

Ahmadinezhād's Mahdi. The ideological aspects of Ahmadinezhād's political fail

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Abstract

Being once the favorite president of the Supreme leader and the conservative cadre of the IRI and enjoying their support during the post-electoral protests in 2009, Ahmadinezhād's second presidential period was characterized by political challenges with these former supporters. Ahmadinezhād's close circle was labeled as the 'deviant current' in the rhetoric of pro-leader conservatives and became subject of judicial prosecution, parliamentary interpellations and clerical disapproval.

Although the critiques were expressed ambiguously, two central charges could be identified in the conservative campaign against this current: its Nationalist tendencies and messianic beliefs.

The second charge is the main concern of this paper. I shall try to demonstrate the essential gap between the ideology of the conservative establishment of the Islamic Republic and of Ahmadinezhād's closest circle, as a major reason for the prompt change of attitude of the establishment towards Ahmadinezhād. In order to show this gap, I am going compare the role of messianic belief in Khomeyni's political thoughts as the constitutional idea of the Islamic Republic with Ahmadinezhād's statements regarding to Mahdaviyat. I shall then try to locate the 'new elites' in their socioeconomic context, in order to explain their rising and their temporary success.

Keywords

Politics in the Islamic Republic of Iran, messianism, Mahdi, Ahmadinezhād, mahdaviyat, Political Thoughts in Shia,

Introduction

The disqualification of Ahmadinezhād's protégé for the Iranian presidential elections in 2013 through the Guardian Council was hardly surprising to many political observers. Once having been the presidential candidate preferred by the Supreme Leader and the conservative body of the establishment and having enjoyed their absolute support during the post-electoral protests in 2009, Ahmadinezhād became in his second presidential period the main target of political attacks of these former supporters.¹ The tension between the Leader and Ahmadinezhād reached its fever peak in 2011 when the Supreme Leader ordered the intelligence minister Heydar Moslehi reinstated after he had been fired by the President (or rather urged to resign). Protesting against this order, Ahmadinezhād didn't appear in his office for 11 days and this unprecedented reaction triggered a severe wave of publicly expressed criticism from the side of conservative and pro-leader elites.² Labeled as 'deviant current' (*jaryān-e en-herāfi*) in the rhetoric of these pro-leader conservatives, Ahmadinezhād's clique became subject of judicial prosecution, parliamentary interpellations and clerical disapproval during the second presidential period. Many conservative protagonists classified the 'deviant current' as even more dangerous than the protest wave after the elections of 2009 - the so-called *fetne* 1388 in the rhetoric of the conservative bodies, which itself was considered as a major threat to the Islamic state.³

¹ The New York Times (http://www.nytimes.com/2011/06/23/world/middleeast/23iran.html?pagewanted=all&_r=5&, accessed 15.08.2015)

² Radio Farda (<http://www.radiofarda.com/content/f15-ministerofsecurityandintelligence-ahmadinejad-iran/25375372.html>, accessed 15.08.2015)

³ Alborz News Agency (<http://www.alborznews.net/fa/news/43874/>, accessed 10.12.2011)

Although the specifics and contents of the ‘deviant current’ remain relatively vague in these critical voices, two central charges can be identified in the conservative campaign against this current: On the one hand the ‘deviant current’ is accused of not being true enough to the line of the Islamic Republic because of its nationalist tendencies. On the other hand, ‘the deviant current’ is severely criticized for its ‘superstitious’ messianic beliefs, which are considered to be in contradiction with the concept of Absolute Guardianship of the Jurist (*Velāyat-e motlaqe-ye faqih*), the very fundamental principle of the Islamic Republic.⁴

Investigating this second point of critique is the main concern of this inquiry. In this paper I shall portray the essential ideological gap between the conservative establishment of the Islamic Republic and the new political elites emerging during Ahmadinezhād’s presidency. This ideological gap is in my opinion to be regarded as a major reason for the radical change of attitude of the old cadre towards Ahmadinezhād and for their efforts to abolish his political line from the political scene in the Islamic Republic. In order to demonstrate this gap I shall first illustrate the role of messianic belief in Khomeyni’s political thoughts as the constitutional idea of the Islamic Republic. In a second step Ahmadinezhād’s statements concerning Mahdī shall be analyzed and subsequently compared with the Mahdi-understanding of Khomeyni and of the establishment of the Islamic Republic. Finally, I shall trace the socioeconomic background of the new elites around Ahmadinezhād in order to explain the emergence and success of these political elites as a populist movement.

The historical development of Mahdaviyat and its role in the emergence of IRI

The question of the leadership of the Muslim (Shia) community in the time of occultation has been one of the main concerns of shiite scholarship from the very beginning of the emergence of the notion of occultation. As long as the Imām lived and was present to the public, he was, at least theoretically, considered to be the only legitimate instance to take on the secular as well as the religious leadership of the post-prophetic community.⁵ After the emergence of the notion of occultation the clergy and the shiite experts had to deal with some very essential questions regarding the leadership in the absence of the legitimate authority. It had to be clarified, whether an authority could be identified in the available religious sources who could represent the hidden Imām and take over his secular and divine responsibilities. A negative answer to this question caused another dilemma, namely the question of the applicability of divine rules, which were from one side assumed to be eternal and not subject to any suspensions and from the other side were considered to be the exclusive domain of the Imām or eventually his legitimate successor.

The shiite experts of the early years of occultation almost uniformly held the view that the Imām could not be represented by any person and authority. Thus, any kind of leadership in the time of his absence is illegitimate.⁶ This positioning led to a quiescent passivity and to the de facto recognition of the secular ruler, as any kind of opposition or revolution resulted in an installation of some other illegitimate

⁴ Tabnak News Agency (<http://www.tabnak.ir/fa/news/172255>, accessed 15.08.2015)

⁵ Calder, „Accommodation and revolution“, 40.

⁶ Ibid., 40.

ruler. Consequently, the divine rules could not be implemented as no authority was legitimate to enforce them.⁷

Although this quiescent attitude has survived up to now and can still be found among the contemporary clergies, it was soon modified by the idea of representation of clergies and lost its predominance. Viewing themselves as the general representative of Imām (*na'ib al-'ām*), the clergy took over judicial and financial duties which were dedicated to Mahdi in the classical sense. The political affairs, however, remained as a field which the clergy at least officially avoided.⁸

The reign of the Safavid Dynasty resulted in an important conceptual shift in the political role of 'ulamā'. Being shiite rulers of a territory with a prevalently Sunni population, the Safavid Shahs were reliant on the assistance of the clergies in converting the population to Shia.⁹ Hence the 'ulamā' enjoyed a very favorable social status and were integrated in governmental bodies such as the office of *sheykh-ol-eslām* and *sadr* which were in charge of controlling the legal system and application of Islamic law, as well as supervision over the religious endowments (*auqāf*).¹⁰

Another more or less parallel development which improved the secular and spiritual role of the clergy was the prevailing of the *usuli*-school over the *akhbāri*-school among 'ulamā'. The proponents of the *akhbāri*-school considered Quran and tradition as the only permissible source of jurisdiction, whereas the supporters of the *usuli*-school added reason (*'aql*) and consensus of clergy (*ijmā'*) to the eligible sources of jurisdiction. These two sources brought the clergy in a privileged position in the shiite community, since the laymen didn't dispose of these sources and were, therefore, in their religious life captive to the expertise of 'ulamā'.¹¹ The shiite understanding of imitation (*taqlid*) rose in this context and divided the religious community in two classes: on the one hand, the laymen who were expected to follow the religious instructions of the 'guides' and on the other, the 'ulamā' who monopolized the access to divine truth. The spiritual leadership, the authority that once was exclusively ascribed to hidden Imām was complemented, if not replaced, by an authority practiced by living human beings through a collective representation.¹² The shiite clergy class with the spiritual authority over the Muslim community had become entrenched by the time of the rise of the Qajars, a dynasty which in contrast to the Safavids, who observed themselves as descendants of the seventh Imām Musā al-Kāzem, wasn't in possession of any qualities to legitimate its rule and thus more dependent on the clergies as a source of legitimation.¹³ The Qajar era is thus characterized by increasing clerical interferences in political affairs, who regarded themselves as the guardians of Shari'a at that time. The political intervention of clergies could be observed in the order of *jihād* during the Russo-Persian wars (1803-1814), the determinant *fatwā* in the Tobacco Protest (1890), as well as the engagement of a part of influential

⁷ Akhavi, „Contending discourses“, 248.

⁸ Martin, Creating an islamic state, 116.

⁹ Amanat, Apocalyptic Islam, 183.

¹⁰ Halm, Die Schia, 110.

¹¹ Ourghi, Schiitischer Messianismus, 80.

¹² Halm, Die Schia, 129-30.

¹³ Ourghi, Schiitischer Messianismus, 81.

clergies during the constitutional revolution (1905-1911), just to name a few examples. The clergy of the Qajar era declared defending or improving the implementation of shari'a as their exclusive domain and the main goal of their sociopolitical engagement.¹⁴ The direct participation in secular power remained yet a terrain, which the clergy didn't, at least officially, intend to enter into. However, and in contrast to the early Shia doctrine, any political change was considered by the 'ulamā' of the Qajar Era to be permissible, if the illegitimate secular ruler breached the divine law through his actions and legislations or if some other form of government than the absolute monarchy was considered to be a better guarantee for the enforcement of the shari'a, as in the positioning of some pro-revolution 'ulamā'.¹⁵

This attitude towards the sociopolitical role of the clergy could be found in Khomeyni's early works as well. In *Kashf al-asrār* he not only postulated the continuous supervision by jurists and 'ulamā' regarding the compatibility of legislations and state decisions with the divine law, but also suggested the selection of the ruler by an assembly of 'ulamā' and all these were justified by the idea of the duty of the 'ulamā' to protect Shari'a.¹⁶ The decisive turn in his political theory could be observed in his later lectures, known as the theory of Guardianship of the Jurist (*Velāyat-e Faqih*). He starts these lectures with the argument that the divine law is valid for eternity and the occultation of the legitimate executive authority is not a plausible excuse for suspending the implementation of divine law. On the other hand, it is impossible to enforce some of the public shari'a regulations, such as *hudud*, without having an Islamic State. The establishing of an Islamic State in the time of occultation, which warrants the enforcement of divine Law, is subsequently inevitable and obligatory.¹⁷ Now that no one is particularly named by God to take on the task of leadership in the time of occultation, it should be figured out which qualities God's appointees possessed, in order to find out who could possibly be the most competent one to install and govern the Islamic state. As to Khomeyni, God's appointees - namely the prophet and the imāms - incorporated two attributes which made them suitable for secular and spiritual leadership: knowledge of the divine law and justness. If someone is in disposal of these attributes, then this person is the most suitable one to take on the duty of leadership of the Muslim community in the time of occultation.¹⁸ According to Khomeyni no one but a jurist could incorporate both these attributes, as only the jurist disposes of the knowledge to the divine law. Therefore, if a jurist rises up and founds an Islamic state, it is the duty of the Muslim nation (*umma*) to obey him. This idea plays an absolutely essential role in the constitution of the IRI. Although Khomeyni's idea of spiritual and secular leadership of the jurists became for no mean the consensual positioning and is still challenged by a

¹⁴ Halm, *Die Schia*, 142.

¹⁵ Amanat, *Apocalyptic Islam*, 185.

¹⁶ Martin, *Creating an islamic state*, 108.

¹⁷ Khomeyni, *Velāyat-e Faqih*, 29-31.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 63.

number of shiite clergies, it could be regarded as the predominant understanding of the ruling elites and the political doctrine of the Islamic Republic.¹⁹

Apart from very substantial differences with respect to the scope of the authority, all ideas considering the clergy as the representative of the hidden Imām share a common origin. The *raison d'être* of the clergy class in all these approaches is the reticent absence of the Imām and the unpredictability of the date of his reappearance. The reappearance of Mahdi shall, therefore, make the shiite clergy class in their existing form expendable. In a similar way the authority of the clergies shall be challenged, if the Imām could express his opinion or practice his authority indirectly in the time of occultation, as his moves and decisions have an edge on those of the clergies. On this point I strongly agree with Ze'ev Maghen who calls the development of the shiite clergy class as de-messianization and considers shi'ism as the nemesis and antithesis of messianism. In a study on the reaction of the shiite clergies to messianic movements through history he comes to the conclusion:

“Mahdism has thus been for centuries the inveterate enemy of Shi'ism, and the Twelvers have proven exceptionally talented at suppressing this enemy. From the burning of medieval *ghulat* to the shooting of 19th century Babis, no one puts down messianic movements like orthodox Shi'ites. Any time in history that a door has been opened that purportedly led to the Hidden Imām — or through which the Hidden Imām was slated to re-enter our world — the Shi'ite 'ulamā' have done everything in their power to slam it shut.”²⁰

Ahmadinezhād and the Mahdi

Ahmadinezhād's remarkable affinity for the Hidden Imam could already be observed in his career as Tehran's Mayor and recently designated president. In his early statements he declared the preparation for the reappearance of the hidden Imām as the main mission of the Islamic Republic of Iran. At the same time these statements implied that the Imām shall reappear in a very predictable time. For example, during his mayoralty of Tehran a rumor was put out that Ahmadinezhād was planning a highway from Tehran to Qom, in order to facilitate the transportation of Imām's supporters in the case of his reappearance. One of the very first decisions of his cabinet was the dedication of a 17 million USD budget to the expansion of Jamkarān mosque, as well as laying railway lines from Tehran to Jamkarān.²¹ In one of his very first public speeches as the president of the IRI in 2005 Ahmadinezhād said: “Our revolution's main mission is to pave the way for the reappearance of the Mahdi. Today we should define our economic, cultural and political policies on the basis of the Mahdi's return.”²² In the same year and during another public speech he stated: “We have to turn Iran into a modern and divine

¹⁹ Art. 5 of the Constitution of IRI: “During the Occultation of the Wali al-Asr (may God hasten his reappearance), the wilayah and leadership of the Ummah devolve upon the just ('adil] and pious [muttaqi] faqih, who is fully aware of the circumstances of his age; courageous, resourceful, and possessed of administrative ability, will assume the responsibilities of this office in accordance with Article 107.”

²⁰ Maghen, „Occultation in Perpetuum“, 250.

²¹ Naji, Ahmadinejad, 95.

²² Amir Arjomand, After Khomeini, 156.

country to be the model for all nations, and which will also serve as the basis for the return of the Twelfth Imām.”²³

Although the main mission of the Islamic state in the theory of Guardianship of the Jurist and in the constitution of the IRI seems to be the enforcement of divine law in the time of occultation and not hastening the reappearance, Ahmadinezhād’s statements concerning the preparation for the reappearance don’t imply any paradigm shift and structural changes to the existing system and are, therefore, at the first sight less contradictory to the doctrine of the Islamic Republic. Considering Shiism as the antithesis of Mahdism - as we did in the previous lines - means in no way that the orthodox Shia sanctions the zealous wish of Imām’s hastened reappearance. To the contrary, paying lip service to the Imām and praying for his hastened reappearance are very significant rituals of everyday life of Shiites and enjoy a distinctive position in the rhetoric of the Islamic Republic as well. Ahmadinezhād’s statements in which the preparation for the reappearance is declared as the mission of IRI could, therefore, be interpreted as the wish of any zealous believer anxiously waiting for the end time savior and considering the Islamic State as a suitable measure for the time of reappearance.

A second type of statement regarding Mahdi let us assume, however, that the mentioned statements are more than a simple wish of a zealous believer. Numerous statements could be found in the rhetoric of Ahmadinezhād and his followers which imply that the president and his government enjoy a unique attachment to Mahdi. It is also claimed that the Imām protects Ahmadinezhād and his crew in delicate situations and assists them in difficult decision-making processes. One of the most remarkable statements in this context, which was broadly reflected in national and international press, was Ahmadinezhād’s claim of having been surrounded by a halo of light during his speech at the General Assembly of the UN in 2005. He reported on the incident during a visit to a high-profile clergy, Ayatollāh Javādi-ye Āmoli, with the following words: “He [a member of the Iranian delegation to the General Assembly, A.G.] said when you [Ahmadinezhād] began with the words 'in the name of God', I saw that you became surrounded by a light until the end [...] I felt it myself, too. I felt that all of a sudden the atmosphere changed there, and for 27-28 minutes all the leaders did not blink [...] they were astonished as if a hand held them there and made them sit. It had opened their eyes and ears for the message of the Islamic Republic.”²⁴

In another speech at the Elm-o-San’at University Ahmadinezhād reported on his 2007 speech at Columbia University, in which he was introduced as a ‘cruel dictator’ by the president of the university²⁵: “As I was there, I was sure that in the poisonous atmosphere which was created there my Lord will come and manage the situation.”²⁶

²³ Ibid., 93.

²⁴ BBC News Agency (http://www.bbc.co.uk/persian/iran/story/2005/11/051128_sm-ahmadinejad.shtml, accessed 15.08.2015)

²⁵ President Lee C. Bollinger's Introductory Remarks at SIPA-World Leaders Forum with President of Iran Mahmoud Ahmadinejad (<http://www.columbia.edu/cu/news/07/09/lcbopeningremarks.html>, accessed 15.08.2015)

²⁶ BBC News Agency (http://www.bbc.co.uk/persian/iran/2011/01/110107_u03_ganji_hidden_imam.shtml, accessed 15.08.2015)

In defending his controversial 'Project of targeted Subventions' Ahmadinezhād said: "I am sure that the Lord of the Age shall manage and realize this project [...] Justice has an owner and the owner of the Project of targeted Subventions, whose basis is justice, is his holiness Mahdi"²⁷

These are just a few examples of numerous statements of Ahmadinezhād or his sympathizers, which in my opinion encompass new elements, which are in absolute contradiction to the doctrine of the Islamic Republic and result in an ideological conflict between the circle around Ahmadinezhād and the old cadre.

Enjoying a direct connection to the hidden Imām is a claim which could be found repeatedly in the history of Shia till recent times. Just to name a recent example, Ayatollāh Meshkini, the head of Assembly of Experts, claimed in 2004 that he had given the names of candidates for the parliamentary elections to an angel and the hidden Imām had revised the list and ticked the names of the candidates.²⁸ The claim of having a connection with the hidden Imām proves to be a highly delicate matter, however, if it is not made by an 'eligible' person such as a high-ranking clergy or someone enjoying an extraordinary spiritual reputation recognized by the clergy. Yet enough evidence could be found in Shia history which demonstrates the reaction of clergy to a person claiming to be in contact with the hidden Imām. Such claims have been countered with a spectrum of sanctions from calling the claiming person a liar to physical elimination of the claimer.²⁹

Suggesting that one is in connection with the hidden Imām means entering the terrain of the shiite clergy, who - as mentioned - considers its superiority in spiritual affairs as exclusive. By the same token, the idea of the Imām's intervention in secular matters challenges the monopoly of the clergy class in terms of their access to the divine sphere. As demonstrated in the first part of this paper, the mainstay and the *raison d'être* of the shiite clergy class – and that of the Islamic Republic - is the reticent existence of the Imām in the time of occultation. Although the Imām is believed to intervene in some affairs such as *ijama'* of 'ulamā' through mysterious ways, it is generally assumed that the Imām abstains from a direct intervention in the secular affairs of the Muslim community and because of this abstinence the clergy class is indispensable. Now, if someone has the possibility to find out the opinion of the Imām through a direct connection to him or if the Imām's will is expressed in some way or if someone is being protected by him in delicate situations, then it is justifiable to ask, whether the person receiving knowledge from the divine source or the person enjoying the unique divine support ranks lower than the general appointees of the Imām, namely the clergy, in the hierarchical religious order. Is a layman being guided by an inerrant source reliant on the fallible clergy in his decision-making at all or are his decisions superior to the opinion of the clergy? I assume that the 'deviant current' struck just the right note with the clergy at this very point and the reaction of clergies to messianic claims of this current support this assumption.

²⁷ Tabnak News Agency (<http://www.tabnak.ir/fa/news/140661>, accessed 15.08.2015)

²⁸ Ourghi, *Schiitischer Messianismus*, 246.

²⁹ Maghen, „Occultation in Perpetuum“, 232-250.

Ayatollah Mesbāh-e Yazdi, once a firm supporter of Ahmadinezhād, attacked the idea of a connection between a layman and the hidden Imām with the following words: “This new current, which is attractive to the youth, ask who has said that only the clergy could be in connection with Imām. [...] They say, if it is possible to have a direct connection to the Imām, why do we need his representatives at all!”³⁰

The preacher of Ahwaz and member of the Council of Experts put the ‘deviant current’ on a level with Baha’is and declared *Mahdaviyat* with the following words as the exclusive terrain of the clergy:

“*Mahdaviyat* is a subject which has to do with belief and religion. The theology schools and the shiite ‘ulamā’ are responsible for the proper thematizing of *Mahdaviyat* in the society. Each institution and each center treating the question of *Mahdaviyat* beyond the authority of the schools, is misleading and misled.”³¹

Ahmadinezhād’s Mahdi-perception departs from the one of the establishment as well as the orthodox clergy at this very point. The main elements of Ahmadinezhād’s Mahdi-idea, namely the reappearance in a near future, receiving divine support from the hidden Imām and the intervention of Imām in profane secular decisions of Ahmadinezhād’s government, all together challenge the doctrine of the IRI and the raison d’être of the shiite clergy class, which both are based on the absolute absence of the Imām for an unpredictable time. Ahmadinezhād and his supporters tried to open a door leading to the hidden Imām, which was supposed to remain closed as to the orthodox shiite clerics. Ahmadinezhād’s Mahdi is no more an inaccessible holy figure being represented by the clerics and praised by some lip-service, but a political actor intervening in even some trivial matters such as the implementation of an economic project and whose authority is a serious rival to the one of the clergy class, the highest political instance in the IRI.

Among the scholarship there are two explanations regarding the origin of Ahmadinezhād’s messianic tendencies. The first explanation suggests that Ahmadinezhād represents the ideas of Ayatollah Ayatollah Mohammad Taqi Mesbāh-e Yazdi, a conservative clergy with a skeptical approach towards democratic structures and a defender of the idea of Islamic State (*hokumat-e eslāmi*).³² Although it is less doubtful that Ahmadinezhād enjoyed the support of Mesbāh-e Yazdi and his followers during the presidential campaigns of 2005 and 2009, there are major differences between Mesbāh-e Yazdi’s perception of the Islamic State and the messianic belief of Ahmadinezhād. Mesbāh’s understanding of Mahdi’s intervention in political affairs is in no way a continuous and personal one. In order to reduce the democratic impulses of the constitution, Mesbāh attempts to shift the source of legitimacy of the Guardian Jurist from the people to a divine source. He argues that the decision of the Council of Experts on selecting a new Guardian Jurist provide him legitimacy, not because the council has been elected by the people and represents them, but because this decision (and even the outcome of the

³⁰ BBC News Agency (http://www.bbc.co.uk/persian/iran/2011/06/110602_144_mesbah_satan.shtml, accessed 15.08.2015)

³¹ <http://www.jebhemottahed.ir/vdcd2s0s6yt0o.a2y.html>, accessed 10.12.2011.

³² Amuzegar, „the Ahmadinejad Era“, 38 and Rahnema, Superstition as ideology, 64.

election) explores (identifies) the opinion of the Imām. In other words the Guardian Jurist receives his legitimacy indirectly from the Hidden Imām and his decisions shall not be subject of critique.³³

However, some other statements of Mesbāh-e Yazdi regarding the Hidden Imām arouse the idea of a more continuous intervention of Mahdi, which let the scholars claim him to be the spiritual guide of Ahmadinezhād. For example, after Ahmadinezhād's triumph in 2005 he claimed that this triumph were impossible without the prayers of Mahdi.³⁴ In his first meeting with Ahmadinezhād as the president he said that the election "... was replete with miracles and thaumaturgic gifts (*keramāt*)."³⁵ Though, there are no particularities in these statements of Mesbāh, as it is by all mean usual that a high ranking clergy considers an incident as the result of divine will or as a miracle. Seeing spiritual signs in the worldly incidents is very common among the shiite clergies and such claims belong to their everyday rhetoric.³⁶

Mesbāh is therefore in no way supporting the idea that a layman like Ahmadinezhād could be subject of special divine attention in the way Ahmadinezhād is claiming to be. Mesbāh's Mahdi is more similar to the one of his clerical colleagues: A holy figure who has been hidden from the world by the will of God for an undefined period of time and who is practicing his influence in some mysterious ways and in some matters of utmost importance. Mesbāh's Pro-Ahadinezhād positioning in the presidential elections seems to be motivated by his hostility towards the so-called reformists, who were promoting democratic values and pluralism, and not by his affinity to Ahmadinezhād's messianism. Indeed, one of the first groups, who criticized Ahmadinezhād for not being loyal enough to the line of the Islamic Republic, were the followers of Mesbāh. He himself called supporting Ahmadinezhād a mistake: "I am not unfailing. Perhaps I have been mistaken, as I supported a person. But I notice now that I am not allowed to support him anymore. Or perhaps this person has changed. There are a lot of examples on people in the history, who have lived properly for a while and then lost the path."³⁷

A second explanation for the origins of Ahmadinezhād's messianic Doctrine is allocating him as a sympathizer of the Hojjatiyeh-society.³⁸ This society, which was established in 1954 in order to disprove Baha'is in theological debates, consists of clergies who believe that the Imām shall reappear in the near future and the more disorder and chaos in the world the closer the time of reappearance. Therefore, any kind of political action, such as the Islamic Revolution is not welcome in this society. This quietist attitude resulted in conflicts between supporters of this society and the revolutionary forces, a

³³ Mesbāh-e Yazdi, *Negahi gozara*, 73.

³⁴ *Rahnema*, Superstition as ideology, 48-9.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 76.

³⁶ Khomeyni's words in his reaction to the failure of the Operation Eagle Claw of the US-Army is just an example among many for the presence of the idea of divine interventions in the rhetoric of shi'ite clergy: "Was it not an invisible hand at work? [...] Those who do not believe in the spiritual realm and the hidden world should wake up. Who destroyed Mr. Carter's helicopters which were on their way to Iran? Did we? It was the sand, the sand is God's agent, the wind is God's agent." *Rahnema*, Superstition as ideology, 110.

³⁷ <http://www.jebhepaydari.ir/main/index.php?Page=definition&UID=72858&Group=72858&PageNo=4>, accessed 10.12.2011.

³⁸ *Amanat*, *Apocalyptic Islam*, 225; Amir Arjomand „Shi'ite jurisprudence“, 161 and Ahdiyyih, „Ahmadinejad and the Mahdi“, 29.

conflict which ended up with the ban of the society in the mid- 1980s.³⁹ Although it is difficult to keep track of the conceptual development and structure of the society due to its underground existence, there are some major differences between Ahmadinezhād's Mahdi-concept and the one of Hojjatiyeh, which makes this argument less conclusive, although Ahmadinezhād shares the idea with this society that the Imām shall reappear in a predictable time. A very decisive difference which makes the affinity of Ahmadinezhād to this movement unlikely is the idea of political participation. During the period of its public activity, the Hojjatiyeh-society held a strictly quietistic view regarding the political agency, while Ahmadinezhād and his clique are not only politically active, but believe in the necessity of hastening the reappearance of the Imām through political agency.

Ahmadinezhād's Mahdi perception seems to be rather a collage of various existing ideas in shiite body of thoughts and is not novel in its components. It is at the same time difficult to associate these ideas with a certain existing group in the IRI. It seems to me that the messianic elements of Ahmadinezhād's thoughts have developed as a part of the ideology of a rising political group and have been adjusted according to the demands of this group in the course of time. Therefore, in order to understand the development of these messianic thoughts, I shall try to locate Ahmadinezhād and his neoconservative followers in their socioeconomic context and hope to give a suitable explanation for the necessity of this ideological paradigm shift.

Socioeconomic roots of Ahmadinezhād's Movement

Ahmadinezhād's biography offers us lots of information on the socioeconomic milieu of his companions and followers. As a young student with religious background he was attracted to Khomeyni's movement in the years of revolution. Shortly after the revolution he became member of a students' group which was engaged in fighting Marxism and Marxist groups. After the 'cultural revolution' and reopening of the universities, he was a member of one of the committees which reviewed the compatibility of students with the values of the Islamic Revolution.⁴⁰ In the early 1980's and with the help of one of his fellow students, he obtained the governorship of Mākū and then Khoy, two regions in northwest of Iran, which were both rife with ethnic and religious conflicts with the central government. The instability of these regions resulted in a close cooperation between the governor and the security services and the Revolutionary Guard (*Sepāh-e pāsḍārān*). He officially joined the Revolutionary Guard in 1987 in order to do his military service behind the front lines as an engineer.⁴¹ After the war he was the advisor to the Governor of Province Kurdistan and during the presidency of Hashemi he became the Governor of province Ardebil. At the time of Khatami's presidency he was ousted from this position and until becoming Mayor of Tehran he worked as lecturer at 'Elm-o-Şan' at University.⁴²

Reviewing this biography lets us ascertain that Ahmadinezhād by no means belongs to the political elite that took over key roles and high-rank leadership after the revolution and during the war. Alt-

³⁹ Sadri, „Hojjatiya“, 426-8.

⁴⁰ Naji, Ahmadinejad, 11-12.

⁴¹ Ibid., 32-34.

⁴² Ehteshami and Zweiri, Iran and the rise of neoconservatives, 51-57.

though Ahmadinezhād himself was not directly involved in the fronts, his political socialization was, due to the governorship of provinces directly involved with the war and through his cooperation with the paramilitary sources, strongly influenced by the war.

During eight years of Iran-Iraq war millions of young men were mobilized through religious motives and sent as paramilitary forces to the fronts. Ideas such as ‘selflessness’, ‘self-sacrifice for the collective’ and ‘fighting for higher puristic religious and social ideals’ were predominant values at the fronts.⁴³ The preachers and clergies appealed to Shia sanctuaries and holy characters in their propagandas in order to support veterans morally and motivate them in the battlefields; each success in a battlefield was a miracle and a divine gift; each ‘soldier of the lord of the age’ who died in the ‘holy defense’ was of course a martyr. To the veterans the Iran-Iraq war was not a simple political ‘event’ but also a unique spiritual experience loaded with higher blessed values and aims.⁴⁴ With the normalization of everyday life, however, these values disappeared rapidly from the political rhetoric of the post-war society.⁴⁵ The main concerns of the political agenda during the presidency of Hashemi and Khatami were the economic reconstruction and modernization of the country and not all former veterans could be integrated or accommodated in the post-war life.⁴⁶ This development resulted in frustration of the veterans, their families and the families of soldiers, who lost their lives at the frontline. A new social milieu developed that was highly dissatisfied with the ‘downgrade’ and alienation of ‘their’ revolution.⁴⁷ It saw its values being threatened by the new course taken by the post-war politicians and felt deserted and materially and spiritually not enough rewarded for the price they had paid for the revolution and the war. This dissatisfaction could clearly be observed in the political rhetoric of groups supporting Ahmadinezhād running for the office of Mayor of Tehran. These groups, who called themselves the Grand Coalition of the Principalists, consisted predominantly of active members of the paramilitary, the Revolutionary Guard and the security service as well as former veterans, who dissociated themselves from the well-established old cadre, which held the most sensitive political offices up to that time. From the point of view of the new elites, the old cadre had moved away from the ideals and the true path of the revolution and had dedicated itself less to the disadvantaged masses (*Mostaz'afin*), the main concern of Khomeyni in the revolution. In Ahmadinezhād’s words the early years of revolution are glorified as a golden age:

” The days of the holy defense is one of the most beautiful and proudest times of the life of our nation. It is the time of the appearance of the most precious values of our people. [...] We have to keep the martyrs, the veterans and the war-invalids forever in our minds. They shall remain up to eternity our example and their mentality remains up to eternity our mentality”⁴⁸

⁴³ Rahnema, Superstition as ideology, 46.

⁴⁴ Amanat, Apocalyptic Islam, 239.

⁴⁵ Rahnema, Superstition as ideology, 48.

⁴⁶ Ansari, Iran under Ahmadinejad, 11-19.

⁴⁷ Naji, Ahmadinejad, 51-2.

⁴⁸ Official Website of the President of IRI: www.president.ir/fa/outlooks, accessed 20.12.2011.

Deviating from the true path and replacing holy ideals with materialistic and western values are in Ahmadinezhād's words seen as the reasons of economic problems and grievances:

“If we take a deeper look at their [The politicians, who claim to be true to the line of revolution] statements, we can observe that they have accepted all of the views of materialists and only stuck a label by the name of Islam on it. [...] This is the problem of our planning after the revolution. Instead of planning our cultural, economic and social affairs with a god-oriented point of view, they [the former politicians] have taken on and imported the planning of materialists and want to apply them with violence and pressure.”⁴⁹

With such populist slogans Ahmadinezhād and his supporters could not only attract and mobilize the protagonists of the war, who felt neglected in the post-war society, but also economically disadvantaged apolitical classes, who found Ahmadinezhād more sympathetic than other options because of his modest performance. As the Mayor of Tehran Ahmadinezhād presented himself as a modest politician with a simple background, who positioned himself at the side of the disadvantaged people and whose politics were based on the idea of returning to the origins of the Revolution and the values of the war as well as realizing social justice.⁵⁰

He followed this strategy through his campaign for the presidency in 2005 and successfully revived Khomeyni's populist agenda of social justice, combining it with loyalty to the war values and the martyrs.⁵¹ Among the candidates running for presidency he was the only non-conformist one, who didn't belong to the established political cadre and his victory over Hashemi-ye Rafsanjani was celebrated like the victory of David over Goliath. Ahmadinezhād's success in the presidential election in 2005 is, therefore, not a plain shift from a reformist president to a conservative one, but an indication of the emergence of a new elite in the political landscape of the IRI. The development of an apocalyptic ideology and the increasing presence of Mahdī in the rhetoric of Ahmadinezhād and his close circle are explainable within the framework of their political agenda. This group blames the former governments and the post-war politicians for failing to realize the original Islamic aims of the revolution. Although at the first sight the former presidents Khatami and Hashemi seem to be the main target of the attacks of these groups, the criticism is actually directed towards the whole system. The former governments have operated in a system which has been under supervision of the Supreme Leader and other offices, which are controlled by high ranking clergies. In spite of having the possibility to stop the misled government and to bring the system back onto the right path, they have kept silence and observed passively the decay of the state. All of the defects and grievances have occurred in a time, in which the shiite clergy had the political ascendancy and not in a time of the reign of a tyrant. The shiite clergy class was, therefore, a less attractive option for the aspirations of the emerging political class and mobilization of the population, as they had failed to keep the revolution on the right path and were

⁴⁹ Official Website of the President of IRI: www.president.ir/fa/outlooks, accessed 20.12.2011.

⁵⁰ Ansari, *Iran under Ahmadinejad*, 29.

⁵¹ Amir Arjomand, *After Khomeini*, 159.

probably satisfied with the status quo and unwilling to introduce any kind of radical political change, which could reduce their political influence.

The absence of any kind of religious legitimacy could result in failure of this political group in mobilizing the economically marginalized and deeply religious population. Ahmadinezhād's perception of Mahdi, therefore, seems to be a key to the lack of religious legitimacy of the new movement, corresponding with popular religious beliefs on the one hand and marking the boundaries with the old cadre and the failing clergy class on the other. As demonstrated, appealing to Mahdi is an effective way to liberate oneself from the authority of the orthodox clergy class and to legitimate any kind of rebellion against it. The religious eschatological ideas of Ahmadinezhād along with populist economic slogans and appeal to nationalist feelings functioned as the ideological framework of the rising political elite, which attracted and aroused hope among unsatisfied and frustrated masses living in misery and guaranteed the enormous success of this political group within a very short period of time. These elements, however, were boon and bane at the same time. The alliance between Ahmadinezhād's clique and the old conservative cadre of the IRI could not last long. Soon after the exclusion of the reformers from most important offices, in other words after the elimination of the common enemy, began the struggles among the former allies on personal decisions and distribution of resources. The main charge, of which the new elite was accused, was - as mentioned - the ideological aspects of the so-called 'deviant current', which ultimately led in hinderance of this elite by running for parliamentary seats and presidency, in the very same manner that happened to the reformists.

Conclusion

I am neither claiming that the new political elite around Ahmadinezhād is to be seen as a religious movement which is pursuing a religious revolution, nor am I claiming that the ideological discrepancy between the old cadre and the newly emerged elite is to be regarded as the only decisive reason of the – at least temporary - abolition of Ahmadinezhād's movement from the political scene of the IRI. In this paper I tried to demonstrate that the messianic statements of Ahmadinezhād and his followers are not to be regarded solely as some random or superstitious impulses but as a part of an ideological framework of new protagonists in the political landscape of the IRI, who are competing with the existing cadre on the economic and political resources. The function of messianism in the ideological framework of these new elites seems to be operating as a means to dissociate themselves from their political rivals as well as provide themselves with an independent legitimacy source which offers an alternative attractive enough for their religious grassroots.

After the loss of the presidential office as well as parliamentary seats I believe that a political comeback is a very difficult task for these new elites for at least two reasons. Firstly, major offices controlling the electoral processes, such as the Guardian Council are still under control of conservative pro-leader clergies and these have clearly shown their hostility towards Ahmadinezhād's clique in the last presidential and parliamentary elections and shown enough success in keeping undesired forces from gaining power. Secondly, the economic achievements of Ahmadinezhād's eight years of government

are remarkably poor, if not disastrous. It seems unlikely that the masses who once enthusiastically supported Ahmadinezhād could once again be mobilized after this unfortunate experience.

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