Iranian president Mahmoud Ahmadinejad surprised not only many Westerners but also many Iranians when, during his first speech at the United Nations, he prayed for the hasty return of the Hidden Imam, the Mahdi, Shi'i Islam's messianic figure. Demonstrating his priorities, he repeated the prayer in December 2007 when addressing Arab leaders at the Gulf Cooperation Council meeting in Doha but did not object when they described the Persian Gulf as Arab, a diplomatic swipe at Iran's place in the region. Ahmadinejad's messianism is no ploy; it is very serious indeed. Ayatollah Ahmad Jannati, chairman of the Guardian Council, credits Ahmadinejad with "being inspired by God."

The Mahdi and the Islamic Republic

The inspiration for Ahmadinejad's thinking can be found in traditional Shi'ism. As with other monotheistic religions, Shi'i teachings promise the return of a messiah. For Twelver Shi'a, the messiah will be Muhammad al-Mahdi, the Twelfth Imam, who went into occultation in 874 CE and is expected to return before the Day of Judgment to lead the righteous against the forces of evil. Such ideas pervade Iranian culture, even beyond the Islamic context. The idea of the Mahdi has historical precedence, for example, in ancient Zoroastrian beliefs. Persian literature and poetry are awash with the notion of a promised savior. Abol-Ghasem Ferdowsi (935-1020), the author of Shahnameh (The book of kings), Iran's national epic, wrote that a "noble man" would appear in Iran from "whom will spread the religion of God to the four corners of the world."

After the 1979 revolution, the Islamic Republic incorporated the idea of Mahdism into its complex system of governance. Under Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini's concept of velayat-e faqih (guardianship of the jurisprudent), Khomeini became the "guardian of Muslims" and representative of the Mahdi in the "first government of God" on earth. He allowed the election of a parliament, the Majlis, but then commanded the elected deputies in May 1980 to offer their "services to Lord of the Age [the Mahdi], may God speed his blessed appearance."

Khomeini and the framers of the Islamic Republic's constitution established an important precedent: Both rationality and irrationality can be employed in the governance of a nation. This approach explains how the Islamic Republic has survived in the modern world even as it pursues a millennium-old philosophy in the face of a skeptical international community and despite a largely progressive and
Paying lip service to the Hidden Imam has been, since the time of Khomeini, a standard practice for Iranian officials. For example, shortly after leaving office, former president Mohammad Khatami delivered a philosophical and relatively rational speech about civilizations intended to lessen the adverse international reaction to Ahmadinejad's messianic statements. Nevertheless, during the course of his speech, Khatami asserted that the "Lord of the Age will bring about a world government" even as he claimed that "we have no mission to change the world."[9]

If past Iranian presidents have mentioned Mahdism, Ahmadinejad has made it a focal point of his rhetoric. In September 2005, he sponsored the first annual International Conference of Mahdism Doctrine in Tehran. The conference presented Mahdism as an ideology that could form the basis for world peace and unity across religions. Addressing the conference, Ahmadinejad said that the "Islamic Republic and the system of velayat-e faqih have no other mission but to prepare for the establishment of a world government . . . as the Imam [Mahdi] runs and manages the universe." He repeated the same idea but modified his language at the second conference in 2006, saying the "Mahdavi perception [Mahdism] and view are the perfect method for the administration and direction of the world." In follow-up seminars, speakers defined Mahdism as the "defining strategy of the Islamic Republic," a "comprehensive plan and strategic policy," and a "political regime and world view." Within that context, the conference determined not only that the Mahdi's advent is "inevitable" but also that it can be "accelerated" through human action. Discussants spoke about the Iran–Iraq war as a practical example of the application of Mahdism since "combatants were moved by the love of the Mahdi's representative, Khomeini, to sacrifice their lives." Attendees also spoke of Iran as the "Umm al-Qura" (mother of villages), suggesting that the Islamic Republic had replaced Mecca—which uses that same title—as the rightful center of Islam.[10]

Ahmadinejad's View of the Mahdi

Ahmadinejad's concept of Mahdism derives from the same sources that have inspired other Iranian leaders across the Islamic Republic's political spectrum. Aside from Khomeini's teachings on the subject[11] and the writings of Ayatollah Morteza Mottahari[12] (1920–79), a prominent ideologue of the Islamic Republic, a number of other Iranian authors have been influential. In the nineteenth century, Jamal al-Din al-Afghani (1838–97) sought to unite the Islamic world and demonstrate the utility of Islamic teachings in the modern world. He hid his true identity as a Shi'i believer under the rubric of taqiyya (dissimulation) and pretended to be a Sunni from Afghanistan. Indeed, he contributed not only to Islamist reform inside Iran but also helped lay the groundwork for the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt.[13]

Ahmadinejad may also have derived inspiration from Navvab Safavi (1924–55), founder of Fadayan-e Islam, a group that assassinated a number of more liberal Iranian politicians and intellectuals. The writings of both Jalal Al-e Ahmad[14] (1923–69) and Ahmad Fardid[15][16][17]; and he may even have been influenced by such anticlerical writers as Fereydun Adamiyat (1920–2008), the most popular modern historian of Iran and a senior diplomat in the late shah's government, whose decades of work[18] have vastly influenced generations of Iranian intellectuals but are now being scrutinized after the exposure of a number of falsifications,[19] such as his intentional misrepresentation of facts about nineteenth-century religious and political movements and the early twentieth-century Iranian constitutional
Although he was prevented from writing or engaging in political activity after the 1979 revolution, major organs of the Islamic Republic—the Kayhan and Jam-e Jam dailies, for example—continue to amplify parts of Adamiyat’s work that support their positions often without citing his name. So, too, does the Majlis Research Center and the Islamic Revolution Documentation Center, whose director is an advisor to Ahmadinejad, as well as major political and religious websites such as Tebyan. (1909–94), popular anti-American writers, may have influenced Ahmadinejad in his formative years, as would have ‘Ali Shariati (1933–77), an Iranian sociologist who helped meld leftist thought with political Islam and popularized the notion of Islamic revolution in the years before Khomeini’s return. Ahmadinejad may also have drawn upon Ehsan Tabari (1916–89), the theoretician of Tudeh, the Iranian communist party, who after a lifetime of indoctrinating Iranian leftists confessed to “erroneous” ideas after the 1979 revolution.

Further coloring Ahmadinejad’s worldview, even if not his Mahdism, has been German philosopher Martin Heidegger. Iranian intellectuals react favorably to Heidegger’s real or perceived anti-American sentiments, anti-Semitism, and his criticism of traditional Western thought. His grand theory of existence and his objection to attaching great significance to logical reasoning and intelligibility, as well as his theories of the value of nothingness, are concepts that have made him the darling of many Iranian intellectuals.

The Hojjatieh

But what surely has had the greatest influence on Ahmadinejad and his peers is systematic indoctrination by the Hojjatieh Society. The name Hojjatieh derives from Hojjat (proof), one of the titles of the Mahdi; the society was founded in the mid-twentieth century by clerics to combat the Baha’i faith, founded in the nineteenth century by a prophet whom Muslim clerics have labeled and opposed as a false mahdi. The Hojjatieh grew with the help of prominent clerics and assistance from the late shah, who sought to curry favor with the clerics. It soon became a powerful nationwide organization of fundamentalists trained in Mahdism and proved a menace to the late shah.

The Hojjatieh played an important role in radicalizing Ahmadinejad and other secular Muslim youth, students, teachers, government bureaucrats, and even some members of the armed forces prior to the 1979 revolution. Many Hojjatieh activists participated in the 1979 Islamic Revolution. But in the early 1980s, Khomeini moved against the society, both because it challenged his velayat-e faqih doctrine of leadership and because it was poised to take the reins of power in Iran. The ensuing purge of its members from the Islamic regime forced numerous aspiring advocates of the new Islamic regime, such as Ahmadinejad, to renounce or hide their membership in or sympathy for the Hojjatieh.

As a result, the Hojjatieh went underground. Accusations of membership were enough to taint aspiring politicians with disloyalty to the supreme leader. In recent years, several critics of Ahmadinejad’s tenure have suggested that his administration is Hojjatieh-inspired and bent on settling scores with Khomeini’s allies. Such charges may not be baseless, as some Ahmadinejad supporters have publicly called for rehabilitation of the Hojjatieh and resumption of its activities against the Baha’i faith. For example, the head of the powerful Islamic Propagation Organization (IPO) in East Azerbaijan called for the “revival and strengthening of Hojjatieh Society.”

Here, Ayatollah Mohammad Taqi Mesbah-Yazdi’s role is notable as Iranians believe
A member of the Assembly of Experts and director of the Imam Khomeini Institute, Mesbah-Yazdi is a leading proponent of Mahdism and a powerful senior cleric with great influence over Ahmadinejad, his government, the Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps (IRGC), and security forces. He is also allegedly a trainer of hard-line clerics at the Haqqani theological college in Qom, some of whom have joined Ahmadinejad's cabinet.

Outspoken, Mesbah-Yazdi opens a window into Ahmadinejad's beliefs. He advocates the use of violence to promote the interests of Islam and seeks to purge the republican aspect of the Islamic Republic system in favor of a pure Islamic system, which his publications refer to as the nucleus of a Mahdi-led world. The October 2005 issue of his monthly publication *Ma'refat*, for example, argued that the "superiority of Islam over other religions is stressed in Qur'an, which calls on believers to wage war against unbelievers and prepare the way for the advent of the Mahdi and conquering the world." According to *Pasdare Islam*, the monthly publication of the powerful Islamic Propagation Organization, an institution in tune with Mesbah-Yazdi's ideas, Khomeini himself elucidated this idea by saying that the "Mahdi will fill the earth with justice" and that "all institutions in our country and their extensions worldwide must prepare the way to receive the Mahdi upon his advent." Mesbah-Yazdi even attributes Ahmadinejad's election to the presidency to the will of the Mahdi. Mesbah-Yazdi is not the only senior cleric who endorses Ahmadinejad's messianism. Jannati and Ayatollah Mohammad Yazdi, the secretary-general of the Qom Seminary Lecturers' Association, both members of Assembly of Experts, have also endorsed the president's beliefs. Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei himself characterized Ahmadinejad's election to the presidency as the fulfillment of the "prayers of the Lord of the Age."[26][27][28][29]

A close examination of the statements and activities of Ahmadinejad and his supporters point to their intimate knowledge of Shi'i traditions about the Mahdi's expected appearance in Iran and the fierce opposition and violence against him and his followers by clerics, issues that have been closely guarded and rarely mentioned by the ecclesiastics for obvious reasons. For example, following the
establishment of the Islamic Republic, clerics directed the purging and editing of statements in books of the sayings and traditions attributed to Prophet Muhammad and his Shi'i successors about the circumstances surrounding the future advent of the Mahdi. Media coverage of such statements was also tailored in the same manner. In one case, the redactors did not even exempt the most famous 110-volume book called *Biharu'l-Anwar* (Oceans of light), a standard textbook compiled by the Safavid-era scholar Muhammad Baqir Majlisi (1616-89). Major portions and traditions were stripped of materials deemed detrimental to the Islamic Republic's interests.

**Ahmadinejad's Interpretation**

No matter how unorthodox Ahmadinejad's interpretation of Islamic theology and prophecies are, he appears sincere in his beliefs. Ahmadinejad's motto of "justice-nurturing government," together with the often-cited promise of the Qur'an about the righteous inheriting the earth, is meant to evoke the idea of a savior in the name of the Mahdi as Iranians are well-versed in the tradition promising the Mahdi will "fill the earth with justice after it has been filled with oppression." As minority Shi'i Muslims, Iranians also expect vindication of their beliefs against the "false" Sunni majority belief. Furthermore, Ahmadinejad's characterization of his government as "jihadist" and "basiji" (militia), further inflames emotions in more radical believers about the militancy of his administration in pursuing Mahdism.

Ahmadinejad seeks an Islamic government in Iran that is free from democratic pretenses and devoid of modern concepts of human rights and the equality of the sexes; that seeks the acquisition of nuclear weapons, the elimination of Israel, the destruction of liberal democratic states and Western capitalism, and an end to the United States as a superpower, which is perceived as the greatest threat to the Islamic Republic's survival and the main obstacle to the accomplishment of its objectives. The achievement of these preconditions, Ahmadinejad believes, will enable Shi'i domination and the establishment of a world government. When Ahmadinejad declares frequently that his government represents a return to Khomeini's revolutionary ideals from which previous governments have allegedly deviated, he is suggesting that he believes it is time to return Mahdism—and the achievement of its precursor steps—to its rightful place among the Islamic Republic's priorities.

It is an attractive idea for the masses, nurtured on more than two decades of state-sponsored incitement. Khomeini, after all, called for the Islamic world to "rise up and destroy Israel," and said of the United States, "We will fight them with all our might until the last drop of our blood." Ahmodinejad's acolytes find his lack of inhibition in speech and his fiery populism a fresh breeze of honesty compared to the deceptive discourse of Rafsanjani and the philosophizing of Khatami. While both Rafsanjani and Khatami might pay rhetorical heed to the goal of eliminating Israel or countering U.S. influence, both prefer to finesse their rhetoric not to antagonize outside powers.

Mesbah-Yazdi's role as a central figure in promoting Mahdism is important because both he and at least one influential disciple, Hujjatu'l-Islam Mohsen Gharavian, openly endorse the Islamic Republic's acquisition of nuclear weapons. In September 2005, for example, Ma'refat declared that "deterrence does not belong just to a few superpowers but also to other countries," and argued that "The Qur'an calls on the faithful and the Muslim nation to acquire maximum power to be able to deter the enemies of religion and humanity: 'Against them make ready your
strength to the utmost of your power, including steeds of war, to strike terror into the hearts of enemies of God and your enemies."[36] In February 2006, Gharavian reiterated this position, as reported by the international media and a number of news agencies in Iran, by stressing the "necessity of using nuclear weapons as a means to retaliate," adding that "there is no religious constraint in using nuclear weapons to retaliate."[37] Although he later denied his statement, his original argument is consistent with those made by others.[38] For example, Hojat ul-Islam Saidi, Khamenei's representative to the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps, a powerful supporter of Mesbah-Yazdi, is often cited in the Revolutionary Guards' Sobh-e Sadegh weekly arguing that the nuclear program "transforms Iran into the dominant regional power."[39]

Mesbah-Yazdi's views and influence over Ahmadinejad and other spiritual pupils grows in importance because his religious edicts are obligatory for his followers. Even if Khamenei has indeed issued a fatwa (as some have argued despite its lack of publication) declaring that making nuclear weapons are contrary to Islamic teachings, Mesbah-Yazdi is theologically permitted to issue a contrary fatwa binding on his followers. As for the Mahdism context of these developments, Khamenei's own words as commander in chief as cited on his website are a sufficient guide: "Becoming equipped with power is a lesson derived from belief in Mahdi. The expected justice, justice of Mahdi for the whole world, is not attained through admonition and preaching ... achieving justice requires that just and righteous people have the power to confront the bullies ... messengers of God preach to the people, but they are also equipped with weapons."[40] An editorial in Hemayat, a daily publication close to Iran's judiciary, went further and declared that "we need to prepare for ruling the world" and "carrying the flag of Islam to the hands of the Mahdi."[41] Such statements are often repeated in the government-sponsored press. Referring to a "great event leading to mankind's salvation," Ahmadinejad presented his vision again in November 2005 by saying, "Iran must become the platform for the appearance of the Lord of the Age."[42]

**Can Ahmadinejad Win a Second Term?**

Ahmadinejad's comprehensive and literal application of Mahdism has led him to call openly for the "elimination of Israel"[43] and otherwise assume a posture of intense confrontation toward Israel and the United States. Domestic opponents argue that Ahmadinejad has committed the cardinal sin of revealing the Islamic Republic's intentions, that he has broken with Iran's traditional enigmatic approach and Shi'i dissimulation (taqiyya). The influential Ayatollah Mohammad Reza Tavassoli, former member of the Expediency Discernment Council and a chief of staff of Khomeini's office, for example, censured Ahmadinejad for openly calling for the destruction of Israel and added that "we all believe in that but there is no need to reveal it." Khatami admonished Ahmadinejad not to "speak of matters that cause economic and political problems for us."[44]

The Islamic Republic has survived because the elected branches of government live alongside those institutions that are not popularly elected and fall under the supervision of the supreme leader—bodies such as the Supreme National Security Council, Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps, armed forces, security forces, judiciary, Council of Guardians, Expediency Council, state media, and economic foundations (bonyads). The supreme leader may technically claim divine power incumbent in his representation of the Mahdi, but, in practice, he governs by balancing institutional interests and ever shifting alliances with other powerful personalities and factional interests.
Ahmadinejad has upset that balance by exceeding the limits allowed for a transient, elected official. His exclusion of some powerful figures from government, recourse to outright Mahdism, and reliance on a band of like-minded advisers have cracked the semblance of unity that had emerged among the "principle-ists," as pro-theocracy Iranian fundamentalists prefer to call themselves.

Some former supporters of Ahmadinejad have now turned on him. For example, Mohammad Reza Bahonar, the deputy speaker in the last parliament and long one of Ahmadinejad's staunchest defenders, criticized the president for suggesting that the Islamic Republic is "bent upon destroying the prevailing global management." Others, such as former parliamentary speaker Ali Akbar Nateq-Nouri, himself a hard-line fundamentalist and someone who often praises the Mahdi, expressed anxiety that Ahmadinejad's "promotion of such superstitions in recent years" might endanger the nation.

Hassan Rowhani, a member of the Supreme National Security Council and former chief nuclear negotiator, characterized Ahmadinejad's views on the Hidden Imam as "superstitious" and "charlatanistic" and called his circle of close allies a "bunch of misguided children." Rumors abound that Ahmadinejad has even dismissed Khamenei's legitimacy. On July 1, 2008, Etemad-e Melli cited Ahmadinejad as having said at the start of his presidency that Khamenei chastised him for claiming that the "Lord of the Age will appear in two years." Ahmadinejad responded by chiding Khamenei: "[He] thinks I am appointed president by him while I am the president appointed by the Lord of the Age."

This has left Ahmadinejad only the support of the Islamic Republic's most hard-line factions—a core group of supporters calling themselves the Pleasant Scent of Servitude (Rayehe-ye Khosh-e Khedmat), followers of Mesbah-Yazdi, and some IRGC elements—a position not conducive to long-term political survival in Iran.

For that reason, Ahmadinejad's tenure beyond the 2009 presidential election is in doubt, as it is opposed not only by longtime rival and newly-elected parliamentary speaker Ali Larijani but also by Mohammad Baqer Qalibaf, the mayor of Tehran and presidential aspirant, and an emerging alliance between Rafsanjani, who represents traditional clerics and technocrats, and Khatami, who represents the business community and reformists. Galvanized by Ahmadinejad's excesses, this pragmatist-reformist alliance made gains in 2007 city council and Assembly of Experts elections. They will face challenges, however, should the Guardian Council and Interior Ministry manipulate candidacies and balloting in the 2009 presidential election.

But elections may not even be necessary to oust Ahmadinejad: By implicitly challenging the supreme leader's authority by channeling the Hidden Imam, Ahmadinejad may have sealed his fate. In theory, Iranians elect their president, but in reality, the supreme leader uses his control over the Islamic Republic's various institutions to manipulate results. The Guardian Council, for example, vets candidates, sometimes disqualifying more than 90 percent of challengers before a single vote is cast. Ahmadinejad's election surprised Iranians almost as much as it surprised the international community. After all, when Mehdi Karrubi went to sleep on election night, he was well ahead in the vote count. When he awoke, he had lost. He openly accused authorities of fraud. Such incidents should not surprise observers. The supreme leader calculates the domestic and international needs of the Islamic Republic and plans the general composition of factional representations in elected offices accordingly.

Alternatively, Ahmadinejad's allies among hard-line fundamentalists may try to...
retain power, a tactic that could risk the existence of the Islamic Republic’s system. Ahmadinejad and his allies showed their intolerance for any dissent when they forced the replacement of 'Ali Larijani, at the time Iran's relatively pragmatic though still hard-line nuclear negotiator and secretary of the Supreme National Security Council, with Said Jilali, a devout believer in Mahdism whose lifetime interest has been the application of principles derived from millennium-old Islamic traditions to Iran's foreign policy.

**Ahmadinejad versus the Clergy?**

While Ahmadinejad enjoys the support of Mesbah-Yazdi and his circle, the president’s Mahdism has severe repercussions for the clerical basis of the Islamic Republic. Incumbent in the belief in the Mahdi’s return is the notion that he will be opposed by the clergy. Says one such prophesy, the "religious leaders of that day will be the most evil religious leaders under the heavens as sedition and dissension will go out from them and to them will it return."

Ahmadinejad may see competitors such as Rafsanjani as among these "most evil religious leaders" who must be neutralized. Another prophecy characterizes the clerics as “faithless” and points to the great suffering of the Mahdi at their hands. Referring to such traditions, one Ahmadinejad adviser asserted that the Mahdi would slaughter such clerics, who are destined to rise against him. The issue is serious enough that some critics accuse Ahmadinejad of trying to eliminate the clergy. A number of prominent clerics have expressed dismay and anger at Ahmadinejad’s treatment of them. Former prime minister Ayatollah Mohammad Reza Mahdavi-Kani, secretary general of the Militant Clergy Association, for example, has "warned the president not to take the clergy for granted" as "we have been combatants for the revolution and against corruption.”

Many Iranians suspect that the traditional clergy's decline after Ahmadinejad's election and the rise of an extremist faction was deliberate IRGC strategy. Statements such as those of Joint Chiefs Commander Hasan Firuzabadi, who warned Ahmadinejad's critics to cease their opposition lest the "enemy … take advantage of them," underscore suspicions of the IRGC role.

Already, a conflict is occurring. Ahmadinejad has encouraged a class of lay clerics (*maddah*) much more in tune with his folk belief than formal Shi'i theology. They staunchly support Ahmadinejad and promote Mahdism, recalling dreams about and sightings of the Mahdi. Such developments have fueled widespread rumors of Ahmadinejad’s campaign against "corrupt” official clerics and his attempt to strengthen the hand of non-clerical hard-liners. The most conspicuous example of such attempts were the May 3, 2008 revelations by Abbas Palizdar, an Ahmadinejad supporter, who, while addressing students at the University of Hamadan, listed corrupt clerics by name, raising suspicion in one newspaper’s assessment that "Ahmadinejad and his military base are bent on eliminating, or at least weakening, the clergy."

The proliferation of hundreds of websites and weblogs that support Ahmadinejad’s Mahdism doctrine has become a Pandora’s box for the traditional clerics and the Islamic Republic as an increasing number of people learn about the issue. For example, among the traditions repeatedly cited on the web in Persian is the story of Prophet Muhammad's sobbing grief at the fate of the Mahdi and his followers. According to accounts on such sites, Muhammad identified the Mahdi's future followers as “brothers” and differentiated them from his disciples whom he only labeled "companions." Asked by his disciples from among which people the Mahdi's followers will appear, he pointed to his only Iranian disciple, Salman, the Persian
Ahmadinejad's opposition to traditional clerics, who are circumscribed in their statements about the Mahdi with a view to concealing from the public the implications of such beliefs, fits perfectly with the tenets of Mahdism that identify Iran as the battleground where the Mahdi appears.

The Iranian nation’s fascination with its glorious ancient civilization was the subject of exploitation by the Pahlavi monarchs preceding the Islamic Republic. They sought to project Iran's glorious past into the present and future. Ahmadinejad has perfected the shah’s art by relying on a religious version of the same concept. The path is fraught with risks, though. Ahmadinejad has integrated practically all the revolutionary ideals of the regime, open and secret, and their supposed Islamic and historical roots, real and imaginary, into one school of thought and strategy for action; it is inspired by his messianic zeal, and he has proudly and publicly revealed its details. For the Islamic Republic of Iran, the genie is out of the bottle.

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[10] Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, "President Ahmadi Nejad: Turning to Mahdism is the only way for the survival of humanity," accessed July 24, 2008. His first speech and the follow-up seminar presentations were recently removed from the permanent website of the annual conference.
[17] Ervand Abrahamian, Tortured Confessions: Prisons and Public Recantations in
Modern Iran (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999), p. 204.


[27] Partow Sokhan (Qom), June 8, Nov. 9, 2005.


[34] Ibid.


[36] Qur. 8:60.


Mahmoud Ahmadinejad is the Iranian president, known for his controversial views on nuclear energy, human rights and Israel. Learn more at Biography.com. Mahmoud Ahmadinejad is best known as the controversial sixth president of the Islamic Republic of Iran, serving from 2005 to 2013. Synopsis. Mahmoud Ahmadinejad was born in Aradan, Iran, on October 28, 1956. He assumed the presidency of Iran in 2005 and was re-elected in 2009, though his second election sparked widespread protests by Iranians who considered the contest corrupt. Ahmadinejad's controversial positions on human rights, nuclear development and Israel alienated him from both the Western and the Islamic worlds. MBR and MBZ mentioned the rumors about Ahmadinejad's belief in the imminent return of the missing Imam and said some think that Ahmadinejad believes himself to be an incarnation of the “hidden” Twelfth Imam. Abizaid said Sultan Qaboos of Oman forecast to him that Ahmadinejad would be sidelined in a few months (Note: a view many Iranians have expressed to AmConsulate Dubai). MBZ noted that Ahmadinejad's rhetoric follows the line of Khomeini and that he does have a populist following. Custer added Ahmadinejad seemed to be mimicking Moqtada al Sadr's strategies in Iraq for attracting followers am