also the proof of God on earth. Shiites believe that the earth cannot be without proof of God—otherwise it would be destroyed. Hence, after the death of the prophet, imams would be the proof of God. After Ali Ibn Abi-Talib, all the imams up to Ali Ibn Muhammad Askari were Ali's descendants, and apparently lived as ordinary people. According to Twelver Shiism, the bani-Umayyah and Bani Abbas who ruled the Islamic world during the time of the eleventh imam (Ali Ibn Muhammed Askari) decided to interrupt the chain of imams by not allowing Askari to have a son. But

1. For a comparative study on the Christian and Islamic apocalypse and eschatology see: Samuel Shahid, *The Last Trumpet* (Longwood, FL: Xulon Press, 2005).
2. John J. Collins, *The Encyclopedia of Apocalypticism*, vol. 1 (New York and London: Continuum, 2000), p. 13. See also Jane Dammen McAuliffe, *Encyclopedia of the Qura*, (Leiden: Brill, 2001), 1:111-113.
3. For the image of Jesus in the Quran see Jane Damman McAuliffe, *Encyclopedia of the Quran*, (Leiden: Brill, 2003), 3:7-21; and Hamid Algar, "Jesus in Quran: His Reality Expounded in Quran," *Islamic Publications International*, 1999. For a critical review on the difference between Quran's perception of Christianity and the historical Christianity see William Montgomery Watt, *Muslim-Christian Encounters; Perceptions and Misperceptions* (London: Routledge, 1991).
4. Muhammad Baqer Majlesi, *Behar al-Anwar fi Dorar-e Akbar-e Aimat-e al-Athar* (Tehran: Manshourat-e Ketabchi, 2004 [AHS 1383]), 51:27.
5. *Ibid.*, p. 89.
6. *Ibid.*, p. 69.
7. *Ibid.*, pp. 94, 105.
8. *Ibid.*, p. 93.
9. *Ibid.*, p. 13.
10. *Ibid.*, p. 85.

in Shiite belief, “God wanted to keep his light on,” so the Mahdi was born from a slave woman in secret, and only a few people were permitted to see him. When the Mahdi was four or five years old, his mother put him in a well in Samarra and he became invisible. He supposedly lives in this world and watches all people, especially the Shiites. But nobody will see him until God decides to end history and make him appear. The Mahdi will complete the prophet Muhammad’s mission of spreading Islam throughout the world. He will invite all people to Islam; if they do not accept his offer, he will kill them and clean the earth for the believers.

Imamate theory is an extraordinarily important part of the Shiite theology. For Shiites, an Imam is not only a political leader—he occupies an ontological place in the existence of the world.<sup>11</sup> Shiite theology can be reduced to Imamology, just like the theological trends in Christianity that give a distinguished place to Christology.<sup>12</sup> Denial of an Imam is equal to denying the prophecy of Muhammad. Therefore, Shiite jurists have theological problems when considering Sunnis as Muslims.<sup>13</sup> An Imam is the first existence God had ever created; other existences had to be created through him. Hence, the major prophets, such as Abraham, Moses, Jesus, and Muhammad, were initially Imams and then turned prophets. The chain of Imams has to continue to the end of world; that is why a living Imam—whether apparent or hidden—is necessary for the continuity of the world’s existence. In Shiite theology, an Imam has a position equal to the Quran. Both are God’s word, but the Quran is silent while an Imam is not. Understanding Islamic law is not possible by relying only on the Quran. An Imam’s sayings, actions, and affirmations have the same value as the Quran and Muhammad’s sayings, not only in terms of theology but also in the

understanding about legal notions. This is a huge difference between Shiites and Sunnis.

While the historical existence of Muhammad and the first eleven Imams was never a matter of doubt, there is almost nothing about the life or existence of the son of Askari—the twelfth Imam—that has not been a subject of critical controversy. In his book, *Crisis and Consolidation in the Formative Period of Shiite Islam*, Hossein Modarressi Tabatabai, a prominent Shiite scholar, masterfully examined the historical context of the Twelver Shiites’ belief that Askari had a son—the Mahdi.<sup>14</sup> In Shiite tradition, there are many ambiguities and inconsistencies about his birth, name, the identity and name of his mother, the year he entered the well, and his disappearance, among others. The same is true for apocalyptic literature in general. In the aftermath of Askari’s death, many Shiites converted to Sunnism or other Shiite sects that believed in the continuity of the Imam through the children of the fourth, fifth, sixth, and seventh Imams.

### Difference between the Shiite and Sunni Mahdi

The main difference between the Shiite and Sunni view on the Mahdi is that while Twelver Shiites believe that the Mahdi was born approximately twelve centuries ago and still lives on earth, most Sunnis hold that he will be born at a later date. Both Shiites and Sunnis see the Mahdi as fighting Islam’s enemies, but those enemies are defined very differently. In Sunni tradition, the conflict reflects the conflict that mainstream Muslims have with Christians and Jews. Sunnis define the “other” as unbelievers. For Shiites, a fundamental motivation for the Mahdi to rise is to seek vengeance on the bani-Umayyah for killing the third Imam. Their danger to Islam is considered to

11. For Quranic use of the term, see: Jane Damman McAuliffe, *Encyclopedia of the Quran* (Leiden: Brill, 2001), 2:502-504.

12. Henri Corbin, *En Islam Iranien: Aspects Spirituels et Philosophiques* (Paris: Gallimard, 1971).

13. According to a hadith that is transmitted through a different chain of narrators (Rawi) and is well accepted by Shiites, if somebody dies without knowing or recognizing the Imam of his time, that person dies as he would have in the pre-Islam period (Jaheliya). According to many hadiths, deniers of the Imam go to hell and their prayers are not accepted by God. See Muhammad Baqer Majlisi, *Behar al-Anwar* (Tehran: Almaktabah al-Islamiyah, 1993 [AHS 1372]), p. 61.

14. Hossein Modarressi Tabatabai, *Crisis and Consolidation in the Formative Period of Shiite Islam: Abu Jafar ibn Qiba al-Razi and His Contribution to Imamite Shiite Thought* (Princeton: The Darwin Press Inc., 1993). In this regard, see also Ahmad al-Katib, *Tattavor al-Fikr al-Siasi al-Shii, min al-Shoura ila welayat al-Faqih* (Beirut: Dar al-Arabiyyah lil Uloum, 2005). Al-Katib, a prominent Shiite scholar, explains in this book that the Shiite Mahdi is a theological postulate rather than a historical truth. He argues that the theory of “authority of jurist” in Shiism has reinforced the need for the notion of the Mahdi.

be more acute than Christians and Jews, and therefore Shiite apocalyptic tradition lays little stress upon killing them or fighting over holy lands. Early Shiite apocalyptic tradition was based on an ethnic perception. In this tradition, Persians and Turks are “enemies” and the Mahdi will kill them if they do not convert to Islam. As one can see, this tradition reflects the historical context in which it has been produced. In their apocalyptic writings, Iranians obviously try to down play this feature.

The Shiite notion of the Imamate is substantially different than the Sunni notion of the Caliphate. The Caliphate is a secular and worldly political institution that is based on the separation of religious institutions from secular institutions, while the Imamate relies on the Shiite belief that secular power is not separated from religion. The reunion of religious and political power is basically rooted in the pre-Islamic political thought of ancient Iran. In this way, Shiism can be regarded as mostly a Persian product, while Sunnism contains more pure Islamic and Arab roots.<sup>15</sup>

15. On the pre-Islamic Iranian roots of the Imamate see: E. Burke Inlow, *Shahanshab, The Monarchy of Iran* (New Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 1979).

## Appendix B: The Twentieth-Century Clerical Establishment

THE MAIN SHIITE INSTITUTION in Iran, the Qom seminary, and all its modern political discourses are products of the Pahlavi period. Reza Shah Pahlavi established his dynasty in 1925 by deposing Ahmad Shah, the last ruler of the Qajar dynasty. It is ironic that Reza, who began his modernization agenda by enforcing secularism, unknowingly modernized the seminary and paved the way for the politicization of Shiite institutions and discourses. Modern messianism in contemporary Iran could not have taken place without Reza Shah's modernization and secularization policies. The Iranian revolution and the empowerment of clerics advanced in a sophisticated process that was a result of clerical access to modern technology and economic mechanisms. Two opposite versions of Shiism, militant and messianic, find their roots in the political, economic, and social environment and developments of the Pahlavi period.<sup>1</sup> Since then, messianism and other religious concepts have transformed into modern ideologies that are heavily influenced by the religious and secular ideologies of the time.

In twentieth-century Iran, Messianism emerged as a reaction to the political, social, and cultural developments of the time. After the conflicts and controversies followed by the Constitution movement and the role clerics played in the political developments, Reza, the powerful military man of the late Qajar period,

started to plan for broad reforms in Iran at the same time as Ataturk's modernization process in Turkey. One of the fundamental goals of Reza was to consolidate the power of central government and to end communalism. For this goal, he needed to redefine the geopolitical borders of Iran and reduce the influence of foreigners. Since most high-ranking clerics in Najaf were originally Iranians and considered themselves as Shiite leaders who have right to intervene in the affairs of Iran—the only Shiite country in the world—they directly influenced political events in the Qajar period.<sup>2</sup> In order to minimize the influence of foreigners, Reza became interested in transferring the center of religious authority from Najaf to Iran. Many clerics in Iran also wanted an Iranian center of Shiite learning on par with or superior to Najaf in order to compete with the religious authorities there.

Reza's reform agenda required secularizing the political structure, the administration, and the bureaucracy. He wanted to announce the end of the monarchy and become the first president of the republic, but he failed. Therefore, he became the first secular king of Iran—something paradoxical in itself. The clerical establishment and the monarchy have been the two oldest political institutions in Iranian society since ancient times. The kings and clerics were connected to the same source of divine legitimacy. Reza

1. Since the European Renaissance, one can divide Shiism into four significant periods: Safavid, Qajari, Pahlavi, and the Islamic Republic. In the Pahlavi period, clerics found an effective mechanism for reconciliation with modernity by using modern technology in the service of their ideology. It was in this period that clerics made their decisive and fundamental decision about modernity as a whole. This decision enabled them to launch a revolution against the monarchy and take over political power. Economic and developmental notions, and the function of capital and labor, helped the clerics to organize their financial system. The changes in income the oil industry brought to the country in this period enriched the clerical establishment and enabled them to mobilize the masses in different religious associations and gain political and social leadership. For Qajar period see: Abbas Amanat, *Pivot of the Universe: Nasir al-Din Shah Qajar and the Iranian Monarchy, 1831-1896* (London: University of California Press, 1997). On the relationship between the clerics and the Qajar dynasty see: Hamid Algar, *Religion and State in Iran, 1785-1905: The Role of the Ulama in the Qajar Period* (London: University of California Press, 1969). For the Pahlavi period see: Donald Wilber, *Reza Shah Pahlavi: The Resurrection and Reconstruction of Iran* (Exposition Press of Florida, 1975); S. Corbin, *The Making of Modern Iran: State and Society under Riza Shah, 1921-1941* (London: Routledge 2003); George Lenczowski, *Iran Under the Pahlavis* (Stanford: Hoover Institute Press, 1978); Amin Banani, *The Modernization of Iran* (Stanford University Press, 1961); Cyrus Ghani, *Iran and the Rise of Reza Shah, From Qajar Collapse to Pahlavi Power* (London: I.T. Tauris, 2000). On clerics and government in the Pahlavi period see: Shahrough Akhavi, *Religion and Politics in Contemporary Iran: Clergy-State Relations in the Pahlavi Period* (New York: State University of New York Press, 1980); Nikki Keddie, "Religion, Society and Revolution in Modern Iran" in *Modern Iran: The Dialectic of Continuity and Change* (New York: State University of New York Press, 1981). For a historical account of the role of clerics, especially in the Constitution Movement, see: Abdul-Hadi Haiiri, *Shi'ism and Constitutionalism in Iran* (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1977).
2. For a historical account of the elaboration of this theory see: Rula Jurdi Abissab, *Converting Persia, Religion and Power in the Safavid Empire* (London: I.T. Tauris, 2004); and also *Authority and Political Culture in Shi'ism*, ed. Said Amir Arjomand (New York: State University of New York Press, 1988).

intended to reduce the social and political power of the clerics in order to have an apolitical clerical establishment in Iran.

Abdul Karim Haeri, the founder of the Qom seminary, understood the political requirements of his time and established the Qom seminary at the price of depoliticizing it. Haeri, in the words of another contemporary cleric, “does not introduce himself into political concerns and governmental matters since he believes that in these times avoidance of such things is far preferable for someone like himself.”<sup>3</sup>

Clerics who gained political and social authority since the Safavid period, the first powerful Shiite government in Iran, started to lose their political power base in the Pahlavi period. Since Reza cut the clerics out of the country’s education and judicial systems, the theory of the representation of the Imam encountered a serious crisis. Since the Safavid period, Shiite clerics had elaborated the theory that gave a Shiite jurist almost the same authority as an Imam, and made him the one who offers religious legitimacy to the Sultan’s power.<sup>4</sup> But the secular platform of Reza’s political reform reduced the role of clerics in the public sphere. The apolitical clerical establishment had varying results for Reza’s government: on the one hand, it has reduced the risk of interference of clerics in politics, but on the other hand, it put the legitimacy of his kingdom in crisis.

Not opposing the government at that time has been interpreted as the “political aloofness” of the clerics and their quietism. This view undermines the different political roles that clerics played in history. While Reza’s secular agenda attacked clerical authority, he felt that he needed the support of the clerics for legitimacy soon after he became shah. The clerics were incapable of opposing him because they did

not have sufficient social power or financial resources. They experienced a very difficult dilemma, being unable to oppose his anti-clerical policies or to support any anti-shah trend. However, given the fact that Marxists were against the shah, the shah and the clerics had many common interests.

Emphasizing the Shiite nature of the Iranian government could have helped Reza to create a powerful central government and a clerical establishment with little social power. The Pahlavi dynasty started to pretend to be a Shiite government because it was not powerful enough alone and needed to attract clerical support. The clerics supported that inclination because that was the only way for a new rapprochement between the government and the clerics.

The political attitudes of many Shiite clerics began to change in the decades before the 1979 revolution. During that time, Marxist ideology was increasingly influential among intellectuals and hence became a major political threat to the government as well as to Islam. In order to fight the influence of Marxism, many clerics started to read the works of Iranian Marxists such as Taqi Arani and Ehsan Tabari. As a result, Marxism influenced many clerics and Islamic writers. For instance, Morteza Motahhari, who was approved by Khomeini as a disciple whose works are “Islamic,” started to work on the “philosophy of history” from an Islamic point of view. Not only this particular subject, but also Motahhari’s entire Marxist approach, was completely unprecedented in Shiite theology.<sup>5</sup> The main references in his books are to Marx or Marxist books and pamphlets. Marxism not only shaped the clerics’ “philosophy of history but also their worldview as well as their opinion on economy.”<sup>6</sup> In order to defeat Marxism as the rival ideology to Islam, most clerics and Muslim writers tried to prove that Islam already had

3. Roy Mottahedeh, *The Mantle of the Prophet: Religion and Politics in Iran* (Oxford: Oneworld, 1985), p. 229.

4. For a historical account of the elaboration of this theory see: Abissab, *Converting Persia, Religion and Power in the Safavid Empire*; and also *Authority and Political Culture in Shi'ism*, Arjomand.

5. Motahhari’s main ideas about the philosophy of history have been elaborated in two books: *Society and History* and his colossal work *Philosophy of History*: Morteza Motahhari, *Jameeh va Tarikh: Majmooeh-ye Athar* (Qom: Entesharat-e Sadra, 2004 [AHS 1383]), 2:325-498; and Morteza Motahhari, *Falsafeh-ye Tarikh: Majmooeh-ye Athar*, vol. 15 (Qom: Entesharat-e Sadra, 2004 [AHS 1383]). For his criticism on Marxism see: Morteza Motahhari, *Naqdi bar Marxism: Majmooeh-ye Athar* (Qom: Entesharat-e Sadra, 2004 [AHS 1383]), 13:495-913.

6. Motahhari’s notes on “Islamic economy” were published in Iran after the revolution, but after some traditional clerics, such as Muhammad Reza Mahdavi Kani, labeled them Marxist, they were banned.

better views on economics and society than Marxism, arguing that Marxism was based on materialism and atheism while Islam provided prosperity for the human being in both worlds.

Khomeini took elements from Marxism and put a Shiite spin on them, as many other Muslim writers and clerics did at that time. For instance, Khomeini transformed the Marxist class struggle into a battle between “abased” or “oppressed” (*mostaz’afin*) people

and “wax proud” powers (*mostakberin*); in another words, between colonizers and colonized people, good and evil, and divine and profane. In Khomeini’s view, only the revolutionary version of Islam is “progressive” and “authentic” because only this version can provide oppressed people with the necessary means to fight the super powers. This view implies that people should take action to improve their situation, rather than wait patiently for the Hidden Imam.

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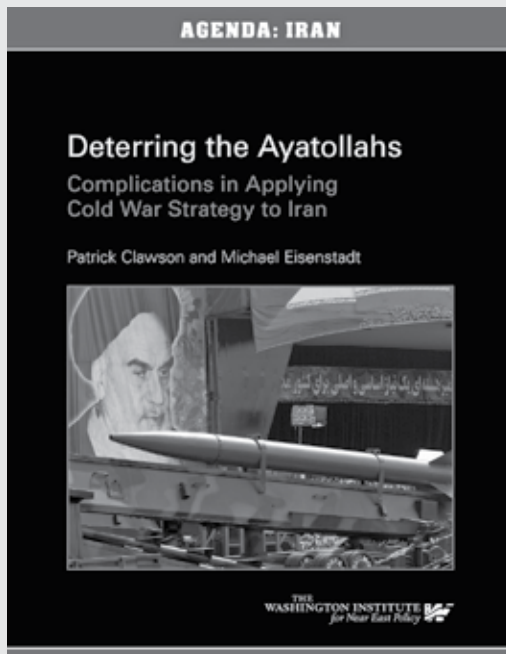
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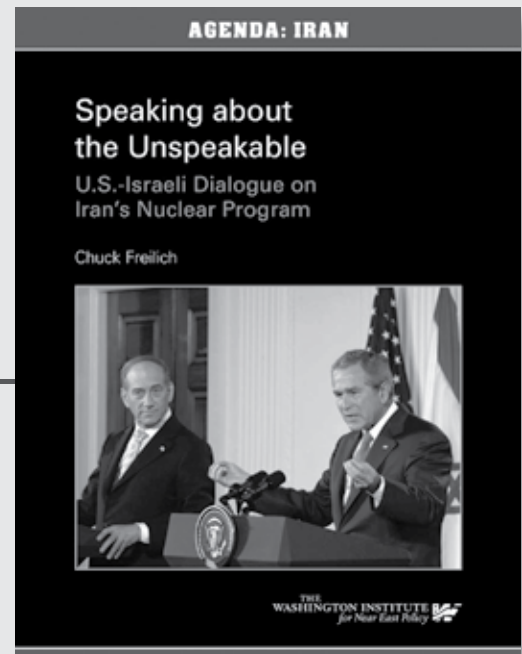
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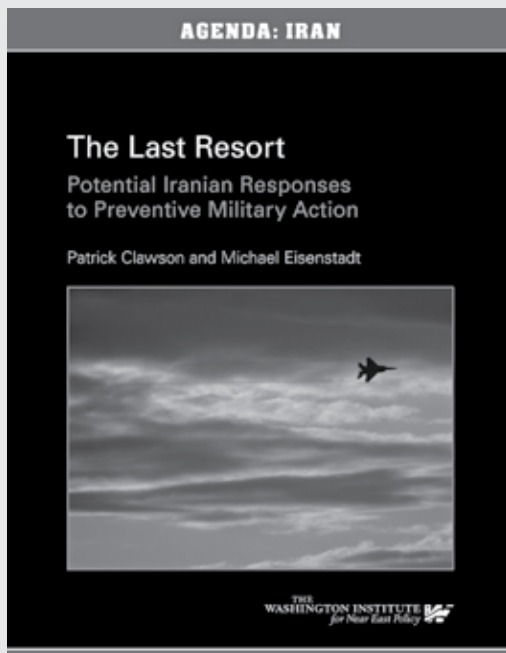
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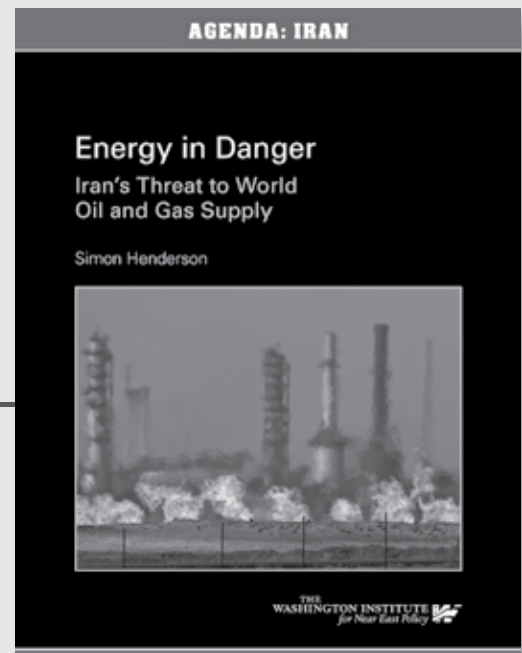
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