

# Ahmadinejad and the Politics of Mahdism in Iran

Written by Zachary Keck

This PDF is auto-generated for reference only. As such, it may contain some conversion errors and/or missing information. For all formal use please refer to the official version on the website, as linked below.

## Ahmadinejad and the Politics of Mahdism in Iran

<https://www.e-ir.info/2011/06/03/ahmadinejad-and-the-politics-of-mahdism-in-iran/>

ZACHARY KECK, JUN 3 2011

Western audiences have become both fascinated and horrified by Iranian leaders' public appeals to Shi'a Islam's Messiah figure, the Twelfth Imam Muhammad al-Mahdi, known widely as the Hidden or Missing Imam. Despite the attention Mahdism has recently received in the West, the ways in which Iranian officials use it remains poorly understood. A good example of this misunderstanding is Jamsheed Choksy's recent article on *e-International Relations*, which argues that Iranian leaders have been using Mahdism to expand Iranian influence throughout the Middle East.[1] As I discuss below, Choksy misattributes who in the Iranian government use Mahdism most saliently, and to what ends they use it.

This article thus tries to provide a more accurate description of the role of Mahdism in Iranian politics. I argue that Mahdism is mostly used by a new generation of Iranian leaders in order to bolster their religious credentials, discredit their rivals and to mount a challenge to the Islamic Republic system itself. In this regard, Mahdism helps illuminate the deeper issues behind the recent public dispute within the Iranian government.[2] Compared to the relatively important role the Mahdi figure has had in Iran's domestic politics, the issue has played only a minor role in Iran's foreign affairs. After briefly explaining the background of the Mahdi factor and discussing the shortcomings in Choksy's article, I will attempt to provide a fuller account of the politics of Mahdism in Iran.

Mahdi refers to Shi'a Islam's twelfth Imam who is thought to have gone into hiding during the 9<sup>th</sup> century where he remains today. According to Shi'a Islam, during a turbulent moment on earth, Mahdi will reappear in order to restore peace and justice in the world. Although most Shi'ites believe in Mahdi's reappearance only in an allegorical sense, some take a more literal interpretation. The most radical sects proclaim that Mahdi's return is imminent. This paper terms this last belief "Mahdism" in so far as it is used strategically on behalf of other ends.

Choksy's recent article notes this strategic use of the Mahdi conception. Nonetheless, his analysis errs in two ways. First, he is indecisive as to which Iranian leaders use Mahdism. For most of the article, he does not differentiate between the Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei and President Ahmadinejad as far as their religious appeal to Mahdi is concerned. Later in the article, however, he does correct this position by explaining that the two leaders have widely different interests in the Mahdi issue. This only serves to undermine his overall point, namely that Iranian leaders are using Mahdism as a strategy to expand Iran's influence abroad. As Choksy notes and I discuss more below, Mahdi's reappearance would divest the Supreme Leader of all his power.[3] It is therefore not too surprising that Choksy fails to cite a single instance of Ayatollah Khamenei actually using Mahdism for any purpose whatsoever.[4]

Additionally, Choksy fails to make a convincing case for the claim that Iranian leaders are using the Mahdi symbol to advance their interests abroad. Not only does he fail to offer a single example of Iranian leaders successfully employing this tactic, but he also puts forward confusing and contradictory explanations about how Iranian leaders intend to do this. At times, for instance, he argues that Iran is using the Mahdi figure as a means to unify the Shi'ite populations in the region. At other points in the article, however, Choksy claims that Iranian leaders are openly using Mahdism to contest and eliminate other brands of Shi'ism. While these are not necessarily mutually exclusive, the argument does undermine Choksy's contention that Iran will be able to spread its influence in the region, as Shi'ites aren't likely to willingly abandon their own religious interpretations and embrace Tehran's version of Shi'ism.

# Ahmadinejad and the Politics of Mahdism in Iran

Written by Zachary Keck

Matters only become more obscure when Choksy discusses how Sunni Muslims fit into Iran's Mahdist strategy. At some points in the article, Choksy makes the plausible claim that Mahdism conveys the message that "Shi'ism and Iran offer the only path" which is "targeted at Sunni Muslims across the region." In other instances, however, Choksy states the direct opposite; namely that Iran is using Mahdism to unite Muslims regardless of sectarian differences in a bid to "undercut the Saud family's claim... to absolute authority over the Muslim holy sites of Mecca and Medina."<sup>[5]</sup> These two arguments are irreconcilable. Moreover, while Choksy is correct that Iranian leaders have been downplaying sectarianism in recent years, it's difficult to conceive of them using one of the most divisive figures in Islam towards this end. If this is indeed Iran's strategy for establishing its dominance over the region, it would seem that fears of Iran establishing regional hegemony have been greatly overblown.

Overall then, Choksy's argument that Iran is using Mahdism to "radically reshape politics across the Middle East" is unpersuasive. Professor Choksy misconstrues who in Iran uses Mahdism and on behalf of what ends they use it. A more accurate account would depict Mahdism as a tactic mainly used by a new generation of Iranian leaders in order to advance their domestic political power relative to the older revolutionary vanguard. To understand how Mahdism fits into Iranian politics, then, some background is in order.

Ahmadinejad's presidency is representative of a new generation of Iranian leaders trying to take the reins of power from the elder revolutionary leadership.<sup>[6]</sup> They started ascending to power when Conservative clerics, believing that their power was threatened by the Reformist movement led by former President Mohammad Khatami, began empowering a younger generation of leaders in the security and intelligence agencies.<sup>[7]</sup> The Principlists, as this second generation of leaders is widely called,<sup>[8]</sup> went on to enhance their power through electoral victories in the 2003 municipal elections, 2004 Majlis (Parliament) elections, and the 2005 presidential vote that brought Mahmoud Ahmadinejad to power.<sup>[9]</sup> Their rise to power was in full swing when, after assuming power, President Ahmadinejad carried out extensive purges at all levels of the Iranian government, which in turn helped strengthen the institutional power of the Principlists further.<sup>[10]</sup>

Although hardly a monolithic force amongst themselves, a number of characteristics distinguish the Principlists from their predecessors. First, in contrast to the clerics who have led Iran since the 1979 revolution, the Principlists have little formal religious training and instead come from the intelligence and security organs of the state. Similarly, while their predecessors were most profoundly shaped by the leading roles they played in the 1979 Iranian revolution, the Principlists are, for the most part, a product of their experience fighting on the frontlines in the war against Iraq during the 1980s. Finally, the Principlists advocate a populist economic agenda that draws from an aspect of Grand Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini's revolutionary message that previous factions had largely ignored since Khomeini's death.<sup>[11]</sup> Mahdism is well-suited to both the Principlists' political strengths and their weaknesses. While there is no way to determine if Ahmadinejad and his allies actually hold the beliefs they profess, it's undeniable that they often use Mahdism for political gain. This is done in a number of ways.

First, the Principlists use Mahdism to make them less vulnerable to charges that their lack of religious training precludes them from being legitimate leaders. Compared to most Shi'a Twelvers, who speak of Mahdi's return in a philosophical, distant sense, those who speak of the Hidden Imam's imminent return are considered religious fanatics. By staking out such an extreme religious stance, the Principlists seek to insulate themselves from criticisms for their lack of religious allegiance and commitment.<sup>[12]</sup> As one observer has noted, "Ahmadinejad had no religious credentials, but he also managed to out-believe even the strongest believers in Shia Twelver Islam by constantly invoking the Mahdi's name."<sup>[13]</sup> The Principlists also use Mahdi's image to symbolize their own self-described struggle for justice on behalf of ordinary Iranians. As mentioned above, Mahdi's return will supposedly usher in a world free of injustices. This is undoubtedly attractive to Iranians who, as a result of both history and the influence of Shi'ism, have taken to identifying themselves as victims. The Principlists therefore use Mahdism to convey the message that they are determined to establish universal justice.

To the extent that Mahdism factors into Iran's foreign affairs, it seeks to promote this sense of justice. Iranians understandably feel their nation has historically suffered grave injustices at the hands of foreign powers. Many Iranians see the current U.S.-led order as perpetuating this injustice. By proclaiming that the return of Mahdi is imminent, the Principlists are in effect saying that they will stand firm against foreign powers seeking to violate

## Ahmadinejad and the Politics of Mahdism in Iran

Written by Zachary Keck

Iranians' *haq* (rights). In the long term, the return of Mahdi signals the Principlists' ultimate objective of establishing a more just international order, which would roughly consist of a multipolar world internationally, and a Middle East where Iran would assume its "natural" role as a leader.

No foreign policy issue better conveys the Principlists' emphasis on justice and basic rights than the nuclear impasse with the West. Although the nuclear issue hardly registered among the Iranian populace until as late as 2000, it has since been much more highly publicized in Iran.[14] The greater importance of the nuclear issue for the Iranian public correlated with the Principlists' rise to power and their nuclear narrative which strongly resonates among many Iranians.

The Principlists' nuclear narrative portrays Western opposition to Iran's nuclear program as an attempt to dilute Iran's sovereignty and impede its scientific progress with the goal of keeping Iran weak. To illustrate this, they have drawn explicit parallels between the West's current opposition to Iran's nuclear program and historical injustices that Iran has suffered at the hands of foreign powers, such as 1928 Treaty of Turkmenchai with Russia and the 1953 CIA-backed coup against the popular Prime Minister Mohammad Mosaddegh.[15] The Principlists then frame themselves as the only faction in Iran capable of protecting the nation's rights against the powerful West. It is in this context that President Ahmadinejad defiantly proclaims that Iran will not relinquish "one iota" of its nuclear rights.[16]

But the sense of injustice is by no means limited to the international realm. Of at least equal importance to the Principlists are the injustices orchestrated by the "aristocrats" in the Clergy. These elder Revolutionary leaders, according to them, have used their privileged position in the Iranian government to amass enormous personal wealth while simultaneously denying positions of power to others. The exemplar of this type of leader is the former President Ayatollah Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani.[17] Rafsanjani has been a permanent fixture on the Iranian political scene since the 1979 revolution during which time his family has also become one of the richest in Iran.[18]

President Ahmadinejad's campaign denouncing Rafsanjani began when the two were opponents in the 2005 Presidential election. This criticism continued throughout Ahmadinejad's first term and was a central component of his re-election campaign in 2009. In a televised debate against the leading candidate Mir Hossein Mousavi in June 2009, for instance, Ahmadinejad told the audience he was not merely running against Mousavi but rather a collection of establishment figures that included Rafsanjani and former President Mohammad Khatami. In so doing, Ahmadinejad sought to portray himself as a victim to a ruthless slander campaign being staged by the establishment Clerics in an effort to dissuade him from continuing to fight on behalf of the rights of ordinary Iranians.[19] As was the case in the fight to uphold Iran's rights in the face of Western powers, Ahmadinejad pledged to remain steadfast in this effort.

This argument has enormous appeal among large segments of the Iranian electorate. As one observer noted, "Ahmadinejad, like the Glenn Becks and Sarah Palins of America, appeals to every Iranian who is either envious or contemptuous (or both) of the highly educated elite – Iranians who believe themselves entitled to govern over the masses of less educated and less sophisticated people." [20] In other words, it is the Principlists who will restore the social justice that Ayatollah Khomeini had always intended. Judging from their impressive electoral record over the preceding decade (even excluding the 2009 Presidential elections), this tactic has been an unblemished success.

Finally, at least for Ahmadinejad and his close aides, proclaiming the prompt return of Mahdi is a not-so-subtle way of challenging the power of the Supreme Leader and, indirectly, the concept of *velayat-e faqih* itself. *Velayat-e faqih* (literally, guardianship of the Islamic jurist) is Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini's controversial concept that became the central governing principle of the Islamic Republic. It radically departs from traditional Shi'a theory, which taught that Clerics shouldn't directly hold political power, by proclaiming that Clerics should assume direct control over the political machinery of the state. In the Iranian system, *velayat-e faqih* finds its best expression in the enormous power given to the Supreme Leader who, along with other members of the Clergy, preserves Mahdi's power until he returns, at which point the Supreme Leader is supposed to relinquish his power to him. Put another way, the Supreme Leader is the guardian of Mahdi's divine rule.

Despite their generally friendly rapport during most of Ahmadinejad's tenure as President, by proclaiming that

## Ahmadinejad and the Politics of Mahdism in Iran

Written by Zachary Keck

Mahdi's return is imminent, Ahmadinejad is in essence proclaiming that the Supreme Leader and Clergy's time in power is drawing to an end. This is not surprising for a number of reasons. First, Ayatollah Khomeini was never able to reconcile his concept of *velayat-e faqih* with his emphasis on participatory democracy. Even with the Constitutional amendments of 1989, the tension between the state's religious and non-religious institutions remained unresolved. Instead, a hybrid system emerged that includes a "dual leadership" between the President and the institutionally and potentially constitutionally stronger Supreme Leader.[21] Under this system, the relationship between these two authorities remains ambiguous. While every President since Khomeini's death has tried to expand the Presidential power at the expense of the Supreme Leader, this has been particularly true for Ahmadinejad. This probably reflects the fact that Ahmadinejad, unlike his two most immediate predecessors Khatami and Rafsanjani, does not come from the Clergy and therefore is not qualified to ever become the Supreme Leader. In this regard, Ahmadinejad and his Principlist allies have every incentive to try to reform or topple the clerical system in order to establish one more compatible with their particular characteristics and conducive to their political objectives. Their plot to use Mahdism to mount a challenge to the clerical foundations of the Islamic Republic, however, has not gone unnoticed by the Clergy and supporters of Khamenei. Over the recent years prominent figures have lashed out at Ahmadinejad for invoking Mahdi's name.[22] Moreover, this criticism has come from Clerics of radically different political leanings, from traditional Conservatives like Ayatollah Muhammad Reza Mahdavi Kani, to staunch Reformists like Medhi Karroubi.[23] And it has grown more intense in recent months.

The recent high-profile spat began when a new video entitled *The Emergence is Very Near* was circulated throughout Iran. The film claims that Ahmadinejad (and Khamenei) have set the conditions for the return of Mahdi who, it suggests, will appear before the end of Ahmadinejad's presidency.[24] The film is widely assumed to be the idea of Ahmadinejad's Chief of Staff and closest advisor, Esfandiar Rahim-Mashaie or those close to him.[25] The Clerical establishment has reacted furiously to the film, mounting an unprecedented amount of criticism against Ahmadinejad, Mashaie and their close associates. For example, countless regime members have denounced them as "deviants" and "exorcists" seeking to subvert the system of *velayat-e faqih* by claiming they can predict the time of Mahdi's reappearance.[26] As Grand Ayatollah Makarem Shirazi of Qom put it in a recent sermon:

There are some people who engage in suspicious acts related to the Imam of the Era and spread news about his emergence, so that they through lies spread hopelessness among the Muslims with regard to the sacred being of the Imam of the Era and the issue of Messianism.[27]

The Iranian Parliament (Majlis) deputies were even more pointed in their criticism. One of them, Parviz Sarvari, a former Revolutionary Guards commander, stated bluntly that "Ahmadinejad is against the Guardianship of the Jurist." His fellow parliamentarian Ali Mottahari agreed, arguing that Ahmadinejad and his associates "claim a minor emergence [of the Imam of the Era] has taken place and 'we don't need the Guardian Jurist.'"[28] Even Ayatollah Mohammad Mesbah Yazdi, once deemed Ahmadinejad's spiritual mentor, has come out against the President and especially Mashaie. For example, in a recent interview, he said, "[b]y claiming that Imam Mahdi runs the country, some people want to question *Velayat-e Faghih*." [29] He went on to characterize Ahmadinejad's recent actions as "illogical and unnatural." [30] On the other hand, Brigadier General Hossein Hamadani, a senior commander of the Revolutionary Guards and another Ahmadinejad supporter, recently said, "Leader [Khamenei], we will obey you until the last moment of our lives and, as you said, will not allow the Revolution to be deviated from its path. Those who want to hurt the political system should be aware that the Basij [forces] are more prepared than ever to protect the Revolution." [31]

It should not be supposed that Brigadier General Hamadani was simply issuing empty threats, which is evident by the security organizations' arrest of over two dozens of Ahmadinejad and Mashaie loyalists in recent weeks.[32] Similarly, a growing number of Majlis deputies have also been calling for Ahmadinejad's impeachment.[33] After years of mostly acquiescing to some of Ahmadinejad's more anti-establishment actions, the Supreme Leader refused not coincidentally to accept the resignation of the current Intelligence Minister, Heydar Mosehi, whom Ahmadinejad had sought to fire. Rather, Khamenei took the rare step of publicly, though indirectly, rebuking Ahmadinejad, who then responded by not showing up at cabinet sessions for ten days.[34] It's difficult to square this evidence with the claim that Khamenei is among those championing Mahdi's imminent return in order to spread Iran's influence abroad. Instead, the role of Mahdism continues to be a much more influential issue in Iran's domestic politics.

# Ahmadinejad and the Politics of Mahdism in Iran

Written by Zachary Keck

In conclusion, Mahdism has played a fairly significant role in Iran's domestic politics while only taking on comparably minor importance in the country's foreign affairs. While Mahdism itself is not the actual issue dividing the Iranian regime, it has been used by the feuding factions as a symbol in their larger struggle over the future of the Islamic Republic. The need to resort to strategic symbols like Mahdi is to some degree the result of the Persian cultural trait of *ta'arof* which discourages direct confrontation and criticism.<sup>[35]</sup> The use of this symbolism by Iranians, however, does have the unfortunate effect of often leaving Westerners bewildered when trying to give meaning to Iranian actions. In light of this, many Westerners fall back on what they know best, Iran's foreign affairs, while overlooking the domestic aspects that are the real cause of behavior.<sup>[36]</sup> As Kenneth Pollack noted in 2004, "Iran's motives, its politics, and its policies are often a source of utter confusion for many Americans."<sup>[37]</sup> Pollack's observation remains just as true today.

**Zachary Keck** recently graduated with a B.A. in Political Science from the State University of New York at New Paltz and is a D.C. Foreign Policy Examiner at Examiner.com where he writes on U.S. foreign policy towards Asia and the Middle East. His commentary has appeared online at Foreign Affairs, Foreign Policy, and World Politics Review. Zachary would like to thank Gregory McGowan and the editorial team at e-International Relations for their insightful comments. All shortcomings are his alone.

## Notes

[1]. Jamsheed K. Choksy, "Why is Iran Championing Messianism to the Arab Masses?" *e-International Relations* (April 19, 2011), available at, <http://www.e-ir.info/?p=8348>. Subsequent page numbers refer to the PDF version of this article. This viewpoint has also been endorsed by Reza Kahlili, which is a pseudonym for a former Revolutionary Guards member who worked as a double agent for the Central Intelligence Agency in the 1980s. See, Erick Stakelbeck, "Iranian Video Says Mahdi is 'Near,'" *CBN News* (April 3, 2011), available at <http://www.cbn.com/cbnnews/world/2011/March/Iranian-Regime-Video-Says-Mahdi-is-Near/>. For his memoir describing his time as a double agent see, *A Time to Betray: The Astonishing Life of a CIA Agent Inside the Revolutionary Guards of Iran* (New York: Threshold Editions, 2010).

[2]. There have been many accounts of these disputes; For a brief description of some of them, see Zachary Keck, "U.S. Human Rights Stance on Iran Would Weaken Opposition," *World Politics Review* (May 6, 2011), available at <http://www.worldpoliticsreview.com/articles/8763/u-s-human-rights-stance-on-iran-would-weaken-opposition>. For analyses of the deeper issues behind the intra-conservative struggle, see Jamsheed K. Choksy, "Iran's Leadership Struggle Reveals Secular-Islamist Split," *World Politics Review* (May 13, 2011), available at <http://www.worldpoliticsreview.com/articles/8838/irans-leadership-struggle-reveals-secular-islamist-split>.

[3]. Choksy, "Why is Iran Championing Messianism," p. 5.

[4]. Choksy writes that, "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." This statement alone is a far cry from the argument that Khamenei is using appeals to Mahdi to spread Iran's influence in the Arab world. Even so, the article Choksy cites for this statement does not have any reference to Khamenei discussing Allah or the twelve imams. Instead, the sole quote from Khamenei reads, "[t]he enemies try to say that the popular movements in Egypt, Tunisia, and other nations are un-Islamic, but certainly these popular movements are Islamic and must be consolidated." The article does mention Mahdi, however, when quoting a statement President Ahmadinejad made on the day the former Egyptian President resigned from office. According to the article, Ahmadinejad said "[t]he final move has begun ... a great awakening is unfolding. One can witness the hand of Imam in managing it." See Robert Tait, "Khamenei Praises Arab revolts as Iran crushes its own," *Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty* (February 21, 2011), available at [http://www.rferl.org/content/khamenei\\_backs\\_arab\\_revolt/2316073.html](http://www.rferl.org/content/khamenei_backs_arab_revolt/2316073.html). My point is not to say that Khamenei has never invoked Mahdi's name, as he clearly has. Rather, the role of Mahdism for Khamenei and Ahmadinejad is an important point that is mostly overlooked by Choksy in this particular piece.

## Ahmadinejad and the Politics of Mahdism in Iran

Written by Zachary Keck

- [5]. Choksy, "Why is Iran Championing Messianism," p. 6.
- [6]. See, Bill Samii, "Iran: A New Generation of Leaders and a Shift to the Right," *Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty* (June 21, 2005), available at <http://www.rferl.org/content/article/1059390.html>.
- [7]. On the Conservative campaign to marginalize the Reformists during this period see, Kenneth M. Pollack, *The Persian Puzzle: The Conflict Between Iran and America* (New York: Random House, 2004); Also see, Ali Gheissari and Vali Nasr, "The Conservative Consolidation in Iran," *Survival* 47, no. 2 (Summer 2005), pp. 175-190.
- [8]. I use Principlists to refer mainly to the Iranian officials who rose to power as part of the Coalition of Developers (Abadgaran). Since Ahmadinejad's presidency, they have become increasingly divided. Yet, most still recognize Ahmadinejad as their leader. On their split see, Gareth Smyth, "Will the Principlists Rally Behind Ahmadinejad?," *PBS Frontline: Tehran Bureau* (March 15, 2009) available at <http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/pages/frontline/tehranbureau/2009/03/will-the-principlists-rally-behind-ahmadinejad.html>; Larijani Acknowledges Split among Principlists," *Mehr News Agency* (August 20, 2009), available at <http://www.mehrnews.com/en/NewsDetail.aspx?NewsID=933083>. Analysts have called the Principlists by various names. Other terminology includes the neoconservatives, the New Right and the Neo-fundamentalists. This paper adopts the Principlist term in order to avoid confusion with other political movements in different countries that have similar names.
- [9]. There are a number of accounts documenting the Principlists rise to power, see especially Ray Takeyh, *Guardians of the Revolution: Iran and the World in the Age of Ayatollahs* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009), pp. 223-260. Also see, Bahman Baktiari, "Iran's Conservative Revival," *Current History* (January 2007), pp. 11-17. Said Amir Arjomand, *After Khomeini: Iran under his Successors* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009), p. 152. Also see, Edward N. Luttwak, "Commentary: Tehran's 'Populist' Leader Clashes with the People," *Los Angeles Times* (June 28, 2005), accessed using ProQuest.
- [10]. For more details on the purges Ahmadinejad carried out in his first term see, William Polk, *Understanding Iran: Everything You Need to Know from Persia to the Islamic Republic, From Cyrus to Ahmadinejad* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), pp. 157-159.
- [11]. Said Amir Arjomand, *After Khomeini: Iran under his Successors* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009), p. 152. Also see, Edward N. Luttwak, "Commentary: Tehran's 'Populist' Leader Clashes with the People," *Los Angeles Times* (June 28, 2005), accessed using ProQuest.
- [12]. This hasn't always precluded them from such charges, however. See, for example, Amir Taheri, "Impeaching Ahmadinejad: Some members of Iran's ersatz parliament worry that the president is not Islamist enough," *Wall Street Journal* (November 30, 2010), available at <http://online.wsj.com/article/SB10001424052748704693104575638210916460270.html>.
- [13]. Hooman Majd, *The Ayatollah Begs to Differ: The Paradox of Modern Iran* (New York: Doubleday, 2008), p. 121.
- [14]. Farideh Farhi, "'Atomic Energy is our Assured Right': Nuclear Policy and the Shaping of Iranian Public Opinion," in Judith Yaphe ed. *Nuclear Politics in Iran* (Washington, DC: National Defense University Press, May 2010), pp. 3-18.
- [15]. Bahman Baktiari, "Seeking International Legitimacy: Understanding the Dynamics of Nuclear Nationalism in Iran," in Judith Yaphe ed., *Nuclear Politics in Iran* (Washington: DC, National Defense University Press, May 2010), p. 30; Kasra Najj, *Ahmadinejad: The Secret History of Iran's Radical Leader* (Berekeley, CA: University of California Press, 2008), pp. 123-124; Volker Perthes, "Ambition and Fear: Iran's Foreign Policy and Nuclear Programme," *Survival* 52, no. 3 (2010), pp. 95-114. The Treaty of Turkmenchai was a treaty Iran was forced to sign with Russia after losing a war the two fought between 1826-1828. One scholar has noted that the Treaty of Turkmenchai erased

## Ahmadinejad and the Politics of Mahdism in Iran

Written by Zachary Keck

“any remaining doubts about the loss of Iran’s great power status.” The terms of the treaty were particularly unfavorable to Iran. As the same scholar explains, “[i]n addition to the loss of further territories in the Caucasus, Iran was faced with a 20-million-ruble indemnity... the imposition of commercial treaties that signified the start of the system of capitulations” among other humiliating terms of peace. Ali M. Ansari, *Confronting Iran: The Failure of American Foreign Policy and the Next Great Conflict in the Middle East* (New York: Basic Books, 2006), p. 12.

[16]. For instance, when talks with the West were being contemplated, Ahmadinejad said, “In whichever negotiation we take part ... it is unequivocally with the view to the realization of Iran’s nuclear right, and the Iranian nation would not retreat one iota from its rights.” See, “Ahmadinejad: Iran won’t retreat one iota from its nuclear rights,” *Haaretz* (February 8, 2008), available at <http://www.haaretz.com/news/ahmadinejad-iran-won-t-retreat-one-iota-from-its-nuclear-rights-1.250982>.

[17]. Arjomand, *After Khomeini*, 158, 161.

[18]. For a fairly good background on Rafsanjani and his place in the Islamic Republic’s politics see, Muhammad Sahimi, “The Middle Road of Hashemi Rafsanjani,” *PBS Frontline: Tehran Bureau* (April 28, 2010), available at <http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/pages/frontline/tehranbureau/2010/04/the-middle-road-of-hashemi-rafsanjani.html>. On Rafsanjani’s wealth see, Paul Klebnikov, “Millionaire Mullahs,” *Forbes* (July 21, 2003), available at <http://www.forbes.com/forbes/2003/0721/056.html>. Also see, “Iran’s Supreme Leader under Pressure: Iran’s real political battle is being fought far away from the street protests,” *al-Jazeera* (June 19, 2009), available at <http://english.aljazeera.net/news/middleeast/2009/06/2009616184556951795.html>; “Iran’s Ahmadinejad Criticizes Rival Rafsanjani,” *CNN* (August 18, 2009), available at <http://edition.cnn.com/2009/WORLD/meast/08/17/iran.political.tensions/index.html>; Barbara Slavin, *Bitter Friends, Bosom Enemies: Iran, the U.S., and the Twisted Path to Confrontation* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 2007), pp. 76-82.

[19]. Hooman Majd, *The Ayatollahs’ Democracy: An Iranian Challenge* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2010), pp. 8-11.

[20] *Ibid*, p. 9.

[21] See, Arjomand, *After Khomeini*, chapter 2.

[22]. See, for instance, “Iranian Clerics rebuke Ahmadinejad over ‘Hidden Imam’,” *Agence-France Presse* (May 7, 2008), available at <http://afp.google.com/article/ALeqM5gZxynkYHW-GrZ3SB965i1TxhulxQ>; And Ahdiyyih Mohebat, “Ahmadinejad and the Mahdi,” *Middle East Quarterly* 15, no. 4 (Fall 2008), pp. 27-36.

[23]. Nazila Fathi, “Memo from Tehran: Iranian Clerics Tell the President to Leave the Theology to Them,” *New York Times* (May 20, 2008), available at <http://www.nytimes.com/2008/05/20/world/middleeast/20mahdi.html>.

[24]. “Iran News Round Up,” *AEI Iran Tracker* (March 23, 2011), available at, <http://www.irantracker.org/roundup/iran-news-round-march-23-2011>.

[25]. Robert Tait, “Ahmadinejad Floored by Bugs, Spirits, and Djinns,” *Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty* (May 6, 2011), available at [http://www.rferl.org/content/ahmadinejad\\_weakened\\_by\\_attacks\\_on\\_subordinates/24093844.html](http://www.rferl.org/content/ahmadinejad_weakened_by_attacks_on_subordinates/24093844.html).

[26]. “Iran News Roundup,” *AEI Iran Tracker* (May 3, 2011), available at, <http://www.irantracker.org/roundup/iran-news-round-may-3-2011>; Saeed Kamali Dehghan, “Ahmadinejad’s allies charged with sorcery,” *The Guardian* (May 5, 2011), available at <http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/2011/may/05/ahmadinejad-allies-charged-with-sorcery>; “Iran News Round Up,” *AEI Iran Tracker* (May 5, 2011), available at <http://www.irantracker.org/roundup/iran-news-round-may-5-2011>.

## Ahmadinejad and the Politics of Mahdism in Iran

Written by Zachary Keck

- [27]. "Iran News Round Up," *AEI Iran Tracker*, (March 23, 2011), available at <http://www.irantracker.org/roundup/iran-news-round-march-23-2011>.
- [28]. "Iran News Round Up," *AEI Iran Tracker* (May 5, 2011), available at <http://www.irantracker.org/roundup/iran-news-round-may-5-2011>.
- [29]. "Guardian Council Chief: The Perverted Team is Being Eliminated," *PBS Frontline: The Tehran Bureau* (May 14, 2011), available at <http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/pages/frontline/tehranbureau/2011/05/guardian-council-chief-the-perverted-team-is-being-eliminated.html>
- [30]. "Ahmadinejad Criticized by his Chief Supporter Amongst Clergy," *Radio Zamaneh* (May 15, 2011), available at <http://radiozamaneh.com/english/content/ahmadinejad-criticized-his-chief-supporter-amongst-clergy>.
- [31]. "Guardian Council Chief: The Perverted Team is Being Eliminated," *PBS Frontline: The Tehran Bureau*; Also see, Shayan Ghajar, "Ahmadinejad Beset on All Sides by Khamenei Loyalists," *Inside Iran* (May 23, 2011), available at <http://www.insideiran.org/critical-comments/ahmadinejad-beset-on-all-sides-by-khamenei-loyalists/>.
- [32]. "Iran News Round Up," *AEI Iran Tracker* (May 4, 2011), available at <http://www.irantracker.org/roundup/iran-news-round-may-4-2011>; "The Moslehi Blowback: Ahmadinejad Allies Arrested, Top Aides Targeted," *PBS Frontline: Tehran Bureau* (May 5, 2011), available at, <http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/pages/frontline/tehranbureau/2011/05/the-moslehi-blowback-ahmadinejad-allies-arrested-top-aides-targeted.html>; Arash Aramesh, "IRGC Arrests Ahmadinejad Loyalists to Show Support for Khamenei," *Inside Iran* (May 6, 2011), available at <http://www.insideiran.org/media-analysis/irgc-arrests-ahmadinejad-loyalists-to-show-support-for-khamenei/>; Najmeh Bozorgmehr, "Infighting Undermines Ahmadi-Nejad," *Financial Times* (May 9, 2011), available at <http://www.ft.com/cms/s/0/f9d27552-7a69-11e0-af64-00144feabdc0.html#axzz1Lun3FXpy>.
- [33]. "Iran News Roundup," *AEI Iran Tracker* (April 26-27, 2011), available at, <http://www.irantracker.org/roundup/iran-news-round-april-27-28-2011>; "Iran News Roundup," *AEI Iran Tracker* (May 6, 2011), available at <http://www.irantracker.org/roundup/iran-news-round-may-6-2011>.
- [34]. This recent Ahmadinejad-Khamenei dispute has been extensively reported in Western media. For some thoughtful analysis and background on the issue see, Muhammad Sahimi, "Analysis: Ahmadinejad-Khamenei Rift Deepens into the Abyss," *PBS Frontline: Tehran Bureau* (May 7, 2011), available at, <http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/page/s/frontline/tehranbureau/2011/05/opinion-ahmadinejad-khamenei-rift-deepens-to-an-abyss.html>.
- [35] Perhaps one of the best explanations of the meaning of *ta'arof* is provided by Hooman Majd. Majd calls *ta'arof* "the single defining characteristic" of the Iranian people. Still, at no point does he offer a concise definition, perhaps because he believes such a definition is not possible. *Ta'arof* can mean superficial and often insincere flattering of guests. Yet, Iranians also use *ta'arof* in a deceiving strategic manner. As Majd explains, "For Iranians [*ta'arof*] is a cultural imperative that is about manners, yes, but is also about gaining advantage, politically, socially, or economically, as much as anything else." See, Majd, *The Ayatollah Begs to Differ*, p. 39; 105.
- [36]. For a recent example of this tendency see, David Ignatius, "Internal Strife Emerges as Tehran looks Westward," *Washington Post* (May 5, 2011), available at, [http://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/internal-strife-emerges-as-tehran-looks-westward/2011/05/05/AFVKTH2F\\_story.html](http://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/internal-strife-emerges-as-tehran-looks-westward/2011/05/05/AFVKTH2F_story.html). Iran expert Trita Parsi has refuted Ignatius on this point see, Laura Rozen, "Amid Iranian power struggle and arrests for sorcery, a thwarted Iranian channel to the U.S.?" *The Envoy* (May 7, 2011), available at, [http://news.yahoo.com/s/yblog\\_theenvoy/20110506/ts\\_yblog\\_theenvoy/amid-iranian-power-struggle-and-arrests-for-sorcery-a-thwarted-iranian-channel-to-the-u-s](http://news.yahoo.com/s/yblog_theenvoy/20110506/ts_yblog_theenvoy/amid-iranian-power-struggle-and-arrests-for-sorcery-a-thwarted-iranian-channel-to-the-u-s). While, admittedly, Ahmadinejad and Mashaei's outreach to the West may be one aspect of the ongoing dispute between the conservatives in the Iranian regime, it hardly the central issue as Ignatius implies.
- [37] Kenneth Pollack, *The Persian Puzzle*, p. xix.



## **Ahmadinejad and the Politics of Mahdism in Iran**

Written by Zachary Keck

---

### **About the author:**

Zachary Keck is assistant editor of *The Diplomat*. He Tweets from @ZacharyKeck and can be contacted through his website.