



Ahmadinejad versus the Clergy

By Ali Alfoneh

Iranian president Mahmoud Ahmadinejad has taken advantage of Iranian millenarianism in a well-orchestrated power play to bypass the established clergy. While Ahmadinejad's populism is unlikely to ignite a messianic revolt against the clerical establishment, its manifestations—most notably leaks about the clergy's involvement in economic corruption—will weaken their authority and allow the Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps to consolidate further control over the power structures of the Islamic Republic.

A wave of millenarianism is sweeping over Iranian society.¹ Amid social and economic unease, and with eschatological anticipation high, many Iranians interpret even the most mundane matters as signs of the realization of Shia prophecies of the end of the world and the imminent emergence of the Hidden Imam, often called the Imam of the Era in Persian-language sources. Communicated through both the Internet and mobile phones, millenarian rumors have mobilized the masses and occasionally led to riots.

Traditional Shia Millenarianism

Mainstream Shia doctrine holds that after the death of the Prophet Muhammad, leadership of the Muslim community passed to a succession of twelve imams, beginning with Imam Ali (599–661 AD) and continuing through the Twelfth Imam, Muhammad ibn Hassan al-Askari (born 868 AD), also known as Muhammad al-Mahdi. The Mahdi did not die, but in 873 or 874, went into what became known as the Lesser Occultation to escape persecution at the hands of caliphs fearing potential rivals. He briefly reemerged in 940 before entering the Greater Occultation and will return only before the Day of Judgment to purge both

corrupt politicians and dishonest clergy and usher in an incorrupt and just Islamic government on earth.² Traditional Shia therefore believe that any government existing prior to the Mahdi's reemergence is by definition unjust, corrupt, and imperfect. This interpretation is the basis of the quietism—the avoidance of any direct role in governance—to which the majority of Shia clergy subscribe, including such figures as Grand Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani in Iraq and Ayatollah Hossein Kazemeyni Boroujerdi in Iran.

Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini turned this mainstream exegesis on its head when, in 1970, he published *Velayat-e Faghih: Hukumat-i Islami* (*Guardianship of the Jurist: The Islamic Government*)—a compilation of his lectures written while he was in exile in Iraq—which argued that senior clerics could act as placeholders for the Hidden Imam and so could run government in his stead.³ This became the theological basis that underlies the Islamic Republic installed in Iran after the 1979 revolution. Islamic Republic authorities must take millenarianism seriously, for any discussion of the Mahdi's return undercuts the legitimacy of the Iranian government. After all, if the Mahdi returns, there is no need for placeholders to remain in power. Indeed, the Iranian constitution stipulates as much when it declares the supreme leader's authority to be valid only “during the Occultation of the Wali al-Asr (may God hasten his reappearance).”⁴ After

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the Hidden Imam's reemergence, the executive and spiritual leadership of the Iranian state and society will pass to the savior, and the supreme leader will be out of a job.

The Iranian judiciary need not look far for those who claim contact with the Hidden Imam, for the Islamic Republic's own president has, on several occasions, done so. Ahmadinejad's belief may be as much political as religious.

Millenarianism Boils Over

While Ahmadinejad has raised the profile of millenarianism in Iran, prior to his assumption of the presidency, religious superstition was already widespread. In November 2003, for example, rumors swept the Islamic Republic that God had punished a woman who had desecrated the Quran in Qom by transforming her into half woman, half tiger. A digitally altered photo of the "tiger-woman" circulated widely, raising the profile of the incident. When rumors spread that she had been arrested, thousands of people stormed the local police station to see her. When police denied that she was in custody, the mob attacked the station, beat several policemen, and set nearby banks and shops ablaze.⁵

Under Ahmadinejad, however, millenarianism has blossomed. Millenarian incidents now occur with increasing frequency. In May 2007, a mob invaded the Tehran neighborhood of Shahrak-e Gharb to see "the shadow of the Imam of the Era" in a pattern left on a wall by a leaking drain pipe.⁶ In February 2008, law enforcement forces in the Kordestan province arrested a woman who claimed she could cure the terminally ill because she was the reverend mother of the Prophet Muhammad.⁷ In June, a religious sect emerged in Qom calling itself "Followers of the Thirteenth Imam." Its followers broke with both Shia and Sunni tradition by facing toward Jamkaran—from whence many Shia believe the Mahdi will return—rather than Mecca for prayer.⁸ A clearly exacerbated public prosecutor complained not only about people claiming to be imams reincarnate, but also about people claiming to be the Fourteenth Imam.⁹

Mashhad—the largest city in eastern Iran and home to the shrine of Imam Reza, the Eighth Imam—has, along with Qom, become a breeding ground for millenarianism. According to the Nowsazi News Agency, a "deviant sect"

led by Seyyed Khorasani has arisen in the city, claiming that any government formed by man is imperfect. In the absence of infallible imams, the sect argues, any government is a revolt against God and must be defeated, a necessary condition for the hasty emergence of the Imam of the Era.¹⁰ The Iranian press has reported similar instances of millenarianism in Behbahan, Karaj, Esfahan, Tehran, Tabriz, Saqez,¹¹ and even Shia communities outside Iran.¹²

The intensity and severity of such cases has led Seyyed Mehdi Khamoushi, head of the Islamic Propagation Organization, to warn against innovation, superstition, and religious deviation that he said have "always been utilized by foreigners to infuse their ideology and points of view into the Islamic society of Iran."¹³ Influential Ayatollah Naser Makarem Shirazi; Hojjat al-Eslam Mohammad Salimi, prosecutor of the Special Clerical Court; and Hojjat al-Eslam Hassan Rowhani, representative of the supreme leader in the Supreme National Security Council, also repeated the warning.¹⁴ The problem has become so severe that according to the newspaper *Kargozaran*, supreme leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei has issued a decree to the judiciary to deal decisively with "those claiming contact with the Imam of the Era."¹⁵

Ahmadinejad's Millenarianism

The Iranian judiciary need not look far for those who claim contact with the Hidden Imam, for the Islamic Republic's own president has, on several occasions, done so. Ahmadinejad's belief may be as much political as religious. A chronological survey of his millenarian speeches suggests political rationale for the seemingly irrational. Ahmadinejad's millenarian discourse can be divided into four distinct phases, each serving a distinct political purpose (see table 1).

The first phase—general mention of the Hidden Imam and the imminence of his reemergence—legitimized millenarian arguments in political discourse and prepared the public for justification of policy based on eschatological expectations. During this phase, Ahmadinejad and his followers claimed that belief in the savior was progressive,¹⁶ not superstitious, and that the government served the purpose of preparing for the emergence of the savior.¹⁷

Once the public became accustomed to millenarian discourse, the second phase began with claims that Ahmadinejad's administration and the president himself were miraculous and enjoyed the benevolence of the Hidden Imam.¹⁸ Indeed, Ahmadinejad and his supporters attribute his escape from alleged U.S. kidnap and assassination

TABLE 1
METAMORPHOSES OF AHMADINEJAD AND HIS SUPPORTERS' MILLENARIAN DISCOURSE

General trend	Specific statements
General mention of <i>Mahdaviat</i> (Mahdism)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Belief in the savior is progressive.¹⁹ • The government's goal is to hasten the emergence of the Imam of the Era.²⁰ • All affairs in the world evolve according to the plan of the Imam of the Era.²¹ • Cultural policies serve the goal of preparing for the emergence of the Imam of the Era.²² • Islamic Republic of Iran Armed Forces is the armed forces of the Imam of the Era.²³
Miracles	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Ahmadinejad is the "miracle of the third millennium."²⁴ • The Imam of the Era was present at Ahmadinejad's miraculous speech at Columbia University.²⁵ • The Islamic Republic's rocket launch was a miraculous act.²⁶ • Ahmadinejad escaped kidnapping and assassination in Iraq and Rome through divine intervention.²⁷ • Had it not been for the benevolence of the Imam of the Era, the Ahmadinejad government would have collapsed.²⁸
Ideological adjustment	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Belief in the Imam of the Era is compatible with the supremacy of supreme leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei.²⁹ • There is a link between Iranian nationalism and the cult of the Imam of the Era.³⁰ • The Islamic Republic survives because of the grace and benevolence of God and the Imam of the Era.³¹ • The Imam of the Era is the executive leader of world affairs.³² • One must show the courtesy of mentioning the Imam of the Era.³³ • One must talk more of the Imam of the Era.³⁴ • The Islamic Republic is an early embodiment of the rule of the Imam of the Era.³⁵ • Ahmadinejad's government is the era of <i>Zohour-e Soghra</i> (the minor emergence).³⁶
Identification of the enemies of the Imam of the Era	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Those publishing blasphemous remarks on the Imam of the Era.³⁷ • Those ridiculing Ahmadinejad's discussions of the Imam of the Era.³⁸ • A certain committee based in the United States that assassinates the character of the Imam of the Era.³⁹ • The United States, which invades Iraq in an attempt to locate and kill⁴⁰ or delay the emergence of the Imam of the Era.⁴¹ • Those who criticize Ahmadinejad's belief in the Imam of the Era.⁴² • Those who are made uneasy by the mention of the Imam of the Era.⁴³ • The Shia clergy.⁴⁴ • Those who do not see the relationship between the Ahmadinejad government and the Imam of the Era.⁴⁵ • Those who do not see Ahmadinejad's halo of light.⁴⁶ • Those who prevent Ahmadinejad's government from fighting economic corruption.⁴⁷ • Those who do not want mention of God and the Imam of the Era.⁴⁸ • Those who ridicule the veneration of the Ahmadinejad government toward the mosque of Jamkaran, the claimed refuge of the Imam of the Era.⁴⁹

plots⁵⁰ and “victories” such as his speech to heads of state at the United Nations (UN) General Assembly to the miraculous intervention of the Mahdi. Indeed, Ahmadinejad commented that at the UN, he felt a “halo of light” above him,⁵¹ while at Columbia University, he said he felt the presence of the Imam of the Era.⁵² Such rhetoric serves the purpose of extending divine legitimacy to Ahmadinejad.

The clergy look at the Iranian president’s claims of miracles and direct contact with the Mahdi with suspicion and consider his actions to be political infiltration into religion, over which the clergy claim a monopoly. Ahmadinejad’s reference to direct contact with the Mahdi, if believed, also makes the clergy superfluous.

Ahmadinejad’s eschatological rhetoric and the millenarian discourse necessitated calibration to political realities in the Islamic Republic. The third phase, therefore, underscored ideological adjustment. Thus, it was at this time that Ayatollah Mohammad-Taqi Mesbah-Yazdi entered the debate to insist that belief in the Imam of the Era is compatible with adherence to the supremacy of Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei.⁵³ Mesbah-Yazdi sought to reconcile the two by arguing that the Islamic Republic is simply an early manifestation of the rule of the Imam of the Era,⁵⁴ who is the executive leader of all world affairs.⁵⁵ Even the grotesque claim that Ahmadinejad’s government represents the era of *Zohour-e Soghra* (the minor emergence)—creating a parallel to the Hidden Imam’s Lesser and Greater Occultation—aids ideological adjustment.⁵⁶ Ahmadinejad even links Iranian nationalism with the cult of the Hidden Imam, which is ironic because Iranian nationalism is often anti-Arab in character, and the Hidden Imam himself was Arab.⁵⁷

If the rhetoric of phase three sounds outlandish to Western ears, it does not sound much better to many Iranians. A number of leading Shia clerics have criticized the Iranian president’s abuse of the public’s religious beliefs (see table 2). Ahmadinejad and his followers responded with a fourth theme in their millenarian discourse, exposing those who oppose the Hidden Imam’s reemergence. Thus, clerical critics of Ahmadinejad’s policies become, in the discourse of the president and his followers, enemies of God.⁵⁸

Clerical Criticism of Ahmadinejad

A survey of clerical criticism of Ahmadinejad demonstrates two themes: Ahmadinejad’s incompetence in handling inflation and his abuse of Shia millenarian beliefs for political purposes. The first strain of criticism fits into standard clerical practice of speaking truth to power when religious figures feel government has gone astray, although, ironically, it is one that has been retarded since the revolution put clerics themselves into power. The inflation issue is particularly sensitive because the lower-income groups—the most devout in Iranian society—suffer most. Ayatollah Abdollah Javadi-Amoli challenged the Ahmadinejad government’s claims about the true level of inflation and insisted that there indeed is such a thing as “rising prices and inflation.”⁵⁹ His criticism was shared by powerful religious leaders such as Ayatollah Abdolkarim Mousavi Ardebili,⁶⁰ Ayatollah Makarem Shirazi,⁶¹ and even long-time Ahmadinejad supporter Mesbah-Yazdi.⁶² From the left of the political spectrum, Ayatollah Ebrahim Amini, the Friday prayer leader of Qom, warned against “galloping inflation,” homelessness, high rents, and malnourishment among the poor.⁶³ Not satisfied with just criticizing the economic policies of the Ahmadinejad government, Ayatollah Ali Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani said, “You can’t improve the economy by raising beggars”⁶⁴ and suggested that the Ahmadinejad government spreads poverty rather than wealth.

The Shia clergy’s protests against Ahmadinejad’s millenarian discourse should not be surprising. Ahmadinejad’s background is in the military, not theological seminaries. He has little formal training in theology. The clergy look at the Iranian president’s claims of miracles and direct contact with the Mahdi with suspicion and consider his actions to be political infiltration into religion, over which the clergy claim a monopoly. Ahmadinejad’s reference to direct contact with the Mahdi, if believed, also makes the clergy superfluous.

Palizdar the Proxy

Ahmadinejad’s “messianism” chafed the clergy throughout the first years of his administration, and the tension between the president and the religious establishment boiled over on May 27, 2008, when Abbas Palizdar—a former director of fundamental studies at the Research Institute of the Iranian Parliament and a member of an investigations committee under the Supreme Audit Court investigating cases of economic corruption⁶⁵—exposed 123 cases involving alleged

TABLE 2
CLERICAL CRITICISM OF AHMADINEJAD'S POLICIES AND DISCOURSE, 2007–2008

Name (Title)	Public function	Criticism(s)
Abtahi, Mohammad-Ali (Hojjat al-Eslam)	Director of former president Mohammad Khatami's Center for Dialogue Among Civilizations	Foreign policy ⁶⁶
Allah-Badashti, Ali (Ayatollah)	Leading expert on the reemergence of the Mahdi and Shia eschatology	Millenarianism ⁶⁷
Amini, Ebrahim (Ayatollah)	Friday prayer leader of Qom	Inflation ⁶⁸
Amoli, Abdollah Javadi (Ayatollah)	Professor at Elmiyyeh Theological Seminary in Qom	Inflation ⁶⁹ Economic corruption ⁷⁰
Do'a-goo, Mohsen (Hojjat al-Eslam)	Friday prayer leader of Shemiranat	Changes in cabinet ⁷¹ Local appointments ⁷²
Dorri Najaf-Abadi, Ghorban-Ali (Hojjat al-Eslam)	Prosecutor general of the Islamic Republic	Millenarianism ⁷³
Fatemi-Niya (Ayatollah)	Professor at a theological seminary in Qom	Millenarianism ⁷⁴
Hashemi Rafsanjani, Ali Akbar (Ayatollah)	Chair of the Expediency Council and the Assembly of Experts	Deficient freedom of speech ⁷⁵ General mismanagement ⁷⁶ Insufficient popular participation ⁷⁷ Repression ⁷⁸ Misguided economic policies ⁷⁹ Mismanagement of Azad University ⁸⁰
Hashemi Shahroudi, Mahmoud (Ayatollah)	Judiciary head (since 1999)	Economic conditions ⁸¹
Karrubi, Mehdi (Hojjat al-Eslam)	General secretary of the E'temad-e Melli (National Trust Party)	Blame game ⁸² Millenarianism ⁸³
Khomeini, Hassan (Hojjat al-Eslam)	Grandson of the founder of the Islamic Republic, Grand Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini	"Talibanism" ⁸⁴
Madani Bajestani, Mahmoud (Hojjat al-Eslam)	Tehran parliamentarian	Millenarianism ⁸⁵
Mahdavi Kani, Mohammad-Reza (Ayatollah)	General secretary of the Society of Combatant Clergy	Blame game ⁸⁶ Rising prices ⁸⁷ Millenarianism ⁸⁸
Makarem Shirazi, Naser (Grand Ayatollah)	Politically influential Shia leader	Rising prices ⁸⁹ Millenarianism ⁹⁰ Inflation ⁹¹
Mesbah-Yazdi, Mohammad-Taghi (Ayatollah)	Head of the Imam Khomeini Research Institute in Qom	Minor symbolic issue ⁹² Rising prices ⁹³
Mesbahi-Moghaddam, Gholam-Reza (Hojjat al-Eslam)	Tehran parliamentarian	Rising prices ⁹⁴
Mohaghegh-Damad, Mostafa	Head of theological studies at the Academy of Sciences	Millenarianism ⁹⁵
Mojtahed Shabestari, Mohsen (Grand Ayatollah)	Friday prayer leader of Tabriz	Economic policies ⁹⁶
Montazeri, Hossein-Ali (Grand Ayatollah)	Dissident cleric	Treatment of student activists ⁹⁷ Maltreatment of a religious minority ⁹⁸
Mousavi Ardebili, Abdol-Karim (Grand Ayatollah)	Former judiciary head (1979–89)	Rising prices ⁹⁹

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(Table 2 continued)

Name (Title)	Public function	Criticism(s)
Mousavi Tabrizi, Hossein (Hojjat al-Eslam)	General secretary of the Assembly of Scholars and Professors at Elmiyyeh Theological Seminary in Qom	Millenarianism ¹⁰⁰
Nateq Nouri, Ali-Akbar (Hojjat al-Eslam)	Former speaker of the Iranian parliament	Millenarianism ¹⁰¹
Niyazi, Mohammad (Hojjat al-Eslam)	Head of the Supreme Investigative Organization of the Islamic Republic	Economic mafia ¹⁰²
Nouri-Hamadani, Hossein (Grand Ayatollah)	Influential Shia leader	Rising prices ¹⁰³
Pour-Mohammadi, Mostafa (Hojjat al-Eslam)	Dismissed minister of interior	Blame game ¹⁰⁴
Rastgou, Mohammad-Hassan (Hojjat al-Eslam)	Director of the Pedagogical Center of the Theological Seminary in Qom	TV programs ¹⁰⁵
Rowhani, Hassan (Hojjat al-Eslam)	Representative of the supreme leader in the Supreme National Security Council	Foreign and economic policies ¹⁰⁶ Millenarianism ¹⁰⁷
Sane'i, Yousef (Grand Ayatollah)	Former member of the Guardian Council	Millenarianism ¹⁰⁸

economic corruption among high-ranking Iranian clergy during a speech at the University of Hamadan.¹⁰⁹ Subsequently, reports surfaced that he had made similar accusations during a speech at the University of Shiraz.

Effectively a proxy for Ahmadinejad in his battle against entrenched religious interests, Palizdar made allegations about clerical malfeasance ranging from illegal acceptance of automobiles from Iran Khodro, Iran's largest automobile manufacturer, to lax attitudes in the fight against drugs, illegal takeovers of mines and factories, luxurious lifestyles, and even moral issues (see table 3). While Iranians understood Palizdar's attacks against Rafsanjani in the context of the rivalry between Ahmadinejad and the former president, Palizdar's attacks against the seemingly God-fearing Friday prayer leader of Mashhad, Ayatollah Alam al-Hoda, and against the Friday prayer leader of Tehran, Ayatollah Mohammed Emami-Kashani, were particularly damaging to the image of the clergy. Palizdar appeared a perfect proxy for Ahmadinejad because, like the president, he was a veteran of the Iran-Iraq War, having volunteered at age fourteen.¹¹⁰

Initially, the Iranian officialdom sought to ignore Palizdar. His speeches received no attention in the state-controlled press for a couple of weeks.¹¹¹ But the story spread on the Internet, and foreign broadcasters such as Voice of America–Persian, the British Broadcasting Corporation, and Radio Farda pursued his allegations—Farda even aired an interview with Palizdar in which Palizdar claimed Ayatollah Hossein Nouri-Hamadani, chairman of

the judiciary committee of the Iranian parliament, had attempted to suppress the findings of his investigations.¹¹² The press was forced to react. Initially, they sought to minimize Palizdar's importance. The Research Institute of the Iranian Parliament claimed to have no knowledge of an employee by his name and even threatened Palizdar with legal action for claiming to work for the institute.¹¹³ Hassan Kamran, another official serving on the investigations committee, also claimed ignorance of Palizdar's membership, although the committee was forced to retract his statement when documents proved Palizdar's employment.¹¹⁴ After Alef News Agency released the news that Palizdar had earlier run for local Islamic Council elections on the Pleasant Scent of Servitude—the parliamentary faction supporting Ahmadinejad and featuring his son¹¹⁵—Ahmadinejad's brother Davoud, the chair of the Special Investigations Office of the Presidency, condemned the crisis that Palizdar had “sparked off”¹¹⁶ in society.

The press then turned to character assassination. Fars News Agency and *Kayhan*—a newspaper whose editor is a direct appointee of the supreme leader—both claimed Palizdar had been involved in an embezzlement scandal as a shareholder in a dairy factory,¹¹⁷ and *Kayhan* wrote that Palizdar had stolen top secret information on the Iranian military, allegations also repeated by the Revolutionary Guards *Sobh-e Sadegh* weekly.¹¹⁸ Raja News Agency said that Palizdar's master's degree from a university in Maryland was fake.¹¹⁹ In a reference to Palizdar, Friday prayer leader of Tehran Ayatollah Mohammed Emami-Kashani

TABLE 3
FIGURES ACCUSED BY PALIZDAR OF CORRUPTION

Name (Title)	Function	Accusation(s)
Abedini, Amir	Persepolis Football Club	Involvement in illegal transfer of ownership of two thousand automobiles from Iran Khodro
Adabi, Hamid	Former head of Iran Khodro sales office	Involvement in illegal transfer of ownership of automobiles to various authorities
Abou	Member of antinarcotics agency headquarters	Not pursuing those involved in drug trafficking
Air and Space Industries	Owned by Ministry of Defense and Armed Forces Logistics	Involvement in illegal transfer of ownership of automobiles from Iran Khodro
Alam al-Hoda (Ayatollah)	Friday prayer leader of Mashhad and owner of Hamgarayi-ye Andisheh Foundation	Involvement in illegal transfer of ownership of automobiles from Iran Khodro
Asgar Owladi	General secretary of Islamic Motalefeh	Involvement in illegal transfer of ownership of five hundred automobiles from Iran Khodro
Budget and Planning Organization	Budget and planning	General economic corruption
Danesh-Ja'fari, Davoud	Former minister of economy and finance	Not pursuing the fight against economic corruption
Din-Parvar, Mohammad	Unclear	Involvement in illegal transfer of ownership of five hundred automobiles from Iran Khodro
Emami-Kashani, Mohammed (Ayatollah)	Friday prayer leader of Tehran and former member of the Guardian Council	Involvement in illegal transfer of ownership of four mines in Zanzan and Fars and corruption involving an institute for Down syndrome patients
Emami-Kashani	Son of Ayatollah Emami-Kashani	Corruption involving an institute for Down syndrome patients
Falahiyan (Hojjat al-Eslam)	Former minister of intelligence and owner of Hamgarayi-ye Andisheh Foundation	Involvement in illegal transfer of ownership of automobiles from Iran Khodro
Forouz Missile Technology	Owned by Ministry of Defense and Armed Forces Logistics	Involvement in illegal transfer of ownership of automobiles from Iran Khodro
Ganji, Akbar	Owner of Mahram Factories	Engagement in economic corruption with Ayatollah Yazdi and Mohammad-Ali Shar'i
Ghorouri, Manouchehr	Former Iran Khodro executive	Involvement in illegal transfer of ownership of automobiles to friends
Hamgarayi-ye Andisheh Foundation	Owned by Hojjat al-Eslam Fallahiyan and Ayatollah Alam al-Hoda	Involvement in illegal transfer of ownership of automobiles from Iran Khodro
Hashemi Rafsanjani, Ali Akbar (Ayatollah)	Chairman of the Assembly of Experts and the Expediency Council and former president of Iran	Importation of automobiles with no customs and ownership of a third of Kish Island, Park-e Jangali in the North, and various businesses in Canada
Hashemi Rafsanjani, Fa'ezeh	Daughter of Ayatollah Ali Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani	Luxurious lifestyle
Hashemi Rafsanjani, Mehdi	Son of Ayatollah Ali Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani and head of Improvement of Energy Consumption of Iran Bureau	Moral issues

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(Table 3 continued)

Name (Title)	Function	Accusation(s)
Heydari	Official involved in the fight against drug smuggling	Lax attitude
Iran Khodro	Automobile factory	Transfer of test cars to all members of the judiciary
Khaz'ali, Abolqasem (Ayatollah)	Head of the Al-Qadir International Foundation	Involvement in mining on Hormuz Island
Mo'ezzi	Unclear	Involvement in illegal transfer of ownership of five hundred automobiles from Iran Khodro
Modallel	Deputy of Ayatollah Makarem Shirazi and son-in-law of Ayatollah Mesbah Yazdi	Sugar mafia
Nahj al-Balaghe Foundation	Owned by Ali-Akbar Nateq Nouri, Mohsen Rafiq-Doust, Asgar Owladi, Hossein Din-Parvar, and Mo'ezzi	Involvement in illegal transfer of ownership of automobiles from Iran Khodro
Nateq Nouri, Ali-Akbar	Director of Special Investigations Bureau of the office of supreme leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, former speaker of the Iranian parliament, and owner of Nahj al-Balaghe Foundation	Involvement in illegal transfer of ownership of five hundred automobiles from Iran Khodro
Ne'mat-Zadeh, Mohammad-Reza	Former minister of industry and mining	Involvement in illegal transfer of ownership of Dena Tire factory much below market price
Rafiq-Doust, Mohsen	Cofounder and former minister of the Revolutionary Guards, former head of the Foundation of the Oppressed, and current owner of Nahj al-Balaghe Foundation	Involvement in illegal transfer of ownership of five hundred automobiles from Iran Khodro
Shahroudi	Judiciary head	Toleration of corruption
Shar'i, Mohammad Ali	Member of Assembly of Experts	Involvement in illegal transfer of ownership of Dena Tire Company
Taqi-Zadeh, Abbas	Protégé of Nateq Nouri	Involvement in Payam Airport smuggling business
Va'ez Tabasi, Abbas (Ayatollah)	Caretaker of the Astan-e Qods-e Razavi	Ownership of twelve mines in Khorasan
Va'ez Tabasi, Naser	Son of Ayatollah Va'ez Tabasi	Involvement in the al-Makaseb affair
Unclear section	Ministry of Interior	Involvement in illegal transfer of ownership of two thousand automobiles from Iran Khodro
Yazdi, Mohammad (Ayatollah)	Former head of the judiciary, current general secretary of Combatant Clergy Association, former member of Guardian Council, former member of Assembly of Experts, former judiciary head, former secretary of Assembly of Scholars and Professors at the Elmiyyeh Seminary of Qom	Involvement in illegal transfer of ownership of Dena Tire Company
Yazdi, Hamid	Son of Ayatollah Yazdi and former director general of the judiciary	Illegally obtaining monopoly on lumber trade in northern woods of Iran
Yousefi, Mohammad-Reza	Member of Revolutionary Guards intelligence and cooperator with Modallel	Sugar mafia
Zargar, Rasoul	Chief of antinarcotics agency headquarters	Lax attitude

SOURCE: Abbas Palizdar (speech, University of Hamadan, Iran, May 27, 2008).

assured the Iranian public that “plotters and accusers are bound to be punished by God,”¹²⁰ and a week later, Ayatollah Ahmad Khatami depicted the Palizdar affair as “conspiracy and sabotage against the Islamic Republic.”¹²¹

On June 11, 2008, security forces arrested Palizdar on charges of “economic abuse, false accusations, spreading of lies in order to disturb the public mind and spreading of rumors.”¹²² In subsequent days, police arrested a number of alleged Palizdar associates—including parliamentarians¹²³—sparking demonstrations in Tehran that took riot police and tear gas to disperse.¹²⁴

Indeed, the rioting is indicative of the frustration ordinary Iranians feel over corruption among their leaders and the lack of accountability of many clergy to the law. Several Ahmadinejad supporters leapt to Palizdar’s defense. Nowsazi News Agency, which generally supports Ahmadinejad’s policies, depicted Palizdar as “a decent man.”¹²⁵ On a website close to the student wing of the paramilitary Basij, a certain Dr. Taha Jazayeri stressed the necessity of an open trial at which not only Palizdar, but also allegations of elite corruption could be investigated.¹²⁶ The Islamic Society Association, which had invited Palizdar to Hamadan, stressed the importance of airing public criticism.¹²⁷ In a not-too-subtle show of support, Ansar News Agency released pictures—which now have been removed—of Palizdar as a soldier in the Iran-Iraq war to mobilize support from war veterans.¹²⁸

Conclusion

Iranian society often turns to millenarianism during times of uncertainty because of a lack of legal channels for expressing political dissatisfaction. Ahmadinejad’s fantastic claims of miracles and direct contact with the Hidden Imam use these beliefs to his advantage. He presents his government grotesquely as one paving the road for the emergence of the Shia messiah and blames the ills of the state-controlled economy on the enemies of the Imam of the Era who want to delay the Day of Judgment. If his assertions take hold, they will dislodge the clergy from their monopoly on religious interpretation. After all, what use is there for the rule of the supreme leader as the intermediary between man and the Imam of the Era if the Iranian president manages to democratize access to the Shia messiah? In the long run, such a development would undermine the authority of the senior clergy in the political affairs of the Islamic Republic.

As the president interfered more in religious matters, the clergy increased their criticism of Ahmadinejad’s

economic management and, understandably, his primitive use of millenarianism. Then came the Palizdar affair—Ahmadinejad’s apparent response. Rather than getting involved in a theological battle that he and his supporters would have lost to intellectually superior Shia clergy, Ahmadinejad used the Palizdar affair in an attempt to taint the clergy and further damage the sanctity of men of God.

While neither Ahmadinejad’s millenarianism nor Palizdar’s corruption allegations will ignite a revolt against the clergy, they have already tarnished the clergy’s image. In the never-ending battle for predominance among the Islamic Republic’s pillars, the Revolutionary Guards, from which the laical Ahmadinejad rose, are the chief beneficiaries of the weakening of the clergy. And so, as two battle-hardened veterans declare war on the clergy, the victors will be the Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps: the self-perceived holy warriors of Islam could take political power by claiming direct communication with the divine element without the Shia clergy as intermediaries. The Shia clergy would then have to take up once again their historical role of protecting the Shia community from abuse at the hands of rulers.

Mr. Alfoneh thanks the Royal Danish Defense College for its support of his research and Washington Institute for Near East Policy visiting fellow Mehdi Khalaji for his insights. AEI resident scholar Michael Rubin and associate editor Christy Hall Robinson worked with Mr. Alfoneh to edit and produce this Middle Eastern Outlook.

Notes

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