

Iran's President and the Politics of the Twelfth Imam

John von Heyking, University of Lethbridge

Observers of Iran have been puzzling over Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad's actions lately. A populist, but not terribly popular, president, he raised the ire of the West and some of his domestic rivals when he recently proclaimed Israel should be "wiped off the map." Iran's nuclear ambitions are well-known. However, Western observers have paid less attention to the political and religious ideology behind some of Ahmadinejad's actions, which he has expressed in [recent speeches](#) (and [here](#)) that have had messianic overtones and are deeply troublesome.

In a region known for bombastic (pardon the pun) politicians, it's unclear how to understand the direction Iran is moving. This is due in part to its closed decision-making process. Writing recently in the [New York Review of Books](#), Timothy Garton Ash draws several comparisons between Iran and the former Communist bloc. Interpreting the intentions of the Iranian leadership resembles Kremlinology with its "reading the tea leaves" methodology of trying to interpret events with the slimmest of evidence. Understanding Iran is further complicated by the fact that it lacks a unitary structure, or sovereign, that makes decisions. Iran in fact has two governments: its formal democratic government run by Ahmadinejad and a religious-ideological command structure headed by the Supreme Leader, Ayatollah Ali Khamenei. Mediating these two power structures is the Expediency Council, headed by former president Hashemi Rafsanjani, whom Ahmadinejad defeated in the recent presidential election) who has also recently been in the news accusing Ahmadinejad of destroying the Iranian Revolution. Power is extremely decentralized in Iran, with a myriad of patrons and cronies vying for control over its institutions, leading Ash to conclude: "No wonder Iranian political scientists reach for terms like 'polyarchy,' 'elective oligarchy,' 'semi-democracy,' or 'neopatrimonialism.'" Ahmadinejad's bellicose speeches must be understood in light of his ambitions amidst the faultlines of Iranian domestic politics, but they may have ominous implications for the rest of us.

In a [speech on November 16th](#), Ahmadinejad spoke of his belief in the return of the Twelfth Imam. One of the differences between Sunni and Shi'ite Islam is that the latter, who dominate Iran and form the majority in Iraq, believe that Allah shielded or hid [Muhammad al-Mahdi as the Twelfth Imam](#) until the end of time. Shi'ites expect the Twelfth Imam, which Jews and Christians would recognize as a messianic figure, to return to save the world when it had descended into chaos. Shi'ite orthodoxy has it that humans are powerless to encourage the Twelfth Imam to return. However, in Iran a group called the Hojjatieh believe that humans can stir up chaos to encourage him to return. Ayatollah Khomeini banned the group in the early 1980s because they rejected one of the primary commitments of the Iranian revolution: the concept of [Vilayat-i Faqih](#) (Guardianship of the Jurist). In other words, they opposed the notion of an Islamic republic because it would hinder the Twelfth Imam's return on account of it being too just and peaceful. Today, in addition to the possibility of Ahmadinejad himself being a member (or a former member), the group has connections to Qom ultraconservative cleric [Mesbah Yazdi](#) whom Iranians frequently refer to as the "crazed one" and the

[“crocodile.”](#) [Four of the twenty-one new cabinet ministers are purportedly Hojjatieh members.](#) Some reports state that cabinet ministers must sign a [formal pledge of support](#) for the Twelfth Imam.

The possibility of Ahmadinejad belonging to this group does not make a lot of sense, at least if one wishes to regard him as a pragmatic politician. Why would the president of the Islamic republic object to the existence of that Islamic republic? Moreover, his recent references to the Twelfth Imam have been to promote Iran as: “powerful, developed and model Islamic society. Today, we should define our economic, cultural and political policies based on the policy of Imam Mahdi’s return. We should avoid copying the West’s policies and systems.” Most Iranians would have interpreted this statement as typical Iranian nationalist and Islamist rhetoric aimed against the West and as a reference to his policy of using oil money to improve the plight of the poor. However, helping the poor is central to Islamic social teaching and he need not have referred to the “Imam Mahdi’s return” to say this.

In terms of pragmatic politics, Ahmadinejad’s actions make some a degree of sense because he is using radicalism to secure power in a fraying society whose economy is in trouble. Despots historically use this strategy to secure their power. While a populist, he is hardly popular. He was elected president because he was perceived as the least insider of the insiders who competed for the office. Iranians rejected former president Hashemi Rafsanjani for being too much part of the establishment. [Ash](#) reports: “A stick would have won against Rafsanjani,’ an Iranian politician told me.” Rafsanjani, for his part, has come out with withering attacks (at least for Iran) against Ahmadinejad’s nuclear anti-Israel speeches and for betraying the Iranian revolution. The conflict between Ahmadinejad and Rafsanjani reflects a struggle over political power but also an ideological struggle over the direction of the Iranian revolution. If Ahmadinejad’s enemies are to be believed, he wishes to undermine the Iranian revolution. However, as Ash observes, double-talk is a way of life in Iran and in societies in the decadent stages of their revolution, and so readers should be skeptical of everyone’s claims. Even Rafsanjani, the supposed “moderate” (at least in comparison to Ahmadinejad), supports uranium reprocessing for the country’s nuclear program.

Yet, Ahmadinejad’s speeches and actions cannot be understood exclusively in terms of a despotic figure who radicalizes politics for the sake of power. He has chosen to radicalize Iranian politics in a particular way, and one that issues a direct challenge to the underpinnings of the regime. This returns us to Ahmadinejad’s references to the return of the Twelfth Imam. The Hojjatieh’s belief in humans’ power to effect his return, which, to repeat, are unorthodox for Shi’ites, should be of grave concern for everyone. This belief should remind Westerners of a long tradition in the West of millenarians dating back to medieval times, and including even Marxian notions of “immiseration of the proletariat,” who believed their religious and ideological activism would inaugurate a new age for humanity. Medieval millenarians, famously documented by Norman Cohn in his [The Pursuit of the Millennium: Revolutionary Millenarians and Mystical Anarchists of the Middle Ages](#), stirred up political chaos in the apocalyptic hope that it would effect the return of Christ. More recent expressions of this “metastatic faith” (to

borrow a term from political philosopher Eric Voegelin) include the poison gas attack on the Tokyo subways by members of the [Aum Shinrikyo cult](#) and of course the 9/11 attacks that were part of al-Qaeda's "divine" politics intended to destroy the "dar al-Harb" and pave the way for a [worldwide Islamist empire](#). Political scientist [Barry Cooper](#) has documented the apocalyptic core of their "Salafist" violence. Groups like these believe their religious and ideological violence is "altruistic" because it purports to "cleanse" the world of the impure and infidel.

According to Shi'ite teaching, the Twelfth Imam will not require an introduction upon his return. His identity will be self-evident to all, or at least to those capable of recognizing him. One view states that he will rule through a deputy, or perhaps the deputy will precede the Imam's return. Perhaps the deputy's identity should also be evident to all who can see.

While Ahmadinejad has not drawn an explicit connection between his desire to see Israel wiped off the map and an activist belief in the Twelfth Imam's return, the dots are there to be connected once one understands the tyrannical "logic" behind someone who, perhaps viewing himself as a self-proclaimed deputy for the Twelfth Imam, might wish to effect Mahdi's return. The deputy would promote Iran's nuclear capabilities for they are key to effecting chaos in the world. The deputy would also purge diplomats, dozens of deputy ministers and heads of government banks and businesses, and challenge the Iranian ruling clerical establishment. All these moves push the regime toward a "[coup d'état](#)" (according to one Iranian source) or at least a constitutional crisis. But a constitutional crisis would be a mere stepping stone for a president for whom the Twelfth Imam does not require an Islamic republic to return.

Western observers need to be able to understand the ideological and religious overtones of the current situation in Iran. Ahmadinejad's peculiar references to the Twelfth Imam are no mere eccentricity to be taken lightly. Nor do they seem to be the rhetorical ploy of a politician manipulating the excitable masses (as some have interpreted Saddam Hussein's embrace of Islamism in the later part of his rule). Minimally, Ahmadinejad's speeches and actions portend a constitutional crisis for the Iranian regime. Maximally, there are times when one should take bombastic statements not as double-talk, but for what they are.