

المركز العربي للأبحاث ودراسة السياسات  
ARAB CENTER FOR RESEARCH & POLICY STUDIES  
(Doha Institute)



[www.dohainstitute.org](http://www.dohainstitute.org)

**Research Papers**

*Mahdism in contemporary Iran:  
Ahmadinejad and the occult Imam*

*Rashid Yaluh*

*Doha, JUN - 2011*

***Series (Research Papers)***

# *Contents*

---

<i>MAHDISM IN CONTEMPORARY IRAN: .....</i>	
<i>AHMADINEJAD AND THE OCCULT IMAM.....</i>	
<b>EXECUTIVE SUMMARY .....</b>	<b>1</b>
<b>INTRODUCTION .....</b>	<b>1</b>
<b>MAHDISM AND ITS INFLUENCE ON IRANIAN POLITICAL THOUGHT .....</b>	<b>2</b>
<b>MAHDISM AND THE ISLAMIC REPUBLIC OF IRAN .....</b>	<b>5</b>
<b>MAHDISM IN THE DISCOURSE OF PRESIDENT AHMADINEJAD .....</b>	<b>9</b>
<b>IRANIAN MAHDISM AND THE ARAB REVOLUTIONS.....</b>	<b>13</b>
<b>MAHDISM AT THE HEART OF THE KHAMENEI-AHMADINEJAD TENSION .....</b>	<b>17</b>
<b>CONCLUSIONS .....</b>	<b>20</b>

## Executive Summary

Scholars speak of a fine intertwining between doctrinal and political factors in the performance of the Islamic Republic of Iran. Given the recent upsurge of Mahdism in Iran, this paper proposes to view the process from these two angles.

The paper seeks to trace the evolution of Iranian political thought in terms of its relationship to the Imam Mahdi doctrine, as well as the role of this doctrine in the emergence of the Islamic Republic. Thereafter, the paper will follow the Mahdist elements in the discourse of Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, and the links between these Mahdist statements and the movement that has been ongoing in Iran since the flaring of the recent Arab revolutions.

This paper argues that the buoyant and increasing Mahdist movement in the Iranian arena these days is but an extension of a doctrinal debate that has accompanied Twelver Shia political thought since its birth. The paper also assumes the existence of varying viewpoints regarding Mahdism among the powerful actors in the Islamic Republic, and that Ahmadinejad's Mahdist rhetoric is a tool that he uses to push his agenda forward, both at home and abroad.

## Introduction

Since the beginning of March 2011, Iran has been witnessing a debate over the matter of the return of Imam Mahdi<sup>1</sup>, and related theological and theoretical issues. The issue began with the distribution by the Mubashiran Zhuhur Institution of hundreds of thousands of CDs, titled "The Reappearance is Nigh", predicting that the world is on the brink of the advent of the twelfth Imam, al-Mahdi Bin al-Hassan al-Askari. The portent for this event, according to the producers of the CD, is what they regard as the emergence of the leaders who were prophesied to prepare for the Imam's reappearance, and whose names and descriptions were mentioned in sayings attributed to the Imams who hail from the House of the Prophet Mohammad. These include the current supreme guide of the Islamic Revolution in Iran, Sayyed Ali Khamenei, identified by the CD as the "Khurasani sayyed", i.e. the main leader in this scenario. President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad is cast as "Shuaib Bin Saleh", the Khurasani sayyed's military lieutenant, and Sayyed Hassan Nasrallah, secretary general of Lebanon's Hizbollah movement, plays the role of the "Yemeni sayyed". On the other hand, Jordan's King Abdullah II was purported to be the Sufyani, while Saudi Arabia's King Abdullah was "the last of the Kings of Hijaz", whose death will signal the beginning of the final portents for the end of the occultation of the awaited Imam Mahdi.

As for "al-Nafs al-Zakiyya" [or pure soul in Arabic], who is prophesied to be killed in Iraq before the advent of the Mahdi, according to Mahdist narratives, the interpreters of the Mubashiran Zhuhur

---

<sup>1</sup> Imam al-Mahdi Mohammad Bin al-Hasan al-Askari, the twelfth in the chain of the "infallible Imams" whom the Twelver Shia believe were anointed by God. He was reportedly born in hiding in 255 Hijri (868 AD), and disappeared into the dungeon of Samarra after the death of his father, Imam al-Askari, in 260 Hijri(874 A.D).

Institution identified him as senior Iraqi cleric and scholar Mohammad Baqir al-Hakeem, who was killed by a bomb in 2003.

This is not the first time that Islamic society in general, or the Twelver Shia doctrine in particular<sup>2</sup>, has witnessed such projections based on the narratives of the reappearance of Imam Mahdi. This instance was preceded by many similar readings, some of which left no trace, while others left significant political and/or social effects in Islamic history.

### **Mahdism and its influence on Iranian political thought**

The personality and life of the twelfth Shia Imam, al-Mahdi Bin al-Hassan al-Askari, is a cornerstone of the beliefs of the Twelver Shia sect, whether in terms of narratives of his birth and his two occultations (minor and major), or in awaiting his return. The presence of this vernacular had an effect on the personal behavior and social lives of Twelver Shia communities during its early days, and it has acquired paramount influence over political life during later stages of the formation of the features of the Shia system of beliefs.

Twelver Shia scholars and chroniclers labored to prove the birth of Imam Mahdi and his two occultations, attempting to defend these notions in the face of the confusion of their coreligionists and the opposition of other sects and movements. For that purpose, Twelvers summon a corpus of sayings and narratives to support their argument that al-Mahdi Bin al-Hassan al-Askari was the ninth Imam from the descendants of Imam Hussain, son of Imam Ali Bin Abi Taleb, and the twelfth overall in the chain of Shia Imams. According to the Twelver version, al-Mahdi was first occulted for 74 years, with four emissaries serving as his representatives: Uthman Bin Said al-Amri (d. 265 Hijri, 878 AD), then Mohammad Bin Uthman Bin Said al-Amri (d. 305 Hijri, 917 AD), followed by al-Hussain Bin Ruh al-Nubakhti (d. 326 Hijri, 937 AD), and, finally, Abu al-Hassan Ali Bin Mohammad al-Sammari (d. 329 Hijri, 940 AD).

Following the death of the last emissary in 329 Hijri (940 AD), and because Shias believe in both the Imam's infallibility as God's anointed and in his occultation, the scholars of the sect were temporarily made the deputies of the Imam, with the condition that they not enlist in any revolutionary or official political activism, except under the leadership of the Awaited Imam. This narrative and the doctrine built upon it have come under criticism, both from within the sect and from outside it, in the past and

---

<sup>2</sup> Twelver Shiism is the largest Shia sect. Adherents believe that the Imam al-Mahdi Bin al-Hassan al-Askari is their twelfth Imam and that he has been in occultation for the last 1,100 years, awaiting the permission of God to reveal himself. This sect is an offshoot of Imami Shiism, which appeared in the second Hijri century (the 8<sup>th</sup> century according to the Gregorian Calendar), and holds that the Imams of the House of the Prophet are infallible and appointed by God; and that religious texts decree that the leadership of the Caliphate should pass from Imam Ali to his sons, Hassan and Hussain, and through the descendents of the latter until the twelfth, and last, Imam.

continue to do so today. For instance, researcher Ali al-Katib, who specializes in Twelver Shia issues, writes:

“When the People of the House split in the second Hijri century between Abbasids, Talibis, Alawis, Kisanis, Hassanis, Hussainis, Ismailis, and Musawis, a group of Shia emerged who believed in the righteousness of a specific strand, the Alawi/Hussaini/Musawi trend, requiring Imamate and Caliphate until the day of judgment. But this theory reached an impasse in 260 Hijri (873 AD) when Imam al-Hassan al-Askari died without a successor to the Imamate ... The strand of Musawi Imamism might have ended then and there, had it not been for the initiative of some of its members to invent the tale of an occult, unknown son of Imam al-Askari, and the construction of the Twelver theory in the fourth Hijri century (10<sup>th</sup> century in the Gregorian calendar). This allowed this narrative to remain alive in the minds of a section of the Shia, which has been awaiting the reappearance of that Imam for over a thousand years. This group gained nothing from awaiting the occult Imam except for isolation, disintegration, retreat and absence from the theatre of life.”<sup>3</sup>

In the Buwehid age (932-1055 AD), Shia scholars began the foundational doctrinal work for the role of the scholar at the hands of the founding scholars such as: al-Kulaini, al-Shaikh al-Mufeed, al-Sayid al-Murtada, and al-Tusi.<sup>4</sup> The Shia maintained the notion of awaiting the occult Imam, the bringer of “the legitimate state”, but this did not prevent them from seeking a solution to the issue of designating deputies during the period of occultation, and the theory of general deputyship for scholars appeared, in the sense that every scholar is a deputy of Imam Mahdi, even if not appointed personally by him; against this backdrop, the Shia religious Marjaya (sources of emulation or reference) appeared.

Because awaiting the occult Imam became an objective in itself, many Twelvers lived in a state of political hiatus lasting for centuries, a situation noticed by some Shia scholars, who began to ponder suitable solutions that could bring the sect back into the throes of political life. In this context, researcher Wajeeh Kawtharani notes that the linkage between the idea of a “deputy of the Imam” with the project of an authority or a state is a controversial matter that has not, historically, been beyond dispute; when such instances of deputyship did occur, they represented a specific facet, and not the dominant trend in history.<sup>5</sup>

---

<sup>3</sup> See Ahmad Al-Kateb, *The evolution of shia political thought, from shura –consultation- to wilayat al-Faqeh – guardianship of the jurist-*, (Arabic), Sixth edition, (Beirut: The institution of Arab dissemination, 2008)

<sup>4</sup> Wajeeh Kawtharani, *Between the jurisprudence of the Shiite reform and the guardianship of the jurist – the state and the citizen*, (Arabic), First edition, (Beirut: Dar al-Nahar, 2007) p. 60

<sup>5</sup> Ibid p61



The Safavid movement<sup>6</sup> emerged in Tabriz in the early 10<sup>th</sup> Hijri century (907 Hijri, 1501 AD) and sought to gather the Shia under a single banner, but quickly discovered that the theory of the awaiting represented an obstacle to the creation of a Shia state; therefore, their scholars permitted fallible leaders – who were not appointed by God – to assume the functions of the Imam.

At a later stage, the Safavid Shah Ismail exerted significant efforts to overcome the ideas of Taqiya (hiding one's belief) and awaiting. He eventually besieged the Tabriz mosque on a Friday, proclaimed the supremacy of Twelver Shiism, and declared the rise of the Safavid state. He is reputed to have done in response to two factors: the appearance of Imam Ali in a dream, and the alleged arrival of a special delegation from al-Mahdi.

The relationship between scholars and kings during the Safavid era was marked by the sharing of the authority of deputyship, with some tension occasionally, with King Tahmasb Bin Ismail granting the Shia scholar Nur al-Deen al-Karaki (1466-1534 AD) the title of “the deputy of the Imam Mahdi”. Later, Shah Ismail Bin Tahmasb gave himself the deputyship of the Imam Mahdi, while Shah Abbas the Great (1641-1664 AD) reduced the influence of scholars over the institutions of the state. This situation engendered two divergent trends in the Twelver school. The first was known as the traditional Akhbari school (from the Arabic word *akhbar*, which in this context means “news”), which founded its doctrine upon awaiting the return of the occult Imam and warned against the practice of government since this is a religious right reserved solely to the infallible Imams from the House of the Prophet. The second direction was the innovative Usuli (fundamentalist) school, which attempted to present solutions to the condition of awaiting that has deprived Shias of *ijtihad* [in Islamic law, the independent or original interpretation of problems not precisely covered by the Qur’ān or Ḥadīth] and historical action for centuries. This school’s jurists began to research and reason based on textual and logical evidence indicating the necessity of a ruler to lead the people.

The early part of the 11<sup>th</sup> Hijri century (18<sup>th</sup> century in Gregorian calendar) saw concerted attempts by the fundamentalists to spread their views, including the initiative of Mohammad Baqir al-Sabzawari, who called for the creation of a political system: “without a just and powerful ruler to direct the world and govern it during the phase of occultation, things will turn into chaos and turmoil, and life will become unliveable for anyone. People, then, must submit to the authority of a king who rules with justice and follows the example and teachings of the Imam.”<sup>7</sup> Scholar Ahmad Bin Mohammad al-Naraqī (d. 1245 Hijri, 1829 AD) rejected the idea of awaiting, offering an alternative theoretical proposition termed “Velayat-e Faqih” (the guardianship of the jurist) which would make possible the necessary

---

<sup>6</sup> A Turkman Sufi school that appeared in eastern Anatolia in the 14<sup>th</sup> and 15<sup>th</sup> centuries, gradually evolving into a Shia movement.

<sup>7</sup> Hamid Enayat, *Modern Islamic Political Thought*, Persian, (Tehran: Amirkabir Publication House, 1983), p. 239.

continuation of the Imamate during the time of occultation. Since finding “the infallible, God-appointed, Imam” was impossible, al-Naraqi abandoned the criteria of infallibility and Alawi ancestry for the Imam, contenting himself instead with the conditions of justice and religious knowledge. Thus, Twelver Shia literature became mature enough to marry the notion of awaiting Imam Mahdi with that of his deputyship in order to run the affairs of the country and the people, a guardianship that can be placed in the hands of the jurist who fulfills the prescribed conditions.

### **Mahdism and the Islamic Republic of Iran**

The scholars of the Safavid age legitimized kings as viceroys of Imam Mahdi, a position which secured far-reaching benefits for them during the Qajar era due to the Qajar kings’ need for support due to their lack of legitimacy compared to the Safavids, who declared their descent from the House of the Prophet. Various kings also used these scholars to mobilize the people’s support against the Russian threat to Iran.

Shia debates about Velayat (guardianship) and governance continued for centuries; and at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century and the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup>, a number of scholars and Marjayia (sources or models for imitation) participated in the movement for change then overtaking Iran, especially with regard to constitutional demands and other items pertaining to the conditions of the modern state. Again, the discourse of the Akhbari school diverged from that of the Usuli school in the midst of this movement, which split apart due to their respective positions on the question of government. Akhbaris articulated demands for a “legitimate autocratic” state, while Usulis raised the slogan of a “conditioned” state. This divergence was apparent in the concepts of “legitimate constitutional monarchy” for the Akhbaris, and the “constitutional monarchy” for the Usulis. By “constitutional monarchy”, Usulis referred to a system that equates the divine legitimacy of a king with his popular legitimacy; guardianship (Velayat) for the Usuli school was conditioned to the service of the people and tending to its interests. Among the prominent scholars of this camp was Mohammad Hussain al-Naini (1860-1936 AD). Akhbaris, on the other hand, believed that “(religiously) legitimate constitutional monarchy” was the proper expression of the divine nature of political authority, which must remain under the supervision of the scholars. This camp expressed its concern at the dominance of Western models, which contravene Islam, over the life of Iranian society. Among the notable representatives of this current was Fadlallah Nuri (d. 1909 AD).<sup>8</sup>

Debates over the question of guardianship receded somewhat at the beginning of the Pahlavi era, in 1924, until 1963, when the Akhbari trend was in the ascendant, engendering calls such as that of

---

<sup>8</sup> Mohsen Kadivar, *The Theory of State in Shia Jurisprudence*, Persian, (Tehran: Volume One, Fifth edition, 2001), p. 117



Ayatollah Haeri, who spoke of the necessity of the scholar's isolation from politics.<sup>9</sup> The scholars of the Usuli School were also capable of surmounting obstacles and pushing their opinions calling for the enshrinement of the concepts of the guardianship of the jurists and governance on behalf of Imam Mahdi. This faction rose once more with the efforts of Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini, who later led the 1979 Islamic Revolution against the monarchist regime. It should also be noted that the arena of debate witnessed efforts by some Akhbaris as well, led by Ayatollah al-Barujardi, in addition to a new current that attempted to reconcile the two main factions, led by Ayatollah al-Gulbakiani and Ayatollah Kazim Shariat-Madari.<sup>10</sup> This current focused on increasing the role of the jurists in supervising the state.

The long period of awaiting the Mahdi and the complexities of the international setting encouraged Khomeini to deepen his consideration of the "Velayat-e Faqih" theory, affirming the necessity of the Imamate in the age of occultation, as al-Naraqī did before him, and presenting the theory as the most suitable solution to the question of awaiting the occult Imam. The theory does not require infallibility, divine delegation and knowledge, or Alawi Hussaini ancestry for the Imam, demanding only justice and jurisprudence. Some researchers believe that Khomeini used this theory to bring the Twelver Shia sect out of its isolation, and as a springboard for the rise of the Islamic Republic of Iran.

In 1969, Khomeini delivered lectures in Najaf that were later compiled into a book under the title of "The Islamic Government". Among the points he enunciated in defense of Velayat (guardianship) was the following:

"The necessity of applying religious rules was not specific to the age of the Prophet, but is still in effect ... believing that Islam came for a limited period or a specific location contradicts the essentials of Islamic doctrine. And since the application of rules after the death of the Prophet and until the day of judgment is among life's necessities, it is necessary to have a government that is endowed with the qualities of an effective, competent, authority. In its absence, chaos and turmoil would rule, for it has been proven by the power of reason and of the text that what was necessary in the days of the Prophet and in the age of the Imam, Commander of the Faithful, in terms of the existence of a government, remains necessary to our day. To illustrate, I shall pose the following question: given that the major occultation of our Imam Mahdi has been ongoing for over a thousand years, and thousands more may pass before the advent of the awaited Imam is decided, should the rules of Islam be suspended throughout this long era, for people to do as they please? ... Does that not mean chaos and turmoil? Did God limit the validity of the Sharia to two hundred years? Is Islam to lose, following the minor occultation, everything?"<sup>11</sup>

---

<sup>9</sup> Jamileh Kadivar, *Transformation in the Shia political discourse in Iran*, (Persian), First edition, (Tehran: Tarh-e No, 2000), p. 357.

<sup>10</sup> Some researchers classified Ayatollahs al-Gulbakiani and Shariat-Madari as among the Usuli School led by Khomeini

<sup>11</sup> Ruhollah Khomeini, *The Islamic Government* (Arabic), First edition, (Beirut: Ammar publication and distribution house, 1988), p.25.

Khomeini also addressed the adherents of the “awaiting” theory. “Do not say: ‘Let us postpone the application of rulings and the defense of borders and the collection of the rights of the poor until the appearance of the Imam,’” he affirmed. “Would you abandon prayer in wait for the Hujja (Imam Mahdi)?” Using logical reasoning, he also debunked the sayings that forbade political activism during the occultation, arguing instead for the necessity of the Imamate, saying: “What constitutes evidence for the Imamate is the same evidence of the necessity of government after the occultation of the Guardian”.<sup>12</sup>

After the victory of the revolution in 1979, Khomeini brought Velayat-e Faqih to the field of application by drafting a new constitution based on the concept, with the Guardian Jurist becoming the highest constitutional authority in the country. The fifth article of the Iranian Constitution states that “in the time of the occultation of the Guardian of Time (may God hasten his release), the Guardianship and the leadership of the nation in the Islamic Republic are to be in the trust of a just and pious jurist, who is in tune with his time, brave, competent and effective.” After eight years in practice, the Guide of the Revolution, Khomeini, took Velayat-e Faqih from its constitutionally limited form to an absolute one that resembles the attributes of the Prophet and the Imams according to Twelver beliefs, in effect combining Velayat-e Faqih with the general deputyship on behalf of Imam Mahdi.

Khomeini’s position reinforced the role of scholars in the Islamic Republic, thus deepening the tradition of broad engagement in Iranian society and pushing the Twelver Shia mind to seek, anew, novel theorizations that allow a wider margin for reason and human agency. As a result, many intellectuals returned to the writings of Ali Shariati<sup>13</sup>, which opposed the “culture of emulation” and its political ramifications. Writer Adel Raouf says of the crisis of emulation and its effects: “The will of the Islamic Nation became a will that is religiously bound ... directed (by the religious clerics) with the leash of tradition as they wish; the children of this Nation became ‘voluntarily’ led towards the emulation of ‘the doctrinal religious leadership figure’, who began to see their role through this conceited cult of personality.”<sup>14</sup>

The notion of the absolute guardianship of the jurist gave the Iranian regime a global Mahdist identity, having directly linked the project of the Islamic Republic to the will of Imam Mahdi and his broad objectives: following the revolution, all the resources, efforts, and programs of the nation are to be directed to the preparation for the reappearance of the Imam. In the introduction to his book *The Faqeeh (the jurist) and the Sultan*, Wajeeh Kawtharani notes that what Khomeini did greatly resembles the experience of the Muslim Brotherhood and Hizb al-Tahreer, with the attributes of the Guardian

---

<sup>12</sup> Ibid p.26

<sup>13</sup> Ali Shariati (1933-1977): Iranian sociologist whose work focused on Islamic studies. Dubbed in Iran as “the teacher of the Islamic Revolution”, he had a significant role in mobilizing the youth and crystallizing revolutionary thought in Iranian universities prior to the revolution.

<sup>14</sup> Adel Raouf, *The manufacture of minds between the jurist emulation and the emulation culture*, (Arabic) 3<sup>rd</sup> edition, (Baghdad: Iraqi Center for Information and Studies, 2007), p. 566

Jurist resembling those of the Caliph, and the notion of “the absolute guardianship of the jurist” paralleling “divine governance”.<sup>15</sup> In many of his letters, lectures, and speeches, Khomeini presented the globalist bent of the Mahdist notion, opining, for example, that “you must be truly aware that your actions are being supervised ... The descriptions of our acts are shown twice a week to the Imam of Time (may God hasten his return); so let us be careful not to engender – me, and you, and all the lovers of the Imam – any negative acts that could cause the dismay our Imam (Peace be upon him).”<sup>16</sup> Clarifying the notion of “awaiting” in the Islamic Republic, he averred: “Awaiting and preparing are commendable, in the sense that the faithful must arm in the time of waiting, have their weapons ready, not put them aside and merely wait; they must acquire arms to face injustice, because preventing disgraceful deeds is a duty for everyone. Therefore, we must all face the unjust regimes that oppose (Islam) ...”.<sup>17</sup> On the experience of the Iranian people in this regard, Khomeini said: “The Iranian Muslim people has achieved the first step towards the government of Islam, bringing Muslim peoples closer to the phase of the return of the awaited Imam; this truth is apparent in the major accomplishments achieved by the Islamic Republic, which is a painful thing for the enemies of Islam, and we consider these achievements to be among the miracles of Islam.”<sup>18</sup>

Three months prior to his death, the founder of the Islamic Republic spoke of the role of the revolution in preparing for the government of the occult Imam: “Those in power must know that our revolution is not specific to Iran; the revolution of the Iranian people is a point of beginning for the flaring of the great Islamic revolution in the Muslim world under the banner of the Guardian Imam (Mahdi), who was a gift granted by God to Muslims and all of humanity, making his advent and reappearance take place in our present times. The government of the Islamic Republic must exert its efforts and resources to serve the people, but not in the sense of diverting them from the paramount objective of the revolution, which is the establishment of a global Islamic government<sup>19</sup>.” Ayatollah Khomeini’s insistence on this function of the Islamic Republic, consisting of preparing for the advent of the occult Imam and his global Islamic government, laid the ground for appearance after his death of a political and theological current that views the project of the Islamic Revolution as a sacred truth that is apt to contact Imam al-Mahdi. This was countered by another current – from within the regime itself – that believed in the relativity of the revolution, its fallible human character, and the necessity of subjecting its experience to revision and criticism.

---

<sup>15</sup> Wajeeh Kawtharani, *The Jurist and the Sultan*, (Arabic), 2<sup>nd</sup> edition, (Beirut: Dar Al-Talee’a printing and publishing house, 2000), p. 21

<sup>16</sup> *The Book of the Imam*, (Persian), Volume 8, p. 391.

<sup>17</sup> <http://www.pasokhgoo.ir/node/18639>

<sup>18</sup> <http://www.hawzah.net/hawzah/Magazines/MagArt.aspx?MagazineNumberID=4357&id=28854>

<sup>19</sup> *Book of Light*, First edition, Volume 21, pp. 107-108.

### **Mahdism in the discourse of President Ahmadinejad**

Since assuming the presidency of the Islamic Republic in August 2005, President Ahmadinejad has reiterated, on numerous occasions, that his government works under the guidance of Imam Mahdi. Upon returning from the United States, where he delivered a speech to the UN General Assembly in September 2005, Ahmadinejad recounted to the Shia cleric Ayatollah Javad Amli that one of those in attendance during his speech told him that he was encased in an aura of light for the duration of his address. This version of the event engendered a wave of criticism in Iran after it spread across the Internet. At the time, some observers regarded Ahmadinejad's words as an indicator of the vision that would guide his actions during his presidency.

Through his belief in the theory of the Guardianship of the Jurist, which is to prepare for the occult Imam's return, the Iranian president believes that the sole mission of the Islamic Republic of Iran is to preface the creation of the global Islamic government. In a Sufi reading of the features and influence of the occult Imam, Ahmadinejad says: "We do not have the ability to benefit from all the outpourings of the Imam. All the good and beauty of this world are to exist with the mediation of the Imam of Time, and if your heart is ever to experience an intention for good, then it is due to the presence of his eminence."<sup>20</sup> During this period, the Arab Shia arena witnessed the propagation of the same notion, especially in Lebanon, where a book by Shadi al-Faqeeh published in Beirut in 2006, under the title *Ahmadinejad and the Coming World Revolution*, was broadly distributed in Lebanon.

During a visit to the province of Mashhad on May 6, 2008, Ahmadinejad gave a speech to teachers and students at the scientific Hauza [religious schools running Shia affairs] in which he declared that Imam Mahdi supports his presidential performance and manages his government programs, a statement that was sufficient to engender another wave of criticism from the reformist and conservative currents, and to elicit the condemnation of some clerics. The leaders and intellectuals of the reformist current faced Ahmadinejad's Mahdist rhetoric with extreme firmness, with some accusing him of heresy, of crossing the red lines of Shia doctrine, and of using myths to impress simpletons, while others claimed that Ahmadinejad was employing the notion of reappearance to cover up his economic failures. In this context, reformist leader Rasul Montajabnia of the Etemad Melli party wrote an opinion article asking Ahmadinejad to clarify and to respond to the claims attributed to him, "such as the story that was reported of him answering an aide, who asked about the source of the billions that he promises to every province: 'do not worry, for in two years the Imam of Time will reappear and all the problems will be resolved.'"<sup>21</sup>

For his part, reformist leader Mehdi Karroubi called on the president to abstain from this behavior, which is liable to cause grave damage to the image of the occult Imam in the minds of the people,

---

<sup>20</sup> <http://www.bfnews.ir/vdceb78fijh8e.9bj.html>

<sup>21</sup> <http://www.aftabnews.ir/vdcjtmeuqyaaa.html>

especially the youth. Karroubi asked: “Will people refer the increase in the price of lodging, living costs, and inflation to the management of the Imam of Time? ... It would have been better if you had blamed these problems on drought, America, or previous governments.”<sup>22</sup> Former Culture Minister Atallah Muhajarani said: “Ahmadinejad is using the Twelfth Shia Imam to cover up his failure in limiting inflation in Iran.”<sup>23</sup> Ayatollah Mahdawi Kani<sup>24</sup> also bemoaned Ahmadinejad’s statements, saying: “If what was going on right now were the work of the Imam, why isn’t he capable of defeating the gangs? Is the price of a kilogram of rice also decided by him?”<sup>25</sup>

In a television interview with Iran’s official Sima 2 channel in 2008, former President Ali Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani, head of the Expediency Council, said he could not confirm a linkage between the reappearance of Imam Mahdi and a specific revolution, because revolutions can come and go and be replaced by other revolutions. Therefore, Rafsanjani added, he could not predict on that level and believed that those who hold to such opinions were mistaken.<sup>26</sup> This was considered a shocking position from one of the symbols of the Islamic Revolution, contradicting the literature of the regime affirming that the revolution is a preface for the advent of the awaited Mahdi. Needless to say, Rafsanjani’s opinion undermines Ahmadinejad’s rhetoric claiming to receive aid and direction from the occult Imam. During the aforementioned interview, Rafsanjani also presented a historical overview of the question of Mahdism: “In the time of his eminence Imam Ali, some believed that Mohammed Ibn al-Hanafiya was the promised Mahdi, while others claimed that he was hiding in the Radawi Mountains and will reveal himself in the future, while another group believed that Zaid was the promised Mahdi. In the time of the Imam al-Sadiq, another group claimed him to be the Mahdi. That was in the past. In our present time we find that the Bahais have created a massive sedition in the Muslim world, as well as the Shaykhiya sect ... and we see recurrent claims of Mahdism in Sudan, and in Iraq also we see people who claim contact with the occult Imam and seek to destroy the Najaf Hauza, and in Iran we saw a lot of similar events.” In direct response to those claiming contact with the Mahdi, Rafsanajani said: “Some say that they communicate with his eminence the Imam, attempting to fool people; this phenomenon has existed continually, and we find it to be very widespread in Iran today”.

<sup>22</sup> <http://www.tabnak.ir/pages/?cid=10434>

<sup>23</sup> [http://radiozamaaneh.com/news/2008/05/post\\_5022.html](http://radiozamaaneh.com/news/2008/05/post_5022.html)

<sup>24</sup> Ayatollah Mahdawi Kani is a senior cleric who was elected in early march 2011 as head of the Council of Experts, succeeding former President Ali Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani. He worked in the government of the assassinated Mohammad Ali Rajai [who was elected as the second elected president of Iran, serving from 2 to 30 August, 1981, after serving as prime minister under Abolhassan Banisadr].as minister of the interior, as well as the cabinet of the slain Mohammad Javad Bahonar [who was an Iranian scholar, Shiite theologian and politician who was the first Iranian cleric to serve as prime minister], then assumed the prime ,inistership following Bahonar’s assassination in an explosion in the president’s office.

<sup>25</sup> <http://www.tabnak.ir/pages/?cid=10480m>

<sup>26</sup> <http://www.hashemirafsanjani.ir/?type=dynamic&lang=1&id=3751#>



Rafsanjani added: "There is no proof for these claims, either by the claimant or his followers. On the other hand, the work done by the jurists of the Council of Experts and the Council of Guardians and the scholars and the sources of emulation, is all based on Muslim legal proofs. They take from the Quran and the correct Sunna and the consensus of past scholars, or they use the reasoning and intellectual evidences based on this methodology. On the other hand, as for those who claim receiving commands from the beyond, none of them has proof or documentation".<sup>27</sup>

In the context of countering Ahmadinejad's Mahdist rhetoric, the supreme guide of the revolution, Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, said in one of his speeches: "The unrealistic claims of some, and in mythical ways, such as claiming to see the Imam Mahdi and being blessed by his meeting and praying behind him, these, in my opinion, are shameful claims and spurious heresy that aim at shaking this truth that inhabits the hearts of the faithful; therefore we should not neglect to deal with the matter, and people should know that claims of contacting the Imam and receiving orders from him are fallacious and not credible".<sup>28</sup> He added: "A happy man may have the opportunity for his eyes and heart to garner that honor, and to lay his eye upon that blessed beauty, but these would not be making claims and calling on people to follow them. Such people are doubtlessly liars and slanderers".<sup>29</sup>

This direct criticism by the supreme guide of the revolution both confirmed Khamenei's awareness of the dogmatic and political line followed by the president and foretold a schism between the two men. This schism appears to have been postponed due to the current challenge that unite the two leaders, namely the threat of the reformist current that has decided to return in force to the political arena since the 2009 elections.

Ahmadinejad interpreted his win in the 2009 election<sup>30</sup> as a divine victory to be added to his triumph over the West by persevering in the development of Iran's nuclear capabilities. Therefore, he took little notice of the criticisms and warnings directed at him regarding his employment of the character of the occult Imam; his second mandate<sup>31</sup> saw numerous positions and statements in which he insisted on the existence of a form of communication between his government and the Imam Mahdi. Ahmadinejad's continued insistence on his government's alleged contacts with the occult Imam prompted a number of thinkers and specialists to intensify their campaigns to reveal the fallacy of his claims. These included Ali Akbar Ashtiani, who posed questions to the president in a sarcastic manner: "In the event that you are having communications with the Imam of Time, get answers from him for the following questions. First, ask him whose photo it is that is in my home and that I love? Second, ask his eminence about the

---

<sup>27</sup> Ibid

<sup>28</sup> Part of a public speech by Khamenei, delivered for the occasion of mid-Shaban 1429 Hijri (2008)

<sup>29</sup> <http://www.hashemirafsanjani.ir/?type=dynamic&lang=1&id=3751#>

<sup>30</sup> Beginning on June 12, 2009, large popular protests erupted, contesting the results of the election. Reformists accused the incumbent president of having rigged the election.

<sup>31</sup> This presidential mandate extends from summer 2009 until summer 2013.



relationship between the conjunctural and the old (a philosophical question)? Also, ask his eminence, where is an object that I have lost and for which I have been looking for a long time?”<sup>32</sup>

Political writer and analyst Sahab Fatimi also criticized Mahdist rhetoric based – in his opinion – on lies. He said: “We have no doubt that the Islamic Revolution is the object of the blessings of the Imam of Time, and that the benefits of that reach the country and the people, but nobody has the right to exploit the notion of awaiting and ride it to achieve his personal objectives. That is especially so since the great guide of the revolution made it clear that awaiting means complete readiness, individually and collectively, and to seek the realization of justice. Therefore, people should stand against the liars and their shameful claims, such as being in contact with the Imam and spreading myths that contribute to worsening the image of the regime”.<sup>33</sup>

Many scholars and specialists in Mahdist issues stress the danger of the Mahdist discourse adopted by the administration of Ahmadinejad. Dr. Naqi Bur, who is both an academic university professor and a seminary lecturer at the Hauza, argued that publicly claiming contact with Imam Mahdi and spreading such claims with the purpose of mobilizing people is pure mendacity, and a crime relative to the nature of the actions for which that claim was made.<sup>34</sup> When Bur was asked whether, in Islam, it is allowed for the manager of the Islamic state to make decisions based on communication with the beyond, he answered: “Managers are to solve problems and make decisions based on religious legal standards, and if there was some contact with one of the infallibles, the principle is that the latter would give directions based on the teachings of the Quran and the chronicles ...”.<sup>35</sup>

Ahmadinejad’s Mahdist discourse is based on a political/sectarian doctrine that stresses the prefacing role of the regime of the Islamic Republic in Iran regarding the reappearance of the awaited Imam Mahdi. In this Ahmadinejad leans on the literature of the revolution, especially the writings of its first supreme guide, Ayatollah Khomeini, and his successor, Ayatollah Khamenei. Ahmadinejad’s second mandate has seen more focus on this rhetoric in his speeches and statements; unlike previous presidents, Ahmadinejad insists on opening all his speeches and official talks with the prayer for a hastening of the reappearance of the occult Imam. Another sign of the influence of the Mahdist doctrine in Ahmadinejad’s political discourse is his linkage of what he sees as successes in his performance to the support of Imam Mahdi, particularly: his victory over the reformist current and the ousting of its leaders from the political arena; his economic program, especially in terms of reforms for subsidies on staple consumption goods; his addresses to the United Nations General Assembly, which he views as international victories; and the events related to facing Western pressure over the nuclear issue.

---

<sup>32</sup> *On the footsteps of sun*, First Volume, (Persian, Dialogue with Ali Akbar Ashtiani), pp. 254-255

<sup>33</sup> <http://www.alborznews.net/fa/pages/?cid=39940>

<sup>34</sup> <http://alef.ir/1388/content/view/78459/83>

<sup>35</sup> Ibid

The continuing proximity of Efsandiar Rahim Mashai<sup>36</sup> to Ahmadinejad forms a central factor in the ongoing controversy about the president's doctrine and that of his team. Many observers and analysts have speculated about the link between Mashai and the spread of Mahdist rhetoric, and its increasing influence, under Ahmadinejad. On more than one occasion, Ahmadinejad has described his friend Mashai as a transparent, unique, and lofty personality, and as a noted researcher in Islamic studies. At the same time, scholars, intellectuals, and activists have directed all manner of accusations against Mashai. Most notably, Ayatollah Mohammad Taqi Mesbah Yazdi<sup>37</sup>, a key Marja, described Mashai's current as representing "the greatest threat known to Islam to this today". Mashai has also been accused of leading a heretical secret society named "the Path of Truth"<sup>38</sup> that is similar to the Shia Hujjati cult, and of promoting the idea of an "Iranian Islam"<sup>39</sup>.

These elements, and others that will be mentioned below, put the Mahdist discourse in the Iranian establishment in a critical point, especially after the flaring of Arab Revolutions and the asserting by some Iranians that these Arab achievements were the fruits of the Islamic Revolution, and a sign for the near appearance of the occult Imam; this is the vision that was represented in the documentary "The Reappearance is Nigh". What are the elements of the ongoing Mahdist movement in Iran, and what are its dimensions?

## Iranian Mahdism and the Arab revolutions

### Mahdism and the awaited global role

Iran publicly welcomed the Arab revolutionary dynamic, casting its spread to several countries in the Arab homeland as a harbinger for a new phase in the history of the world, and a realization of the promise of the founder of the Islamic Republic, Ayatollah Khomeini, who predicted the victory of the revolution over its enemies and the rise of the global government of Imam Mahdi. Citing this belief, the

---

<sup>36</sup> Efsandiar Rahim Mashai was born in the 1960. An electrical engineer by training, he joined the ranks of the Basij [paramilitary volunteer militia] in his youth. He played a significant role in the military intelligence apparatus, moving after that to cultural activities. He is linked to Ahmadinejad through both an old friendship and relations by marriage (his daughter married Ahmadinejad's son). He was appointed vice president after the 2009 presidential election, an appointment that was rejected by Khamenei, prompting Ahmadinejad to then appoint him as his chief of staff, a post Mashai held until his resignation in early April 2011.

<sup>37</sup> Born in 1934, Ayatollah Mohammad Taqi Mesbah Yazdi is a member of the Council of Experts and one of Iran's foremost clerics. He is one of the disciples of Ayatollah Mohammad Hussain al-Tabatabai, and founder of the Imam Khomeini Education and Research Institute.

<sup>38</sup> Adherents to this cult are said to believe that the advent of the Mahdi is imminent and believe in several views related to the Shia Twelver doctrine.

<sup>39</sup> The theory of "Iranian Islam" is based on mixing elements of Persian nationalism and Islamic doctrine.

cleric Mustapha Baqiri – imam of Friday prayers in Bonab<sup>40</sup> – argued that the Tunisian Revolution was one of the blessings of the Islamic Revolution in Iran, adding that it was a realization of Khomeini’s promise, and that this historical transformation was among the portents for the advent of Imam Mahdi.<sup>41</sup> The Friday imam in Qom, Hojatoleslam Sayyed Mohammad Saidi, seemed to agree, saying: “Due to the Egyptian and Tunisian peoples’ lack of a competent guide, such as the great guide of the revolution [Khamenei], then they must obey [him], because the Imam Khamenei is the guide of all the Muslims in the world.”<sup>42</sup> The commander of the Basij forces, Mohammad Rida Naqdi, expressed this comprehensive vision even more clearly when he stated: “The transformation that the region is witnessing is a golden opportunity to free humanity from the throes of despotism, which makes our duty a heavy one. But if we can make use of the great resources of the Basij forces, we will be able to conquer the world.”<sup>43</sup>

In tune with the same doctrine, Ahmadinejad said in a speech in late February that Arab societies had been witnessing a great trend moving “in the direction of the authentic divine and humanist path. Our revolution was a prelude to the paramount event that was promised by the prophets. This last event that they promised has started, and we are in its heart and middle. We have the opportunity to serve and launch initiatives, and we should understand the gravity of the matter.”<sup>44</sup>

According to the Twelver Shia literature cited in the documentary “The Reappearance is Nigh” as specifying the signs of the reappearance of the awaited Mahdi, the first portents are located in Iran, where the personalities of Shuaib Bin Saleh (Ahmadinejad) and the Khurasani sayyed (Ali al-Khamenei) are to appear and lead a large Khurasani army to fight by Imam Mahdi’s side against the Sufyani (Jordan’s King Abdullah II). Therefore, the initiative taken by Mubashiran Zhuhur, which distributed hundreds of thousands of copies of the aforementioned documentary, can be read as a response to the stimulation engendered by the Mahdist rhetoric of Ahmadinejad. The compact disk promising the imminent reappearance of the Imam Mahdi includes media material that was prepared with a high degree of professionalism, presenting a reading of the international political situation that matches current actors with the characters mentioned in the prophecies of the reappearance of the occult Imam. The film ends by concluding that the phase in which we live is very close to the moment of the advent of Imam Mahdi, itself one of the major portents for the Day of Judgment.

Observers estimated the number of copies distributed throughout Iran at 3 million, with the Arab revolutions having opened up suitable space for the proliferation of Mahdist discourse. Media responses

---

<sup>40</sup> A city in eastern Azerbaijan Province, in Iran’s north.

<sup>41</sup> <http://www.farsnews.net/newstext.php?nn=8911030890>

<sup>42</sup> <http://www.farsnews.com/newstext.php?nn=8911130263>

<sup>43</sup> <http://www.iran-world.com/article.php?id=62118>

<sup>44</sup> <http://www.aftabnews.ir/vdchzinzx23nizd.tft2.html>

to the documentary were slow to appear, starting with websites and then spreading to newspapers, followed by Mahdist study centers in Qom, where specialists judged the actions of the authors – applying doctrinal literature to specific personalities – as dangerous and devoid of scholarly parameters. As for the postures of major scholars and clerics, they could be gleaned through the statements of highly regarded figures such as Ayatollah Makarem Shirazi, Ayatollah Javad Amlī, Ayatollah Jafar Subhani, Ayatollah Ustazi, “the Doctor” (*Allama*) Mesbah Yazdi, Hojatoleslam Waez Musawi, Hojatoleslam Ali al-Saidi, and Hojatoleslam wal Muslimeen Mahdi Taeb, in addition to the reported position of Ayatollah Sistani in Iraq. These positions varied between correction, condemnation, and accusations of heresy and endangering the doctrine and the regime.

Hojatoleslam wal-Muslimeen Mahdi Taeb, who heads the central council for the Base of Ammar organization<sup>45</sup>, said: “Our chronicles relating to the Khurasani sayyed, the Yemeni sayyed, and Shuaib Bin Saleh do not provide us with details that can be applied to specific persons. Had these characters been described in the way we saw in “The Reappearance is Nigh”, the enemies would have been able to reach that truth before us, because the appearance of the Imam represents the gravest danger for the enemies. Therefore, they would have been able to specify the time of the advent before us by using verses and chronicles. If the enemy were certain that Sayyed Hassan Nasrallah was the Yemeni sayyed, they would have annihilated the area he lives in with nuclear weapons ...” Taeb added: “Nobody has the right to impose his personal opinion regarding the time of the advent, and we should not discuss the matter as if it were happening this year or the next. In this matter, we only exercise supplication, and on this basis we pray for the Imam’s advent to be this year, but what is for sure is that we do not know in what era this will happen.”<sup>46</sup>

There have been many angry reactions calling for the prosecution of the Mubashiran Zhuhur Foundation and those behind it. Some intellectuals and writers from the reformist current speculated about who stood behind the organization, which operates with large budgets and considerable resources, and all questioned the reasons behind the authorities’ silence over the issue. Soon thereafter, Iranian General Prosecutor Hojatoleslam Ghulam Houssein Muhsini Aji announced that an investigation would be launched regarding “The Reappearance is Nigh”.

The director of the documentary, Ali Asghar Seijani, decried the campaign against his work, using an April 5, 2011 press conference to respond to the accusations directed against him and Mubashiran Zhuhur. “In my opinion, the guardian of the Muslims (Khamenei) leads the current prophesying the advent of the Imam Mahdi,” he said. “I still remember the historic phrase that he said in 2008: ‘The world is now full of injustice and prejudice, and it thirsts for Mahdist justice.’” Seijani added: “The

---

<sup>45</sup> A think tank working in the cultural and religious fields, led by figures from Khamenei’s movement.

<sup>46</sup> <http://www.farsnews.com/newstext.php?nn=9001250217>

pronouncement of [Khamenei] was not a normal thing, for it gave a color and a scent for the near advent of the Imam. A month and a half later, after Eid al-Fitr, the sayyed gave another augur, in which he said: 'The current generation will liberate Palestine and Holy Jerusalem.' This means that the sayyed has promised us since 2008, in an indirect way, the near advent of the Imam. Days before his statements, Sayyed Hassan Nasrallah confirmed the augur of the Guide Khamenei when he said: 'The current generation of the children of the Muslim world will be liberating Holy Jerusalem.'" Seijani also pointed out that Ahmadinejad affirmed the same notion days after Nasrallah's statement, when he pronounced: "The Imam of the Time will arrive soon. He is the real beloved of the good and the disinherited."<sup>47</sup>

Hojatoleslam Muhsin Ashtiani, director of the Negin Sabz Alavi Foundation, also defended the documentary, accusing some of the skeptics of casting doubt upon the entire doctrinal corpus of Twelver Shiism.<sup>48</sup> When the conservative activist Sayyed Mahdi Tabatabai defended "The Reappearance is Nigh", he ascribed the attacks of the critics to their religious backgrounds and their political agendas, saying: "This documentary is one of the most important programs that are realistic and based on suitable narratives. It was produced by a number of young researchers who are loyal to Imam Mahdi, peace be upon him. Those who oppose this spontaneous and foretelling work are not driven by any weakness of the evidence, but instead by the direction of the non-loyal [to Imam Mahdi] Akhbari School, which controls senior ranks and scholarly and executive responsibilities; and by the political goals of the opponents of Islamic government and the person of the president, who is regarded as one of the portents of the end of days and the advent of Imam Mahdi." He added: "Doubtless, the sifter of the end of days shall distinguish the real awaiters of the Promised Imam from the untruthful ones, for they both discuss the matter of the reappearance of the Awaited Mahdi, the former through faith, the verses and divine narratives, and complete obedience to the Guardian Jurist and the promised Khurasani sayyed, following events minute by minute, while the latter turn away from the clear events taking place in the world, seeking refuge in the books of the Hadith, hoping to find in them the global government of Imam Mahdi."<sup>49</sup>

---

<sup>47</sup> [http://www.u313i.com/index.php?option=com\\_content&view=article&id=703:1390-01-16-06-41-16&catid=77:1389-04-03-20-24-30](http://www.u313i.com/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=703:1390-01-16-06-41-16&catid=77:1389-04-03-20-24-30)

<sup>48</sup> [http://www.u313i.com/index.php?option=com\\_content&view=article&id=657:1389-12-17-19-51-10&catid=3:main](http://www.u313i.com/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=657:1389-12-17-19-51-10&catid=3:main)

<sup>49</sup> [http://tazohoor.ir/fa/index.php?option=com\\_content&view=article&id=795:1389-12-23-15-58-36&catid=65:1389-11-14-14-14-00](http://tazohoor.ir/fa/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=795:1389-12-23-15-58-36&catid=65:1389-11-14-14-14-00)



### **Mahdism at the heart of the Khamenei-Ahmadinejad tension**

The controversy over the documentary revived and deepened a doctrinal and political debate regarding Mahdism and its employment for political and electoral purposes. This time, the debate was mainly between supporters of Khamenei and those of Ahmadinejad; accusations were hurled at the latter because since his assumption of the presidency, he – according to his critics – has constantly stressed the idea of Imam Mahdi’s supporting his government. Suspicions were focused on his presidential team, especially his relative – and former chief of staff – Esfandiar Rahim Mashai, who was accused in January 2011 by Houssein Allah- Karam, the head of the Hezbollah coordination council in Iran, of leading a deviant secret organization called “the Path to Truth”. Karam claimed that this organization believes in the imminent advent of the Mahdi and prepares for it, which leads it to argue for closer Iranian relations with four Arab countries: Egypt, Jordan, Saudi Arabia, and Yemen.

The director of Iran’s Fars News Agency, Hamid Reza Moghaddam-Far, listed 13 priorities of what he described as the deviant current in Ahmadinejad’s government: seeking power, focus on self-interest, intellectual forgery, exploiting Mahdism, extreme assertion of Persian nationalism, not believing in the Guardianship of the Jurist in the phase preceding the reappearance of the occult Imam, working to marginalize clerics, believing in the centrality of man, believing in social justice based on redistributive justice, claiming Gnostic knowledge, believing in certain myths, doubting divine intervention with prophets, and believing in modernity while posing as fundamentalists.<sup>50</sup> Even the president’s brother, Davood Ahmadinejad, warned against the danger of the “Path of Truth”, saying it would shake the country and create sedition.<sup>51</sup>

Ever since Ahmadinejad called his friend Mashai to Tehran in order to charge him with cultural functions in the capital’s municipality, the relationship between the two men has continued to strengthen, especially after it acquired a familial character with Ahmadinejad’s son marrying Mashai’s daughter. This brought Mashai even closer to the president, and the resulting positions and responsibilities handed to him have numbered more than ten, including adviser, tourism minister, vice-president (abortively), presidential chief of staff, and diplomatic representative. Ahmadinejad has even tried to maneuver Mashai into sensitive positions that used to be considered “red lines” in the Islamic Republic, such as the Foreign Ministry and the Intelligence Ministry. In the former case, he scored a major victory by unseating then-Foreign Minister Manouchehr Mottaki, who enjoyed the support of Khamenei, but he failed to remove the man responsible for the regime’s “black box”, when the supreme guide intervened in time to reverse a presidential decision to remove Intelligence Minister Heydar Moslehi in late April 2011.

---

<sup>50</sup> <http://www.farsnews.com/newstext.php?nn=9002210676>

<sup>51</sup> [http://www.akharinnews.com/index.php?option=com\\_content&task=view&id=23231](http://www.akharinnews.com/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=23231)



What stirred the wonderment of Iranian observers and officials were Ahmadinejad's unrelenting defense of Mashai and great admiration for his friend's personality, which put the president under the influence of the man and his ideas. One clear piece of evidence for this is Ahmadinejad's adherence to the Iranian School theory promoted by Mashai, especially with his recent statements during celebrations of the Persian new year in Tehran. Some Iranian analysts have likened the relationship between the two men to that of a sheikh and his disciple, with Ahmadinejad playing the role of the disciple, while others argue that Mashai is the president's alter ego.

Mashai is known for controversial statements, such as saying that the Israeli people are a friend of the Iranian people; critiquing the official line in calling people to Islam; his advocacy of the Iranian School of Islam, which mixes elements of Persian nationalism with Twelver Shia teachings; and his claim that the Prophet Mohammad was of Iranian origin. Those who accuse Mashai of leading the Path of Truth organization say the group was an offshoot of the deviant "Hujjatiya" organization, that it believes in avoiding confrontation with the West and adopting the Turkish political model, and aims to remove clerics and marja from positions affecting Shia society. It also believes that reaching truth can only happen through the human spirit, that love is Islam's way of dealing with others, that the idea of jihad [the struggle or effort to "do the right thing", be it contributing to society, feeding the poor, improving oneself, or battling unbelievers ] must be excised from the minds of Muslims, and that the shortest way to justice is by affirming human love and inner peace.<sup>52</sup>

This situation has left the Iranian political scene in a confused and highly sensitive state, especially with the spread of Arab revolutions and resulting transformations in the region, which has prompted some members of the Iranian regime to sound the alarm and call for limits to be imposed on the current that appears to have taken control of the presidency. Some critics warn of "the coming sedition", "deviant fundamentalism" and "Freemasonry". On this matter, the secretary of the Expediency Council, Mohsen Rezaee, said that "the Guardianship of the Jurist and the establishment of the supreme guide are the competent tools to face this new perversion"<sup>53</sup>. Murtadha Nabawi, a member of the same council, stated: "Ahmadinejad's government was distinguished by confronting bourgeois currents, but – unfortunately – the president was surrounded by a number of stray people who labor to achieve their objectives by spreading their own opinions and exploiting people's belief in Mahdism." He added: "In our contemporary world, there are people with satanic characters who can affect minds. Perhaps this deviant current surrounding the president has a link to these things, and its members were able to influence the thought of the president."<sup>54</sup>

---

<sup>52</sup> <http://www.aftabnews.ir/vdch6wnzv23nzzd.tft2.html>

<sup>53</sup> <http://www.rezaee.ir/vdci5qaz.t1azy2bcct.txt>

<sup>54</sup> <http://aftabnews.ir/vdccoeqsp2bqii8.ala2.html>

These positions were echoed by Khamenei's representative in the Revolutionary Guards, Hojatoleslam Zhu Nur, in a statement transmitted by Iran's official Islamic Republic News Agency (IRNA): "Ahmadinejad holds on to the rotten rope of Mashai because he has a special will regarding Mashai, which he previously described by saying, 'Mashai is a summit.' On another occasion, he said: 'Mashai realizes things that we are incapable of comprehending.'" Nur added: "These people do not have the slightest belief in the Guardianship of the Jurist, and they call for an Islam without clerics, and today, Mashai is the real president of the republic, because he interferes in the affairs of all ministries ... I pray to God to save the president from the evil of this man."<sup>55</sup>

In the second week of May 2011, MP Hojatoleslam Houssein Islami directed a clear warning at Ahmadinejad, calling on him to lift his protection of the "deviant" current that surrounds him. He said: "We have warned the president of the republic about the spread of the influence of the deviant current, but he unfortunately has not heeded our warnings or taken them seriously. Therefore, Ahmadinejad – whom we love – must learn that the patience of the parliamentarians has limits."<sup>56</sup>

In this context, we can understand the desire of Khamenei to remove Mashai from the nodes of power, especially following his resignation from the president's office, which was said to have been prompted by the supreme guide, and after he was accused of being behind the dissemination of "The Reappearance is Nigh". It is also possible that one of his close associates, Hojatoleslam Abbas Amiri-Far<sup>57</sup> (secretary general of the Loyalist Preachers Association, chair of the Cultural Council of the Presidency, and the imam of its mosque) was behind both the preparation and the distribution of the aforementioned documentary. Mashai has denied these allegations.

It would be mistaken to believe that the ongoing crisis between the Ahmadinejad and Khamenei camps is the result of recent incidental calculations, for conflict between the two sides goes back years, but common interests and the priorities of the past postponed confrontation up to this moment. This truth was elucidated by Hojatoleslam wal-Muslimeen Mahdi Taeb, who heads the central council for the Base of Ammar organization, and who said on May 7, 2011: "The followers of Ayatollah Khamenei felt the threat of the Ahmadinejad team six years ago, and they believe that Mashai and Mahdi Hashemi<sup>58</sup> represent the two blades of scissors that seek to excise the Islamic regime."<sup>59</sup>

---

<sup>55</sup> <http://www.ayandenews.com/news/27302/>

<sup>56</sup> <http://www.ammariyon.ir/fa/pages/?cid=10144>

<sup>57</sup> Reportedly, he was Ahmadinejad's candidate for the post of intelligence minister.

<sup>58</sup> Son of Ali Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani and accused by the regime of standing behind the protests of the Green Movement in 2009.

<sup>59</sup> <http://www.iranianuk.com/article.php?id=63104>

Undoubtedly, the roots of the discord extend to the two sides' views and understandings of a number of beliefs and doctrinal issues, chiefly the Mahdist doctrine and the Islamic model of the state. For instance, when Ahmadinejad speaks of the Awaited Imam Mahdi, he is not necessarily referring to the same Mahdi who is in the minds of his opponents in the Khamenei camp, despite the fact that the Mahdi of the two sides – according to the narratives of Shiism and its literature – are one and the same. For Ahmadinejad, the Imam Mahdi is a man who blesses his actions and supports his government and economic program, a belief that is condemned by the other side, which considers this political exploitation of Mahdism, and abuse of the feelings of simpletons. In addition, this rhetoric crosses the “red lines” of the doctrine, since the person receiving direct support from the occult Imam is his lieutenant, the guardian jurist and the guide of the revolution, in this case Khamenei, and not another member of the regime.

When Ahmadinejad and Mashai use the term “Iranian Islam”, they stir the fears of the guardians of the regime about what lies behind the term. Ahmadinejad says: “We want the Iranian Islamic model, Islamic in that our goal and model are Islamic, and Iranian in that we build the country with Iranian methods, and of course, there is another debate under the banner of ‘Iranian Islam’ which I shall open in a different place.”<sup>60</sup>

## Conclusions

Analysts believe that the continuing dispute between Khamenei and Ahmadinejad is a mere war of position, while the factors described in this study show that the roots of what is taking place today in the Islamic Republic can be traced to the history of the Shia sect, with Twelvers unable to resolve the debate on the question of Mahdism after more than a thousand years. It goes without saying that the reformist current's understanding of the Guardianship of the Jurist and the advent of the Mahdi differs radically from the conservatives' comprehension of these two issues. Furthermore, the conservative current cannot be seen as a homogenous bloc; it does include readings that are close, but not necessarily identical, as some tend to believe; in addition, the practice of politics has contributed to highlighting the doctrinal differences between the two sides.

Ahmadinejad's insistence on his government's links to the will and management of the Awaited Imam Mahdi could be explained as a form of involuntary attraction, and it could also be a projection on reality of his understanding of the role of the Mahdi, his presence, and the dimensions of his character. It was to be expected that such beliefs would affect Ahmadinejad's political performance. Here we should remind readers of what we argued in the paper titled “**Why was Mottaki Dismissed? An inquiry into an**

---

<sup>60</sup> <http://www.aftabnews.ir/vdchzinzx23nizd.tft2.html>

event”<sup>61</sup> to the effect that Ahmadinejad “sees himself as an extraordinary president in extraordinary times ...”. Mottaki’s removal was a manifestation of the fact that the president has sought to use the presidency’s power to an unprecedented extent, a judgment later confirmed by his sacking of 13 advisers, followed by the attempt to remove Intelligence Minister Heydar Moslehi. Khamenei’s intervention and other reactions that surrounded this event have shown that the Iranian presidency is in the hands of a current that does not necessarily see itself as obedient to the orders of the supreme guide. Some Iranian observers and politicians go so far as to say that Ahmadinejad has become captive to a current led by Mashai, who is accused of doctrinal deviancy and exploiting the Mahdist doctrine for political purposes. This prompted Khamenei’s supporters to advocate the containment of this current and its eradication because it constitutes a threat to the regime.

We also should not discount the role of the regional and international dimensions in fomenting discord between the two camps. When we speak of Mahdism, we are necessarily referring to a regional and international dynamic, and we have seen Ahmadinejad attempting to build an apparatus within the presidency that is parallel to the Foreign Ministry.

These developments could be a prelude to a new crisis in Iran, one that would be different from preceding ones for the following reasons:

**First:** it is taking place within conservative circles, which are extremely influential in the major institutions of the regime, i.e. the office of the supreme guide, the presidency, the Parliament, the security and military apparatuses, and media outlets, because each side – Ahmadinejad’s and Khamenei’s – has a presence within these organisms.

**Second:** its doctrinal and theological dimension.

**Third:** The institution of the supreme guide is confronting the issue while being less powerful and coherent than at any previous time, with Khamenei having abandoned his longtime friend and source of support, Ali Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani (who resigned from the presidency of the Council of Experts after pressure from Khamenei’s current and is expected to leave the Expediency Council for similar reasons). Another factor is Khamenei’s having sided with the conservative current after the 2009 elections and his silence vis-à-vis the exclusion of the reformist current from the political arena. In addition, there are rumors about Khamenei’s health and no candidate to succeed him has emerged with who could garner consensus from all parties.

---

<sup>61</sup>

<http://english.dohainstitute.org/Home/Details?entityID=5ea4b31b-155d-4a9f-8f4d-a5b428135cd5&resourceId=0352c908-2465-4ef1-a422-4c7a85325ffe>

**Fourth:** This crisis comes amid turmoil and sensitive changes on the regional and international levels, especially the situation in Syria, which is a key ally of the Iranian regime.

These considerations prompt us to expect surprises relating to Mahdism in the Iranian political dynamic, and the coming phase will not be devoid of surprises on the level of political/doctrinal conflict, especially since we are facing three main currents<sup>62</sup> in terms of understanding Mahdism and its political role:

**The first current** groups the religious reformist current with the pragmatic current led by Hashemi Rafsanjani. These view the awaiting and presence of the Mahdi to be a spiritual/intellectual matter that prompts action, and they deny any relation between the person of Imam Mahdi and the Iranian Revolution or any person within the regime. In their view, the Islamic Revolution is a human political experience, and its actors are competing politicians.

**The second current** groups the followers of Khamenei, including theologians and marja. These view Khamenei as the legitimate lieutenant of the Awaited Mahdi. Therefore, his religious and worldly attributes are unlimited, including all the attributes of the occult Imam until his reappearance. They view anyone claiming contact with Imam Mahdi as an imposter and a liar who attempts to reach his own goals under the banner of Mahdism. Some in this current also believe in the existence of direct communications between Khamenei and the occult Imam.

**The third current** includes Ahmadinejad, his followers, and those close to him. These believe that the president is backed by Mahdi, that his government receives support from the occult Imam, and that the successes of the president are proof of this notion. According to the information available, it is believed that this current, or some of its members, are behind the ongoing Mahdist revival and the documentary discussed above.

---

<sup>62</sup> All these currents are constituted of children of the Islamic revolution