

Why is Iran Championing Messianism to the Arab Masses?

Written by Jamsheed K. Choksy

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JAMSHEED K. CHOKSY, APR 19 2011

As revolutionary movements sweep across the Middle East, the Islamic Republic of Iran, which hitherto had little success exporting its own brand of fundamentalism, is seeking to capitalize on the uncertain times. If all Tehran accomplishes by providing support for Arab protestors is a reduction in the orientation of governments in Tunis, Tripoli, Cairo, and Sanaa toward the West, Iran will gain much geopolitically.[1]

Yet Iranian leaders are seeking much more. They are attempting to provide religious inspiration to all Muslims – and especially to Shi'ite coreligionists in countries like Bahrain, Saudi Arabia, Lebanon, and Jordan – that could radically reshape polities across the Middle East.[2] Iran is also sending a not so subtle message to incumbent leaders in those and other Arab nations that they need to pay more attention to Tehran and less to Washington, London, Paris, and Berlin.

One influential means by which Iran is reaching out to disgruntled Arabs, while unsettling their pro-Western leaders, is by depicting problems in the Middle East specifically and around the world generally as foretelling the advent of a Muslim savior.[3] Essentially, Iran is exploiting political and religious schisms within Arab societies to advance its confessional and nationalistic causes through a messianic scenario complete with a violent apocalypse.[4]

Messianism has been central to Iranian religiosity since early antiquity. The concept entered Judeo-Christian and Islamic traditions including Shi'ism, from Zoroastrianism or the faith of ancient Iran.[5] Since the spread of those ideas, natural calamities and political upheavals have been regarded as portending the final days. The End's non-advent has never dissuaded belief in it, either. But the Zoroastrian end of the world is one in which evil generates the apocalyptic turmoil that God has to assuage. In Iranian Muslim belief, however, the savior returns to fiercely expunge all forms of deviation from Islam and establish Ithna-'Asharism or Twelver Shi'ism as normative and pervasive.

The twelfth imam Abu al-Qasem Mohammad ibn al-Hasan is believed to have disappeared, or according to Shi'ism entered greater occultation, in the year 940 ce. Allah is said to have hidden that imam to protect him from religious and political opponents, especially medieval Sunni leaders who are alleged by Shi'ites to have assassinated his ancestors.[6] Some of the Islamic Republic of Iran's leaders claim this twelfth imam will reappear *soon* as humanity's savior, called al-Mahdi or the Guided One, because terminal battles between nations are about to cause the end of the world.[7] Their fixation on this messianism and its accompanying apocalypse, which politicizes traditional Iranian beliefs of God saving humanity from evil, has been rising to a feverish pitch.

Messianism in Iran after the Islamic Revolution of 1979 was spurred first by indigenous fundamentalism, then by diplomatic tussles with the West, and recently by sociopolitical upheaval in the Arab Middle East. Essentially the Arab Spring is explained by the apocalyptically-inclined among Tehran's leaders as yet another sign that the Mahdi is definitely about to reappear. Attempts by Sunni Arab leaders, as diverse as Colonel Muammar Gadhafi of Libya, King Abdullah II of Jordan, Sheikh Hamad ibn Isa Al-Khalifa of Bahrain, and King Abdullah of Saudi Arabia, to quash their citizens' populist political, social, and religious aspirations are framed by Iranian mollahs or clergymen as contrary to the will of God and therefore detrimental to the wellbeing of the Muslim umma or community. The actions by most Arab heads of state are characterized in starkly religious terms by Iranian politicians close to Supreme Leader

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Ayatollah Ali Khamenei as representing nothing but “heresy and deception.”[8]

In March, a 75-minute documentary entitled “The Re-appearance is Very Near” aired on Shia TV (which broadcasts in Persian, Arabic, Urdu, and English).[9] Aimed at Muslims who feel oppressed by Western-oriented leaders, the messianic program was distributed globally via the internet and CD-ROMs. Its narrative fused fact, fiction, and belief into a seemingly pious tale that preys upon viewers’ religiosity. It links the savior’s impending arrival to Iran’s Islamic Revolution, to President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad’s foreign policy, and to recent revolts in the Arab world. It calls for the overthrow of Arab, Israeli, and Western leaders as precursory steps to the Mahdi’s arrival. The Persian Gulf, which produces approximately 25 percent of crude oil and 35 percent of natural gas used around the world, is depicted smothered by smoke and fire (see photograph from the documentary’s stage set). Iranian, Hezbollah, and Hamas soldiers are shown training to storm Jerusalem. Khamenei and Ahmadinejad are presented greeting the Mahdi. A sequel to that religious narrative is said to be on its way as well.[10]

Western fears that Iran’s nuclear quest too may be linked to this rise and propagation of messianism are fueled by yet another video – one showing simulated warhead detonations.[11] Obtained covertly by the International Atomic Energy Agency in February 2008, the video included music from the movie Chariots of Fire. The messianic image of a chariot of fire was popularized by William Blake in a nineteenth century poem about Jerusalem. It was taught in Iranian schools prior to the Islamic revolution and is still read by intellectuals and scholars there. So, Iranian leaders viewing the nuclear video would have connected it to apocalyptic events even though Ahmadinejad and Khamenei publically deny developing weapons of mass destruction.[12]

The idea of a religious Armageddon lying around the corner is unusual in Twenty-First Century statecraft and few national leaders vocalize such beliefs or claim to be “paving the way for the savior’s coming.” Iran’s President Ahmadinejad and Supreme Leader Khamenei are stark exceptions. Even Venezuela’s mercurial Hugo Chavez utters similar words only when with his Iranian counterpart.[13] Khamenei speaks publically about the Arab uprisings being unstoppable because they supposedly represent the desire of Allah and the twelve imams to establish polities based solely on Islamic tenets.[14] The supreme leader and the president mention the Mahdi often in meetings with clerics and at public gatherings. Moreover Khamenei and Ahmadinejad have met with protest leaders from Arab nations – including members of Egypt’s Ikhwan or Muslim Brotherhood – urging them to work toward Islamist societies in preparation for humanity’s final days.

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But many pious Shi'ites, even among the mollahs, overtly or covertly oppose *velayat-e faqih* or guardianship of the (Muslim) jurist which is the system of government in Iran.[15] They regard it as superfluous and detrimental to establishing a devout society into which the Mahdi can return. They suggest politics in its current form, including *velayat-e faqih*, is obsolete since the end is nigh. Popular ayatollahs like Mohammad Taqi Mesbah Yazdi and Ahmad Khatami are said to belong to or at least share tenets with a banned Shi'ite messianic organization called the *Hojjatiyeh* or Association of God's Proof. Many of them therefore subscribe to a notion that messianism is a "divine mission" they must undertake for the savior to make current political systems valueless and establish a new divinely-mandated order.[16]

At the level of national politics, Ahmadinejad has a very pragmatic reason to facilitate the spread of messianism within and outside Iran for he stands to benefit politically because the weakening of Muslim clerical authority strengthens his executive branch. Even those mollahs who believe firmly in the Mahdi are aware of this political power play and are wary of its impact on their authority and status. Indeed, they have reason to be cautious of messianism's partisan ramifications even while believing in and proselytizing it. Adding to their political fear of messianism getting out of hand, a website sponsored by the president's close advisor Esfandiar Rahim Mashaei has gone as far as recommending that "Iran remove the mollahs from power once for all and return itself to a great civilization." [17]

Understandably, therefore, Khamenei and Ahmadinejad regard the immediacy of messianism differently. Iran's supreme leader sees the end of the world as an event occurring sometime in the relatively distant future. In reality, Khamenei is pragmatically ensuring belief in messianism does not threaten either his own temporal authority or that of other mollahs. Iran's president, on the other hand, views the world as on the cusp of Judgment Day. Therefore Ahmadinejad speaks of preparing his country, Arab Middle Eastern states, and all other nations for a new, unified, divinely-inspired religio-political system. Because of this difference in approach toward messianism, and despite the Shia TV program's depiction of Iran's current Supreme Leader Khamenei as the Mahdi's facilitator, clerics close to him have abjured the presentation. They claim it misrepresents Shi'ism and the supreme leader's outlook.[18] Attributing its production to attempts by President Ahmadinejad to sideline them, the mollahs forced out his Chief of Staff Mashaei.[19]

These developments indicate messianism is becoming central to internal political struggles even as it is being utilized by Iranian politicians and clergymen to extend their authority beyond Iran's borders. Ahmadinejad and others in the executive branch of Iran's government, like senior bureaucrats of the civil service and commanders in the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps are not from clerical backgrounds. Their loyalty to fundamentalist mollahs has been largely self-serving and now, in the wake of protests – that both inspired and drew upon the Arab Spring – against the supreme leader, is being cast aside.[20] But clerics and bureaucrats alike understand that messianism resonates well across the Arab Middle East as it provides hope all will be made right and just by God through his chosen Muslim agents. So they keep advocating it.

Yet again, and much to the chagrin of mollahs who are fearful of perchance expanding sectarian divides between Sunnis and Shi'ites, Iran's president and his allies are providing another twist to the Iranian rendering of messianism. They are rejecting the notion of Shi'ites as merely one of many groups within the Muslim community. Ahmadinejad has taken the position that "the Iranian interpretation of truth is the closest one to actual truth; thus we should plan our activities according to an Iranian interpretation of Islam." [21]

The rise of Iran on the world stage is being coupled with the eventual triumph of Shi'ism through the Mahdi's reappearance. The message, ultimately, is that Shi'ism and Iran offer the only path to resolution of all problems in the modern world. That theme is targeted at Sunni Muslims across the Middle East in addition to the Shi'ites of Iraq, the United Arab Emirates, other Gulf countries, Saudi Arabia, Syria, and Lebanon. The Islamic Republic's opposition to the United States of America, the European Union, and Israel are proffered as examples of Allah's will working through Iran to provide all Muslims with a path to salvation in troubling and repressive times. Indeed, even the regime in Tehran's suppression of democratic aspirations at home is explained as essential to ensuring the arrival of the Mahdi is not thwarted by a secularist turn in domestic sociopolitics.[22]

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Religious ideas often shape national, regional, and international events. Iranian leaders' manipulation of the messianic concept is aimed at Muslims in Arab and other lands in addition to their own citizens. Iranian leaders like Ahmadinejad have effectively co-opted not only Shi'ism's powerful notions of a world savior but Salafi and other activist Sunni ones as well.[23] Their apocalyptic warnings are aimed at extending Iran's influence by orienting peoples' political dispositions and reverential attitudes toward Tehran and Qom.[24] The message even permits Khamenei, Ahmadinejad, and other Iranian officials to undercut the Saud family's claim, based on Wahhabi tenets and Arabian sovereignty, to absolute authority over the Muslim holy sites of Mecca and Medina. Not surprisingly, Iran's involvement in supporting Arab protestors greatly unsettles the Saudi Arabian monarchy.[25]

Yes, Iran is becoming the proverbial elephant in the room – with the power to do both good and evil like its ancient pre-Islamic faith claimed. Governments in the West, like the Sunni elites of the Middle East fear its interventions will not bode well. Yet, it is important to understand events since 1979 have demonstrated that the powerbrokers in Iran place their own regime's survival at the foremost of their concerns and are unlikely to initiate a cataclysm that torches it. But they also are championing messianism, and especially its apocalyptic features, in a globally menacing manner. Consequently, prudence dictates not discounting the possibility that Ahmadinejad and his cohorts do believe their rhetoric. Indeed, the Middle East has a long history of violence related to beliefs that a world savior is due. Political repressions, popular uprisings, and hope for heavenly intervention have worked together to fuel zealotry since antiquity.[26] So vigilance is necessary to ensure fanaticism does not lead to catastrophe especially now when many Middle Easterners are experiencing revolutionary fervor.[27]

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