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Intelligence and Terrorism Information Center  
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## **Iranian president Ahmadinejad is identified with Messianism, one of the factors contributing to the further radicalization of the regime but also challenging the rule of the mullahs.**

### **The strengthening of Messianism in Iran**



**President Ahmadinejad's Messianic tendencies as depicted by an Iranian cartoon artist (Ruz, October 2006)**



**A picture of President Ahmadinejad with a holy aura around his head (Fars, an Iranian official news agency)**

1. In recent years, there has been a growing public debate in Iran around Messianism. Messianism is a popular grassroots movement which has given a concrete dimension to the return of the Hidden Imam (Imam al-Mahdi), to the point of calling for action. **Iran's president Ahmadinejad is identified with Messianism and, after being elected president, made many public references to the return of the Hidden Imam.**

2. The belief that the imam is a superhuman, omnipotent, and faultless leader is **one of the unique tenets of Shi'ite Islam**. According to Shi'ite belief, the first imam was Ali, the "leader of the faithful", Muhammad's son-in-law and, according to Sunni tradition, the fourth caliph. The prevailing school of thought in Shi'ite Islam (the Twelvers) holds that there were twelve imams between the death of Ali in A.D. 661 and A.D. 874, when the twelfth imam disappeared. The Hidden Imam, according to Shi'ite belief, will return to the world as a "mahdi" ("guided by Allah on the path of righteousness"). He will return bearing the word of salvation, dispatch the Shi'ites' enemies, and usher the world into an era of Islamic justice.

3. **Messianism, which considers the Imam's return to be a distinct, tangible possibility, poses a theological-conceptual threat to the foundations of the Iranian Islamic regime.** Ayatollah Khomeini, the leader of the revolution, based his rule on the combination of religious authority as a model to be followed (*Marja' Taqlid*) and political-governmental authority. Messianism, however, disconnects (in theory) Shi'ite belief (waiting for the "mahdi") from the vanities of this world. That is one of the reasons that holders of such views have been persecuted in the beginning of the revolution; accusations of Messianism are still used to besmirch political opponents; and the movement is strongly criticized by senior officials of the regime and the religious establishment.

## **Ahmadinejad as a representative of Messianism**

4. Iran's president Ahmadinejad is notable for his public statements on the coming return of the Hidden Imam. More than just political rhetoric, such statements stem from his authentic religious beliefs and his social and political background. The president of Iran seems to belong to the **Jamkaran group**,<sup>1</sup> itself a part of the larger movement of **Hojjatiyeh** (see below), which holds that a true Islamic regime is only possible when the Hidden Imam returns, and that the time of his return is drawing ever closer. Ayatollah **Mohammad Taqi Mesbah-Yazdi**, Ahmadinejad's spiritual teacher (his *Marja' Taqlid*, or "role model") is the spiritual leader of the Jamkaran group.



**President Ahmadinejad with his spiritual teacher  
, Ayatollah Mohammad Taqi Mesbah-Yazdi**

**5. Since being elected president, Mahmoud Ahmadinejad has made many statements about the possible return of the Hidden Imam, claiming divine inspiration. For example:**

- a. Speaking at a convention of clerics on November 16, 2005, Ahmadinejad declared that "the main purpose of the Islamic revolution is

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<sup>1</sup> Jamkaran is a Shi'ite group which holds radical views on both internal and foreign affairs. It is named after the Jamkaran Mosque, situated some 6km east of the Iranian holy city of Qom. According to Shi'ite traditions, the Hidden Imam was staying there when he disappeared. He is said to have proclaimed it a sacred site and ordered that a mosque be erected there. Belief has it that it will also be the site of the Hidden Imam's coming return. Accordingly, the mosque became a pilgrimage site for Shi'ites from across the globe. Ahmadinejad is said to have allocated funds to construct a railway from the Jamkaran Mosque to Tehran.

to pave the way for the reappearance of the twelfth imam and to define economic, cultural, and political policy in accordance with the policy of the return of [Imam] al-Mahdi.” Before that, a television camera captured the president telling a religious cleric named Ayatollah Amoli that during his speech at the UN (September 2005), he had felt himself “bathed in a divine aura” (and that he had even had a direct connection with Allah).

b. In a statement given to a crowd of supporters, Ahmadinejad claimed divine inspiration while saying that the President of the US was inspired by Satan<sup>2</sup> (**Iran News**, October 15, 2006).

**6. President Ahmadinejad’s Messianic faith also has political implications.** Apparently, President Ahmadinejad’s belief in the **coming return** of the Hidden Imam (which will follow an apocalyptic war against Israel and the West) is one of the factors making him more extreme. That might explain some of his behavior and policy, such as his stubborn, arrogant pursuit of technology for manufacturing nuclear weapons and his extreme, defiant tone regarding Israel and the Jewish people (statements about destruction of the State of Israel and Holocaust denial –which completely disregard international sensibilities).

7. President Ahmadinejad’s Messianic rhetoric is frowned upon by pragmatic conservatives—the “first generation” of the Iranian Islamic revolution. Top regime and religious establishment members widely and strongly criticize the spread of Messianism. They consider the interest in Messianism to be a growing threat and a significant ideological challenge to the regime and status of Iranian leader Khamenei, the focus of the “religious jurist’s rule” (*Velayat-e Faqih*) who is supposed to serve as a role model and to replace the Hidden Imam until he returns.

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<sup>2</sup> See MEMRI report no. 1328, dated October 19, 2006: “Iran President Ahmadinejad: ‘I have a Connection With God, Since God Said That the Infidels Will Have No Way to Harm the Believers’; We Have [ONLY] One Step Remaining Before We Attain the Summit of Nuclear Technology’; The West ‘Will Not Dare To Attack Us’”.

8. Even though President Ahmadinejad is associated with Messianism, it still carries little weight in the Iranian regime. However, should it gain ground and begin to influence Iran's decision-making, coupled with a strengthening of Ahmadinejad's status and that of the ultra-conservative faction, it is possible that Iran's inner consensus will shift in a **religious-ideological direction that will further radicalize its policy.**

# Appendix A

## Portrait of Iran's president, Mahmoud Ahmadinejad



### Personal details

1. **Origin:** Ahmadinejad was born in 1956 in the village of Aradan, a suburb of Garmsar (a city in the province of Semnan). He is the fourth oldest of seven children. One year after his birth, his family moved to Tehran.

2. **Education:** Bachelor's and Master's degrees in engineering from the Iran University of Science and Technology (IUST); PhD in transportation engineering from the University of Science and Technology.

### Previously held positions and political activity

3. Before the Islamic revolution and concurrently with his studies, he began taking part in the religion lessons of clerics Motahari and Taleqani. It was then, as he participated in student activity against the Shah, that his political views began to form. At the beginning of the Islamic revolution he was chosen to represent the University of Science and Technology at meetings of Iran's student organizations, held in the presence of the leader Khomeini.

4. With the outbreak of the Iran-Iraq War, Ahmadinejad was sent to the front where, until 1985, he was involved in logistics and auxiliary activities. In 1986 he volunteered for the special Revolutionary Guards brigade situated at the Ramadan base and operated beyond Iran's borders (in the town of Kirkuk in northern Iraq). After that, he served as a combat engineering commander in a Revolutionary Guards division.

5. In the late 1980s Ahmadinejad served four years as the deputy and governor of the municipal area of Maku and Khoy (in the province of West Azerbaijan). Later he spent two years as a development advisor in charge of the war effort in the western provinces.

6. In April 1993 he worked as cultural advisor for the Minister of Education and Higher Education. Between 1994 and 1997 he served as the governor of the province of Ardabil. In 1995 and 1996 he was elected Iran's outstanding governor, and was highly praised for his efforts to rebuild and restore approximately 7,500 residential units destroyed in the earthquake that occurred in the region.

**7. In April 2003 Ahmadinejad was elected the Mayor of Tehran**, with the rise of the "New Conservatives" (Abadgaran, the Alliance of Builders of Islamic Iran, the radical right-wing faction of the conservative bloc) in the municipal elections. During his term, he was praised by the residents of Tehran for his management of the city. Ahmadinejad was perceived as a talented, modest manager, effective in solving problems of Tehran's residents. During his campaign he focused on political-economic aspects and presented himself as an Islamic Robin Hood (trading on his history as the son of a blacksmith), promising a comprehensive solution for the problems of poverty. Thus, he refused to accept a salary for his duties as mayor, and promised that women, too, would receive pensions, health insurance, and unemployment allowances. He also promised to grant interest-free loans to peasants and young couples (for marriage and housing), stabilize the inflation, increase teachers' salaries, and transfer government funds from the big cities to the backward peripheral regions.

8. Before the presidential elections he won the support of some parties in the conservative Abadgaran coalition and the Ithargaran group—the dominant factor in the Majles’ conservative coalition. However, old-guard elements in the revolutionary establishment, particularly those belonging to the traditional right wing (the first generation of the revolution) were strongly against his candidacy, attempted to derail his campaign and called him a “political rookie”.

**9. On June 24, 2005, Ahmadinejad was elected the president of Iran.** He won the majority of the votes (approximately 62%), defeating Ali Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani, the former president and candidate of the conservative-pragmatic bloc.

10. Ahmadinejad’s election to the presidency of Iran marked the ultra-conservative takeover of an important source of power in Iran. He was elected based on a platform of promises to make fundamental changes in the economy and society. In practice, however, he failed and was strongly criticized. His promises to fight corruption proved unfounded, particularly in light of appointments of his associates to key positions.

11. Ahmadinejad’s influence in day-to-day management of political-strategic issues, particularly Iran’s nuclear program and relations with Hezbollah, remains limited. Such issues are still controlled by those senior to Ahmadinejad (the “leader” and the Supreme National Security Council).



## Appendix B

### What is the Hojjatiyeh movement and what is its connection to Ahmadinejad?

1. The Hojjatiyeh movement was founded in the early 1950s by Mahmoud Halabi, a cleric of Arab descent and Iranian nationality. The movement believes in the **approaching return** of the Hidden Imam, whose coming is predicted for a time of chaos and injustice. It believes that true Islamic rule is possible only upon his return. The movement does not accept the principle of *Velayat-e Faqih* established by Khomeini. Therefore, in 1983 it was outlawed in Iran.<sup>3</sup> Revolution leader Khomeini denounced the movement in a speech given in July 1983, and ordered that its supporters be persecuted (some were arrested and even executed).

2. Contrary to the idea of *Velayat-e Faqih*, which holds that all political power should be in the hands of a single leader, Hojjatiyeh claimed that a collective leadership should rule until the Imam's return. The movement's economic views are liberal, perhaps the reason for the support it receives from merchants and land owners, who object to any official supervision.

3. Over the years, rumors began to spread about a rift in the Hojjatiyeh movement, when its founder, Mahmoud Halabi, left to lead the Mahdaviyat group. While remaining ideologically close to Hojjatiyeh, it supports a more active approach focusing on spreading chaos to hasten the return of the Twelfth Imam. The movement made the headlines on April 24, 1999 when, according to official publications, its members attempted to assassinate the head of Tehran's judicial system, Ali Razini.

4. In late 2002 and early 2003 Hojjatiyeh increased its activity. In response, Iranian senior officials quickly issued a warning against the entrance of its members into government institutions. Musavi Lari, then Interior Minister,

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<sup>3</sup> Some claim that the movement was never officially banned in Iran.

said he was concerned about the movement's activities whose purpose, he said, was to cause a religious rift. Ali Fallahian, former Intelligence Minister, suggested that the National Security Council examine whether the Hojjatiyeh movement posed a threat to national security. He indicated that during his tenure as Intelligence Minister his man had monitored the movement.

5. Ahmadinejad apparently belongs **to the Jamkaran group, itself a part of the Hojjatiyeh group.** Ayatollah Mohammad Taqi Mesbah-Yazdi, Ahmadinejad's spiritual mentor and the leader of the Jamkaran group, also holds Messianic views and is perceived by extremist circles as the embodiment of true revolutionary ideals. Some of the president's closest associates are also members of the Hojjatiyeh movement. It cannot be confirmed that Ahmadinejad himself formally belongs to the Hojjatiyeh movement, however, **belief in Messianism is common ideological ground between them.**