

Understanding Ahmadinejad

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June 2006

No. 1

Who is Mahmoud Ahmadinejad?¹ Before his meteoric rise to power in the summer of 2005, Iran's ultra-conservative president was a relative political unknown.

Since taking office in August 2005, however, the 50-year-old Ahmadinejad has done much to demonstrate his radical credentials. He has ratcheted up the Islamic Republic's hostile rhetoric toward Israel and the United States. His government has systematically rolled back domestic freedoms and deepened its control over Iranian society. And, under his direction, the Islamic Republic has accelerated its very public march toward an atomic capability.

Yet much remains unknown about Iran's president. What drives Ahmadinejad's extremist worldview? And is he simply a pawn of the country's Supreme Leader, or the representative of a separate interest group competing for power in Tehran? As the current crisis over Iran's nuclear ambitions continues to deepen, the answers to these questions have become crucial for American policymakers.

PASDARAN POWER

Ahadinejad's harsh, uncompromising political rhetoric has led many to label him as unsophisticated. But Iran's new president is no political novice. Rather, he is a seasoned strategic operator with im-

peccable revolutionary credentials.

As a member of the radical "Office for Strengthening Unity" during the Islamic Revolution, Ahmadinejad played a major role in planning and executing the 1980 takeover of the U.S. embassy in Tehran.² Subsequently, he became a commander in the *Pasdaran*, the feared clerical army created by the Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini to serve as the "shock troops" of the Islamic Republic. In that capacity, Ahmadinejad served as an instructor for the *Basij*, the regime's fanatical domestic militia, during the eight-year Iran-Iraq War.³ Afterward, Ahmadinejad served as the governor of Ardebil province, and as an organizer of *Ansar-e Hezbollah*, the most notorious of Iran's *guruh-i fishar* (vigilante or "pressure" groups),⁴ until eventually becoming mayor of Tehran in 2003.

Ahadinejad's ascendance is a reflection of the rising power of the *Pasdaran* in Iranian politics. Indeed, Iran's clerical army has been the principal beneficiary of the conservative re-entrenchment that has taken place in Iranian politics over the past several years. In what was widely seen as a backlash against the failed policies of president Mohammad Khatami, the February 2004 elections for Iran's parliament

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1. An early version of this paper appeared in *National Review Online* on January 19, 2006 under the title “False Prophet.”

2. “Profile: Mahmoud Ahmadinejad,” *Al-Jazeera* (Doha), June 19, 2005, <http://english.aljazeera.net/NR/exeres/91109A0C-83F4-438F-9CC1-52DF6936CC6B.htm>.

3. Matthias Kuntzel, “Ahmadinejad’s Demons,” *The New Republic*, April 14, 2006, <http://www.tnr.com/doc.mhtml?i=20060424&s=kuntzel042406>.

4. *Ibid.*

5. In 2000, reformists won 189 of 290 seats in the *majles*, far outstripping their conservative counterparts, who secured just 54. Four years later, the roles were reversed, with conservatives capturing 190 seats to the reformists’ 50. See, respectively, the *CIA World Factbook 2003* and the *CIA World Factbook 2006*. This outcome was at least partially manipulated; ahead of the preliminary round of voting, Iran’s powerful Guardian Council had disqualified 3,533 of 8,144 viable candidates, most of them reformists. Mahan Abedin, “Iran After the Elections,” *Middle East Intelligence Bulletin* 6, no. 2/3 (February/March 2004), http://www.meib.org/articles/0402_iran1.htm.

6. Kamal Nazer Yasin, “Iran’s Revolutionary Guard Make Bid for Increasing Power,” *Eurasia Insight*, May 19, 2004, <http://www.eurasianet.org/departments/insight/articles/eav051904a.shtml>.

7. “The Revolutionary Guards Are Back,” *The Economist*, June 19, 2004, http://www.economist.com/world/africa/displayStory.cfm?story_id=2773140.

8. Some analysts have dubbed this group the “war generation” in a reflection of their formative experiences during the eight year Iran-Iraq War. See Ray Takeyh, “A Profile in Defiance,” *The National Interest* 83, Spring 2006, 16-21.

9. Amir Taheri, “No Change in Iran’s Strategic Goals,” *Gulf News* (Dubai), November 11, 2005, <http://www.gulfnews.com/Articles/RegionNF.asp?ArticleID=189738>.

10. “President-Elect Re-

(*majles*) resulted in a rout for Iran’s “reformist” camp, swinging no fewer than 130 seats to conservatives.⁵ Additional gains—such as the *Pasdarans*’ assumption of control over the country’s media sector in May 2004 with the appointment of a former commander, Ezatullah Zarghami, to the post of the Islamic Republic’s national press and media chief⁶—have further solidified conservative influence over Iran’s political discourse. Close to a third of Iran’s 290 parliamentary deputies now have links to Iran’s military complex, and 42 are directly affiliated with the *Pasdarans*.⁷

This new crop of conservatives is distinct from other nodes of regime power in the Islamic Republic. Its members are overwhelmingly military strategists and tacticians, rather than professional clerics.⁸ As such, they generally lack the political experience of Iran’s clerical establishment (including the ability to safely navigate international crises). By the same token, this political elite is far less practiced in the language of *taqiyyah* (obfuscation) and *kitman* (dissimulation) that is routinely used by Iran’s clerical class in their diplomatic dealings.⁹ Simply put, Ahmadinejad and his ilk say what they mean and mean what they say, and do so to a much greater degree than Iranian leaders have in the past when interacting with the outside world.

The growing power of the *Pasdarans* has been mirrored by a concerted effort to revive the revolutionary principles espoused by its creator and inspiration, the Ayatollah Khomeini. One of Ahmadinejad’s first public acts follow-

ing his presidential victory was to visit Khomeini’s tomb in a public show of his continuing devotion to the founder of the Islamic Republic.¹⁰ Since then, Ahmadinejad has publicly demonstrated his commitment to Khomeini’s vision. At home, in keeping with his belief that “all orders in the Islamic Republic must be based on the Qoran and the [Revolutionary] tradition,”¹¹ Iran’s president has launched a full bore offensive on lax morals and foreign influence.¹² Abroad, meanwhile, Ahmadinejad has revived an expansionist foreign policy vision for the Islamic Republic, promising supporters that “[t]he wave of the Islamic revolution will soon reach the entire world.”¹³

DIVINE INSPIRATION

But Ahmadinejad is more than simply a political reactionary; he is also a self-styled messianic missionary. Iran’s president is a disciple of the Ayatollah Mohammad Taqi Mesbah-Yazdi, an obscure Qom cleric who preaches a radical strain of Shi’ite liberation theology. Mesbah-Yazdi is a member,

and possibly the *de facto* head, of the Hojatieh, a powerful semi-secret religious society originally created in the 1950s as a political tool against Iran’s Baha’i religious minority. But the Hojatieh was so fanatical and apocalyptic that even Khomeini eventually deemed it too extreme, formally banning the sect from political life in the early 1980s.¹⁴

Like that of the Hojatieh itself, Mesbah-Yazdi’s worldview is exclusionary, anti-democratic and deeply anti-Western.¹⁵ In his writings and public speeches, he has agitated for—among other things—the rollback of individual

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voting rights, the targeting of opposition press and politicians, and the forcible Islamization of Iranian universities.¹⁶ Most notable, however, is his fervent belief in the imminent return of the “Hidden Imam,” or Mahdi, a messiah-like religious figure from the 9th Century that many believe will return as a result of a regional conflagration.

Ahmadinejad has been deeply influenced by these ideas. “Our revolution’s main mission is to pave the way for the re-appearance of the 12th Imam, the Mahdi,” Ahmadinejad told a meeting of national religious leaders in November 2005. “Today, we should define our economic, cultural and political policies based on the policy of Imam Mahdi’s return.”¹⁷

He has wasted no time turning this principle into policy. Back in 2004, while still mayor of Tehran, Ahmadinejad is said to have secretly ordered an urban reconstruction plan to make the city more accessible for the Mahdi’s return.¹⁸ Since his ascension to the presidency, he has perpetuated this practice, funneling substantial federal funds (some \$17 million) to renovate the Jamkaran mosque—which houses the well from which the Mahdi is expected to materialize—and opening discussions about the creation of a direct train route from there to Tehran.¹⁹

Since taking office, Ahmadinejad has also elevated fellow Hojatieh members to key positions of political power in the Islamic Republic’s bureaucracy. At least four of Ahmadinejad’s twenty-one cabinet members are said to be members of the Hojatieh society,²⁰ and one of the president’s closest and most respected advisors, Mojtaba Hashemi Samareh, is reportedly a member of Mesbah-Yazdi’s inner circle.²¹ This confluence of forces has led to a number of controversial governmental measures in recent months, most prominent among them the October 2005 ratification of a formal cooperation pact with the Twelfth Imam.²²

The belief in the imminent return of the Mahdi has driven Ahmadinejad’s foreign policy brinkmanship. According to

him, “a historic war between the oppressor [Christians] and the world of Islam” is under way, and the Islamic Republic is on the front lines.²³ Thus, as Ahmadinejad told a closed-door session of the *majles* foreign policy and national security committee in January 2006, Iran must abandon its decade-and-a-half-old policy of “détente” with the West in favor of confrontation.²⁴

The tool of choice in this struggle appears to be Iran’s nuclear program. As some commentators have suggested, Ahmadinejad’s defiant pursuit of an atomic option despite mounting international pressure is grounded in the belief that their country’s nuclear successes are a sign of divine intervention, and that the Islamic Republic is destined to become a nuclear-armed regional hegemon.²⁵

ALTERING THE INTERNAL BALANCE

Ordinarily, none of these factors would be overly important. Under the traditional structure of power within the Islamic Republic, the office of the president is an empty one, completely controlled by—and beholden to—the Supreme Leader. Indeed, despite sweeping to power on a “reformist” platform, Ahmadinejad’s predecessor, Mohammad Khatami, failed to enact virtually any progressive domestic measures, instead presiding over an expansion of regime repression and an acceleration of Iran’s efforts to acquire weapons of mass destruction.

To some extent, this state of affairs has persisted; certainly, Ahmadinejad could not have risen to the presidency without the endorsement and backing of Iran’s Supreme Leader. However, telltale signs suggest that, now that he is in office, Ahmadinejad has set about changing all that. In recent months, Iran’s president has undertaken a systematic campaign to consolidate power by elevating loyalists to key governmental posts, launching a major clampdown on independent media, and reordering the relationship between

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17. As cited in Paul Hughes, “Iran President Paves the Way for Arabs’ Imam Return,” Reuters, November 17, 2005.

18. Scott Peterson, “Waiting for the Rapture in Iran,” *Christian Science Monitor*, December 21, 2005, <http://www.csmonitor.com/2005/1221/p01s04-wome.html>.

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30. Ramita Navai and Richard Beeston, "Iran Sacks Diplomats in Purge of Reformers," *Times of London*, November 2, 2005, <http://www.timesonline.co.uk/article/0,,251-1854018,00.html>.

the central government and Iran's regions. This initiative has included:

Expanded censorship. In recent months, Ahmadinejad has imposed major new restrictions on radio, television and film content, including a ban on the playing of all Western and "offensive" music on state-run radio and television stations.²⁶ Under his direction, Iran's Ministry of Culture has banned the publication of virtually all books.²⁷ Ahmadinejad has also authorized a campaign of media intimidation—one that has included threats against opposition journalists and a purge of personnel in at least one prominent news agency.²⁸

Consolidation of power. Ahmadinejad's ascendance has been followed by a systematic campaign to replace key governmental positions with former *Pasdaran* commanders loyal to his radical worldview. No fewer than 13 members of Ahmadinejad's 21-member cabinet previously held high-profile positions in the Islamic Republic's clerical army—including Foreign Minister Manoucher Mottaki (a former *Pasdaran* officer responsible for running terrorist operations in Turkey), Defense Minister Mostafa Mohammad-Najar, who served as part of the *Pasdaran* expeditionary force in Lebanon in early 1980s, and Culture and Islamic Guidance Minister Mohammad Saffar-Harandi, the former director of the *Pasdaran*'s political bureau. In addition to cabinet appointments, Ahmadinejad also has commenced a purge of officials at the regional level, so far replacing the governors of at least six of Iran's thirty provinces.²⁹

Restructuring diplomacy. Simultaneously, Ahmadinejad has launched a major overhaul of Iran's professional diplomatic corps. At least twenty of the Islamic Republic's top diplomats—including Tehran's envoys to Paris, Berlin and London—already have been fired, and more changes are expected. The key factor in the purge, observers say, is a failure to effectively promote the president's extremist agenda.³⁰ Those diplomats that have remained, meanwhile, have had their autonomy severely curtailed. As part

of a December 2005 directive, Ahmadinejad has imposed sweeping new restrictions on foreign travel and foreign contacts for Iran's professional diplomatic corps.³¹

Imposing ideological conformity. In a move that echoes the "cultural revolution" that followed the establishment of the Islamic Republic in 1979, Ahmadinejad's government has launched a review of the employment contracts of university-level professors hired since 1997—a step that many see as a prelude to the firing of educators deemed by the regime to be too "un-Islamic." A number of academics at some of Iran's leading higher-learning institutions (including Tehran University and Tehran's University of Alameh Tabatabai) have already been warned that their contracts will not be reviewed once they expire, and more expulsions are predicted in the near future.³² In a similar fashion, the Iranian regime has intensified its efforts to clamp down on "immoral behavior" within the Islamic Republic, enacting restrictive new social measures aimed at greater regulation of the public conduct of Iranian citizens. Among these is the imposition of a *de facto* dress code on the female population of Tehran, as well as an expansion of the activities of the Islamic Republic's "morals police."³³

The impact of these changes has been pronounced. In recent months, the U.S. Department of State and the Congressionally-mandated U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom have both noted a deepening of repression and religious persecution within the Islamic Republic.³⁴ Iran has likewise begun taking new steps to isolate its population from foreign influence—among them the creation of new Internet control measures and the allocation of millions of dollars for domestic propaganda efforts.³⁵ Most significant of all, however, is mounting evidence that on a number of key topics, chief among them the nuclear issue, the Iranian presidency appears to have begun to emerge as an independent foreign policy actor in its own right.

IMPLICATIONS FOR AMERICAN POLICY

For American policymakers, the changes underway within the Islamic Republic have at least two concrete implications.

The first is military. Some analysts have responded to the current crisis over the Islamic Republic's atomic efforts by suggesting that it would be possible for the United States to deter a nuclear-armed Iran.³⁶ In making this assertion, they have relied on the experience of the Cold War, during which the threat of mutual nuclear annihilation created a stable "balance of terror" between Moscow and Washington.

Such assumptions, however, are deeply flawed. Cold War deterrence functioned successfully because a series of conditions (good communication, rational decision-making, well-informed strategic planning, and, most importantly, a shared assumption that war should be avoided) were presumed to exist between the United States and the Soviet Union. None of these are present in America's current relationship with Iran, indicating that the risk of miscalculation by either Tehran or Washington is far too great for a successful bilateral deterrence relationship. Moreover, Ahmadinejad's apocalyptic worldview suggests that at least one segment of the Iranian leadership is now seeking to foment precisely such a nuclear confrontation—effectively making Iran "undeterrable" in the traditional sense of the word.

The second has to do with religious authority. Unlike both of his predecessors, Iran's new president is not a cleric but a military man, with a distinct constituency of his own—one that he can marshal in

the event of an internal power struggle. Indeed, jitters over Ahmadinejad's policies and potential independence have already sparked a backlash in some corners of Iran's clerical establishment, most noticeably through the strengthening of the powers of his political opponent and rival, former president Ali Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani, in his capacity as head of the country's main arbitration body, the Expediency Council.³⁷ Listening devices have also reportedly been found in a number of key regional and federal offices that have close contact with Ahmadinejad and his cabinet.³⁸ This suggests that at least some in Iran no longer believe a future struggle for political dominance within the Iranian leadership to be entirely out of the question.

Should such a struggle emerge, its outcome is likely to be dictated by where Ahmadinejad places his religious loyalties. From the 1979 Islamic Revolution until his death a decade later, the Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini served simultaneously as the Islamic Republic's *rahbar* (Supreme Leader) and its *marja'taqlid* (model of religious emulation). The first post was

political, the second spiritual. Khomeini's death brought with it a bifurcation of these functions. The Ayatollah Ali Khamenei assumed the post of *rahbar*, but has weathered repeated challenges to his religious authority from more senior clerics. Ahmadinejad's mentor, Mesbah-Yazdi, is such a challenger, and has openly questioned Khamenei's religious credentials.³⁹ Indeed, some have speculated that Mesbah-Yazdi is

himself a contender for the Islamic Republic's top post, and could be conspiring to use the upcoming Fall elections of the

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40. Ibid.

country's powerful Assembly of Experts, which selects the Supreme Leader and supervises his activities, to supplant Khomeini.⁴⁰ In the event of such a struggle, it is not at all clear on what side Ahmadinejad and his followers in the *Pasdaran* would find themselves.

Given the foregoing, it would be safe to

say that Ahmadinejad's rise to power has significantly complicated American options vis-à-vis Iran. But it has also served to clarify them. Iran's new president is plain-spoken in his radicalism, and open about his intentions. Policymakers in Washington would do well to take him at his word.

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