

God Talks to Him

What is written in Israeli intelligence files about president Mahmoud

Ahmadinejad

He calls him “Ahmadi,” the kind of affectionate nickname you may give to a loveable, harmless friend or pet, though that’s not what he means at all. It also means “My Ahamad” in Hebrew, and in a way, Mahmoud Ahmadinejad does belong to him, because “he” is the person in Israeli intelligence in charge of the Iran file. Paradoxically perhaps, this man who is familiar with every twist and turn in the life of the Iranian who has often been called “the Hitler of Teheran,” relates in a moderate and matter-of-fact manner to Ahmadinejad’s outpourings of invective against the state of Israel and his delusionary denials of the Holocaust.

The few who have been given access to his written assessments or to his briefings have discerned more than a smattering of admiration for “Ahmadi.” At one closed forum, he recounted how he had once brought home a magazine with a photograph of Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei on the cover. “And who’s that,” asked his wife. “You don’t know? That’s Khamenei, the ruler of Iran,” he replied, annoyed that the wife of the Israeli intelligence officer in charge of that country’s file never knew who the most important man in her husband’s professional life was.

“Never heard of him,” she said. “I thought your Ahmadi was the leader.” And even as he tells the tale, a note of admiration sneaks into his voice, admiration for his subject who hauled himself up from nowhere and by dint of brilliant political moves, turned himself into the most famous Iranian in the world, the man who everyone believes in the true wielder of power in Tehran.

Who is the president of Iran? In August 2006, the Iranian Presidential Office launched a special Web site containing what was dubbed the autobiography of Ahmadinejad. “I was born in 1956, 15 years after the powers invaded Iran,” he writes, a reference to the occupation of the country by Russia and Britain, which feared it was about to ally itself with Nazi Germany. He was born in Aradan, a small village near the city of Garamsar, about 100 kms. south of Tehran, the fourth of seven brothers. He writes that his father was a tough, religiously pious man, who made a living as a blacksmith. The family moved to the capital when he was a year old, part of a large

wave of rural migrants who washed over the city. The grinding poverty and the confusion caused by the encounter with the big city strengthened their religious bonds. The modernizing measures of the shah's "White Revolution" only deepened their alienation from the ruling powers.

Despite the hardship, Ahmadinejad relates in his blog, education was always his parents' top priority. On his way to school, he would pass the homes of the rich. His radical ideas ripened along this route, he says. Foreign analysts of his character have come up with the theory that poverty, together with his smallness of stature and his less than handsome countenance (his opponents mockingly call him "meimoun", the monkey) were the engine that propelled him onward and upward. Without going into the accuracy or lack thereof of this psychobabble, there's no doubt that he was driven to move ahead, and quickly. On his site he recounts that he achieved outstanding results at school, and when he graduated he was admitted to university as number 123 of 400,000 candidates, despite having suffered from a bleeding nose during the exam. He enrolled as a student of engineering.

As a student, Ahmadinejad joined the huge protest movement against the rule of the shah and in favor of Ayatollah Khomeini. He belonged to one of the religious movements, known as the "Office for the Strengthening of Students' Unity," which was deeply involved in the takeover of the American embassy during the revolution and in the subsequent detention of the hostages captured there. As yet, it has not been established whether he was actually one of the kidnappers. He himself has denied it and claimed that he was against the seizure of the embassy and argued that it was a move that would not contribute anything. Incidentally, others who admitted to actually taking part in the operation later reached key positions, oddly enough in the reformist camp headed by Khatami.

There are two published photographs that cast doubt on his denials. In one of them, a man who looks very much like Ahmadinejad is seen standing next to the bound hostages. The second picture, released in October 2006 by sources who were identified as close to the intelligence services of the former Soviet Union, shows one of the kidnappers standing alone with a Kalashnikov AK-47 assault rifle and smoking a cigarette. The image is clear and the man bears a very close resemblance to the Iranian president, except that he looks older than the 23 that Ahmadinejad was in 1979. Detailed analysis of the facial features by powerful computers have files to come up with unequivocal results.

Three of the former hostages claim emphatically that Ahmadinejad was one of the leaders of the kidnappers. Why should this man, who never hesitates to attack the United States in the bluntest terms, go to the trouble of denying his involvement in the affair, if he was present or not? Some analysts say that he understands that an admission of being implicated would place him personally, and not only a president of the republic, in a direct confrontation with the United States, greatly restricting his freedom to go abroad, especially to address the United Nations. Moreover, confessing to taking part in such a violent act would be contrary to the concept that he is constantly trying to put across, that it is the Muslims who are the victims, the doormat that is trampled by the Americans, and not the assailants and kidnappers of helpless diplomats.

According to Ahmadinejad's file in Israeli intelligence, after the revolution he enlisted in the Revolutionary Guards as the engineering officer of one of its divisions fighting Iraq. Information gathered by western intelligence agencies indicates that he went on secret missions behind enemy lines in order to try and hook up with Kurdish underground elements and activate them against Saddam Hussein. Mohsen Sazegara, a founder of the Revolutionary Guards who held high positions in the regime and later became a dissident journalist and professor who fled to the West in 2003, claims that Ahmadinejad belonged to a particularly secret wing of the Revolutionary Guards that handles tough cases and has "an independent network of secret prisons, which house solitary confinement and torture cells."

One need not accept as scriptural truth any information that such an oppositionist and defector proffers, but it is clear that from that point on Ahmadinejad, who left the service with the rank of colonel, based his career on two primary foundations: the links with senior elements in the Revolutionary Guards that he forged during his military service, and his connection with his own personal spiritual guide, Ayatollah Mohammad Taqi Mesbakh-Yazdi, from the city of Qom, one of the most extreme clerics in the country. This very senior theological authority has become the guiding light for many members of the Revolutionary Guards and members of the intelligence services, and of the conservative fundamentalist faction in the Majlis, or parliament. With their help, he advanced up the political hierarchy.

After serving as governor of a number of districts, in 1993 he was made advisor to the ministry of culture in 1993 and the next year he was appointed governor

of Ardabil province and was named outstanding governor in both 1995 and 1996 for organizing the reconstruction of 7,500 housing units destroyed in an earthquake. In 1997 he was awarded his doctorate in transportation engineering and he served a professor until 2003, when he ran for mayor of Tehran on a conservative Islamist program and won, a victory ascribed to the 12 percent turnout.

According to the top-secret conclusion of a joint CIA-Mossad brain-storming session about Iran in 2004, Ahmadinejad's appointment to senior political posts had been part of a process of incorporation of former Revolutionary Guards members into the Iranian administration. Israeli intelligence sees this process as fraught with the danger of further extremism, because in that organization the loyalty of every member to the regime and its values is under perpetual scrutiny. Whoever survives a stint there in good favor must be more loyal, more obedient and more extreme than the average. In the last years of the 20th century and the first of the 21st century, the entire Iranian bureaucracy underwent a process which saw key posts taken over by ex-Revolutionary Guards.

In addition to its security and public order roles, the Revolutionary Guards corps is also a vast economic concern, raking in the profits from various totally civilian projects. Ahmadinejad too played a role in these activities, although he himself is known for living very modestly. Intelligence sources say it is his brother Daoud who skimmed the cream of the big deals and is today a very wealthy man.

As mayor of Tehran, Ahmadinejad introduced a new municipal dress code, requiring male workers to wear long sleeved shirts and to grow beards. He closed down fast food outlets and ordered the removal of advertising billboards bearing pictures of western movie stars. During his term, the Revolutionary Guards enjoyed greater freedom than before in their violent street campaigns to enforce women to obey the modest dress laws. It quickly became clear to the Iranians that he was a dyed in the wool conservative. When President Khatami realized this, he barred him from cabinet meetings, although by custom the mayor of the capital used to take part in them.

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As the elections of June 2005 drew near, tension mounted steeply between the conservatives and the reformists in Iran, against the background of the general weakness of the outgoing president, Mohammad Khatami. Khatami had served two

terms and was constitutionally barred from running again. The heads of the establishment decided to do everything to prevent the election of a new Khatami. The Assembly of Experts, which elects the supreme leader and supervises his activities, also screens the candidates for president and rules whether they meet the constitutional criteria for the post, such as loyalty to the Islamic republic. Before the 2005 poll, the assembly scrutinized over a thousand candidates and ultimately approved only six. Five of them were conservatives, and representatives of the Supreme Leader, Ali Khamenei in various governmental institutions, one of them mayor Ahmadinejad. There was only one reformer, whose chances of election were clearly nil.

The issues in the elections were domestic, mainly economic matters. All of the candidates promised the citizens of Iran a better life. As part of his campaign, Ahmadinejad took some photographers on a tour of Tehran, making sure to point out the magnificent residence of the favorite in the presidential race, former president Rafsanjani, a very rich man, who controlled large slices of two of Iran's major industries: pistachio growing and oil exports. The mayor then showed them his own very modest apartment. One of his campaign slogans was "Vote for your street cleaner." He told mass meetings that if elected he would solve the problems of the young by providing jobs and housing, enabling them to get married, and that he promised to allocate some of the country's oil revenues directly to the poor.

Most Iranian analysts predicted that Rafsanjani would win the election, and so did Israeli intelligence. In the first round, he came in first, and Ahmadinejad second. In the run-off, when the reformists saw that their candidate had been eliminated, many of them never bothered to vote. Conservative voters were overwhelmingly opposed to Rafsanjani. Three other factors cleared the way for Ahmadinejad's victory: a fatwa issued by Ayatollah Mesbah Yazdi, ordering his followers to vote for him, strenuous action by the Revolutionary Guards in his favor, and mainly massive mobilization on his behalf of the popular militia, the Bassij, which Rafsanjani had treated with contempt and had been nurtured by Ahmadinejad. Members of the militia, conducted propaganda on his behalf and used military vehicles and fuel to transport voters to the polling stations. His lowly and simple origins, of which he was so proud, spoke to the militiamen. Most of the members of the Bassij come from similar backgrounds.

Ahmadinejad's election in June 2005 signaled the start of a "second revolution."ⁱ On November 15 the new president declared: "The nation proved in the recent election its faith in the Islamic revolution and wants to see a revival of its values."ⁱⁱ

In the wake of his victory he and his followers squeezed the reformist camp totally out of the upper echelons of the government. He also took measures to restore to the presidency the powers that Khamenei had taken away from Khatami.. His first action was to allocate \$1.2 billion to a special fund whose function is to help young people find jobs, get married and buy homes. He proclaimed his intention of carrying out agrarian reforms and giving the poor citizens of Iran shares in government-owned companies. He also announced the replacement of the managements of seven government banks, causing a slump on the Tehran stock exchange.ⁱⁱⁱ Ahmadinejad also undertook to clamp down on the corruption that had spread throughout the government ministries and amongst senior figures in the regime.^{iv} Key positions, including the cabinet portfolios for foreign affairs, intelligence, interior, defense, culture and Islamic guidance, were given to officers of the Republican Guards, friends of Ahmadinejad's in the staff of the daily Kayhan, and associates in Tehran municipality.

On the issue of nuclearization, the new president toughened Iran's public stance. His method of operation was the creation of *faits accomplis*, forcing the international community to accept them retroactively.^v Another step taken early in his administration was to dismiss some 40, ambassadors, political ministers and consuls, a move which was construed as a purge of reformists from the foreign service.^{vi} The significance of this move soon became clear to the Mossad. The professional diplomats were replaced by Ahmadinejad's cronies in the Revolutionary Guards. The obvious suspicion and fear were that they would carry out intelligence and terror operations and not deal with the more conventional aspects of foreign policy. Many of Iran's representative legations abroad increased drastically in size, especially in Latin America. Thus, for example, the Islamic Republic has no fewer than 30 diplomats in Nicaragua and 44 in Venezuela, and 20 each in Uruguay Mexico and Colombia.

These numbers are very large, out of all proportion to the scope of relations between Iran and those states, or to the diplomatic missions of other countries. The

posting of so many diplomats is a very expensive matter. “We have managed to identify some of the people posted in past year in Iran’s legations in Latin America and Africa,” said a Mossad official in August 2007, “and we know them from their actions against us in the past in Europe and in Lebanon. The very last word I would use to define these people is ‘diplomat.’”

These developments occurred against the background of Ahmadinejad’s ever-improving ties with his Venezuelan counterpart, Hugo Chavez. Between the election in Iran and the middle of 2007, Chavez went to Tehran six times, and the Iranian reciprocated twice. Venezuela supplies Iran with refined petroleum products and Iran supplies it with weapons. A direct air route has been instituted between the two countries which, according to information reaching American intelligence from its Argentinean sister agencies in July 2007, serves to ship weapons and various measuring and monitoring instruments linked to Iran’s nuclear project. The United States was concerned that Iran was about to use Venezuela as a façade for its efforts to produce an atomic bomb and as a way to circumvent the international boycott with which it has to cope.

In the sphere of human rights, there was an increasing deterioration after Ahmadinejad’s rise to power. The new president enthusiastically backed the aggressive measures that were adopted in August 2007 to nip in the bud a drive initiated by civil rights activists to collect a million signatures in favor of a changing the laws that discriminate against women. A demonstration for women’s rights on June 12 of the same year was broken up by female members of the Bassij militia who beat the protesting women and prevented them from carrying poster calling for equal rights for women.^{vii} The demonstration ended with the arrest of 70 male and female civil rights activists, students, journalists and intellectuals.^{viii}

It was during Ahmadinejad’s term that the Iranian authorities announced that an Iranian Kurdish woman, **Malak Ghorbany**, the mother of two, was to be stoned to death for committing adultery. This form of execution is still the customary punishment for women or unmarried girls convicted of having illicit relations with men, even in cases where the woman is raped. The condemned woman’s hands are tied behind her back and she is wrapped in sheets and buried up to her neck in a pit, and the public are invited to pelt her with stones whose size is prescribed in law until she dies.

Within the framework of the new conservatism, Ahmadinejad energetically continued the wave of newspaper closures that had begun before his accession to the presidency. By the end of 2006, more than 100 newspapers identifying with the reformist line were shut down. In September of that year a closure order was served on the daily Shargh, the leading reformist paper still open at the time. It had openly backed Ahmadinejad's rival for the presidency, Rafsanjani, who despite his loss had retained his status as number two in the Iranian hierarchy, after the supreme leader. Closing down Shargh was seen as an attempt to harm Rafsanjani's status, in advance of elections to the Assembly of Experts IN 2006. ^{ix} These elections, which are held every eight years, were seen as of great importance, because the assembly was set to choose Iran's next supreme leader .

Before the elections for the Assembly and local authorities, Ahmadinejad took several more steps against Iran's intellectual elite. On September 5 2006 he called for a purge of liberal and secular personnel from the universities. ^xBefore that, in May and June, dozens of faculty members whose positioned didn't jibe with those of the government were forced to take early requirement. In addition, academics who identified with Ahmadinejad were appointed to head the faculties, including many with no experience in academic administration. Protests by students and faculty were crushed harshly. ^{xi}

Instead of the relatively enlightened values of the reformists, under Ahmedinejad it was the ethos of martyrdom that prevailed. At his second appearance before the media, addressing a group of cinematographers, the new president laid down the line: "We want art that is on the offensive. Art on the offensive exalts and defends the noble principles, and attacks principles that are corrupt, vulgar, ungodly, and inhuman. Art reaches perfection when it portrays the best life and best death. After all, art tells you how to live. That is the essence of art. Is there art that is more beautiful, more divine, and more eternal than the art of martyrdom?" ^{xii}

Both toward the Iranians and toward the outside world, Ahmadinejad is careful to persevere in presenting the common, somewhat ascetic image that won him the election. He wears imitation leather jacket that give him the appearance of a laborer doing his shopping after a day's work. He rides in a 1977 Peugeot, when he receives guests, sometimes sitting on the floor, he offers them only light drinks and fruit and sometimes black bread and lean cheese, nothing more. This is also how he

says that he wants to be received on visits abroad. “This is what I ate throughout my childhood,” he has said. “At best, there were also some grapes.”

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It wasn't Ahmadinejad's moves in the domestic sphere that made him famous the world over. He achieved that status through his increasingly vitriolic verbal attacks on the United States and especially Israel. Beyond his sincere belief that the Great Satan and the Little Satan must be fought, the invective also had a practical value from his point of view, as it put him in the spotlight and enhanced his status, after Khatami had left the presidency almost powerless and facing him and competing for power were two giants with vast experience, the former president Rafsanjani and Ali Larijani, the head of the Supreme National Security Council, who was appointed by Khamenei as chief negotiator on nuclear matters.

In order to distinguish himself from his rivals, Ahmadinejad made a series of utterances which vied with each other in their virulence and crudity. In a speech before students on Jerusalem Day, October 26, 2006, he addressed students under a banner reading “A World without Zionism” and promised that the “the Islamic world would soon wipe away the shameful stain of Zionism.” On the same occasion in the presence of representatives of Hamas and Hizballah, he called for the continuation of the armed Palestinian struggle and demanded that there be no compromise on any part of the “Palestinian land.” Signing an agreement that recognized the State of Israel, he warned, would be like “the surrender of the entire Muslim world.”^{xiii}

The United States, Canada, the European Union, Russia and the United Nations all were quick to condemn Ahmadinejad's words. The Iranian Foreign Ministry rejected the censure of the Security Council, claiming it was “dictated by the Zionist regime,” but declared that Iran had no intention of attacking another country. Two days later, before a crowd of tens of thousands in Teheran, in clear defiance of the international community, Ahmadinejad repeated his call to wipe Israel off the map.

Ahmadinejad's statements do not stand out for their delicacy or tact. When Israeli prime minister Ariel Sharon suffered a stroke, he said, “I hope that the criminal of Sabra and Shatilla will join his forefathers.” But the most extreme statements were those which made about the most sensitive of all subjects in a Jewish context, the Holocaust. The first came in a speech in the city of Zahadan in southern Iran in

December 2005. "The Holocaust," declared there, "is a legend. They invented a legend called 'the massacre of the Jews' and they sanctify it more than God." In the same speech he proposed transferring Israel to Canada or Alaska or elsewhere in the United States. Despite the angry reactions he continued, and at an Islamic conference in Mecca in the same month, he said: "Some European countries insist that Hitler murdered millions of innocent Jews. Although we do not accept this claim, we have a question for the Europeans, 'Is this a reason to support the conquerors of Jerusalem?'" and he said that if the Europeans were "honest people, they should give some of their territory in Europe, Like Germany or Austria or other countries to the Zionists so they can establish their state in European territory. If you offer part of Europe, we will support you."

Since becoming president, Ahmadinejad has welcomed a number of Holocaust deniers facing prosecution to Iran and instructed the official media there to publish their statements. Thus, for example, on Dec 13 2005, Iranian TV broadcast an interview with Roger Garaudy, a French ex-Communist who converted to Islam, who claims that the gas chambers were no used to kill Jews. A particularly bizarre version of the president's theories was expounded by his political adviser Mohammad Ali Ramin, in a speech at Gilan university, where he asserted that the Holocaust was a myth invented by the West to serve its own interests. Ramin added that the aim of the Holocaust conspiracy was to facilitate the establishment of the state of Israel, which would, in turn, provoke the Muslims to rise up, confront the Jews, and massacre them. 'This [conspiracy],' he said, 'conducted by Europe and America, would lead to the total annihilation of global Jewry.' Ramin added that 'as a religious Muslim, who believes in the equality of all nations, he must alert [people] to the fact that the state of Israel was established as the result of a conspiracy against the Jews... So long as Israel exists in the region there will never be peace and security in the Middle East. So the resolution of the Holocaust issue will end in the destruction of Israel.'

In December 2006, Ahmadinejad hosted a conference in Tehran on the Holocaust. He welcomed the 67 participants from 30 countries by informing them that "By virtue of the wish of the nations and with God's help, the course of the Zionist regime is on the downgrade. God has promised it, and it is the will of the nations." He added that, "Just as the Soviet Union has been wiped off the map and no longer exists, so will the Zionist regime soon disappear." Several prominent Holocaust deniers were there, Prof. Robert Faurisson of France, David Duke, the former top Klansman from

Louisiana, Prof. Fredrick Toben of Australia and Lady Michele Renouf, the former dancer and model who supported the British Holocaust denier David Irving. “Iran is your home, and the home of all who seek liberty in the world,” the president told them. “Here you may express your opinions and exchange ideas in a free and friendly atmospheres.”

Before his election, only very little was known about Ahmadinejad to the intelligence services of the United States and Israel. There was no file and he had not been a target for information-collection. He was not considered a key figure in the Iranian establishment. When he was elected and began to make headlines, the analysts had little to go on as they began trying to find out what made him tick. But he made some of their work easier with his incessant stream of declarations and speeches and the many reports which quoted him and his associates, not to mention the series of high-profile public actions that he took, all of which made him the total opposite of his predecessor, Khatami’s passive governmental style. At meetings that took place in Washington and Tel Aviv between officials of the Mossad and Israeli Military Intelligence and the CIA and the Pentagon, in April, July and December 2006 and February 2007, attempts were made to analyze the motives behind the Iranian president’s conduct and to determine whether he was really as demented and dangerous as he appeared to be.

Thus for example, they tried to comprehend what lay behind his vitriolic statements against Israel and the Jews and other remarks and actions on the verge of weirdness. Information obtained by Israeli intelligence indicated that Ahmadinejad is supporter and a member of the second circle of the secret Hojjatiyeh movement. Set up in the 1950s it was from the outset messianic, and more fanatical than even Khomeini. Although it helped him take power, he saw it as a threat because it opposed the principle of *veliyat faqih*, or the rule of a single religious sage, the foundation upon which Khomeini based his arrogation of all the powers of government. In 1983, he outlawed the movement, declaring it to be a great danger, and went as far as having some of its leaders executed. But he could not touch one of its leaders, Ayatollah Mesbah Yazdi, though he did everything that he could to neutralize him. Israeli intelligence’s information indicates that Ahmadinejad is a silent

member of the movement. He has never admitted it. But he makes no bones about his messianic beliefs.

According to the Shi'ite tradition the 12 imams descended from Ali, Muhammad's cousin and son in law were blessed with divine properties that gave them the ability to rule the community of Shi'ite believers, and they served, according to the faith, as God's representatives on earth. But since the disappearance of the 12th imam in the year 941 and the break in his connection with the believers, they are obliged to await his reappearance at any time. When missing imam, known as the mahdi, arrives in order to lead the Shi'ites he will show the world who God is, and how right the Shi'ites were in the faith over the generations, and in particular he will correct the historical injustice that the Shi'ites have suffered over the years as a persecuted minority.

Although Khomeini was a believer in the eventual return of the mahdi, messianism did not play a large part in the religious-political system that he founded in Iran in 1979. He has his own agenda on this issue, and he transgressed against one of the severest prohibitions in Shi'a, and allowed his followers to call him the imam, and to attribute messianic qualities to him. In this sense, the idea that the mahdi was still to come and the eager anticipation of that event, which are considered by some Shi'ites to be no more than a myth by many Shi'ites, were harmful to his own status. Khomeini managed to keep messianism under control, and the separation between it and Iran's internal politics was preserved. Khomeini used the faith in the mahdi in his endeavor to change the Shi'a from a passive congregation into an active, fighting community. He told them that by taking energetic steps on behalf of Islam, they could hasten the advent of the missing imam. But all that changed when Ahmadinejad rose to power, and made messianism one of the central issues.

Early on in his term, he espoused a policy that emphasized his certainty in the imminent arrival of the mahdi as the basis of his ideological doctrine and his political actions. In contrast to the prevailing belief that no one can know for certain when the mahdi will reveal himself, Ahmadinejad proclaimed more than once that it would happen soon. He even went as far as to set a date for the event, at a meeting with a foreign minister of another Muslim state, after being asked, "Is there a whiff of crisis in your country?" His reply: "This is the prelude to the appearance of the missing imam, who will come within the next two years." And in a speech that he made

greeting Christians on the occasion of Christmas, he said: “I can assure that with God’s help the day on which Jesus will appear at the side of the missing imam is not far off.”

In September 2005, at the end of his speech before the U.N. General Assembly, he surprised the delegates when he uttered a prayer for the return of the mahdi: “I beg you, almighty God, to hasten the advent of the last imam, as has been promised.” On another occasion, he proclaimed that “the second wave of the revolution has begun and it is mightier and more terrible than the first wave ... the president of America is like us. That is to say, he also receives inspiration ... but inspiration of the satanic kind. Satan gives inspiration to the president of America.”^{xiv}

As much as Khomeini tried to distance himself from the aura of the “missing imam” in order to create his own sacred aura, so Ahmadinejad tries to get closer to the coming of the mahdi in order to acquire at least a hint of divinity for himself. And not always just a hint. For example, in addressing the nuclear question in October 2006 he claimed a direct connection with Allah, in order to justify his tough line on the matter: “Believe [me] that from the legal point of view, and in the eyes of public opinion, we have succeeded completely. I say this because I know. Someone asked me, ‘So and so says that you have a connection.’ I replied, ‘Yes, I do.’ He asked, ‘truly, do you have a connection? With whom?’ I replied, ‘I have a connection with God.’” Ahmadinejad even claims that he knows what God thinks, and claimed in April 2007, “God has made the missing imam into our supporter.” And after the September 2005 speech at the U.N., he said that during the speech he had felt “God’s aura surrounding me.”

On a more practical level, Ahmadinejad always stresses that the ground must be prepared for the imam’s arrival. In May 2007, he said, “We have a mission and it is to turn Iran into the state of the missing imam. He obliged all the ministers in his cabinet to sign two pledges of loyalty: one to the missing imam and one to himself. The minister for culture and Islamic guidance, Muhammad Hussein Zafar Harandi was sent to throw the signed pledge of loyalty to the imam into a well at the Jamkaran mosque in the holy city of Qom, where the Shi’a faithful are accustomed to consigning letters with their wishes. The well is believed to be the place where the imam will reveal himself when he returns. This mosque, which before 2005 was never considered politically important, was granted some \$10 million for renovations by the

new president, in advance of the expected arrival of the mahdi and another \$8 million to provide food for pilgrims coming there to mark the mahdi's birthday in 2005.

Ahmadinejad ordered the convening of a special international seminar on the subject of the mahdi's return. Addressing the seminar, he tried to persuade the West to accept the mahdi as the universal messiah: "Today, the world is moving toward the truth and the happiness of the world depends on its movement toward the truth. Today, we invite everyone to move toward the truth, because there is no other way ... This celebration [of the 12th imam's birthday] is not restricted to Muslims alone, [but] meant for the whole world. The Mahdi belongs to the whole of humanity."

All of this is of more than mere theological importance, and it demands more of a response than the bemused smile that this man, who to western eyes seems not entirely attached to reality, may evoke. A man who thinks he is acting in the name of God, and who claims that he has an open line to the deity, and who believes that it is up to him to take practical and aggressive measures to hasten the advent of the messiah, is a dangerous man, from the moment that he has access to and control over power. Thus, for example, the Iranian president makes it clear that although he invites the west to accept the holiness of his messiah, there is another side to the coin, one that is menacing to those who do not accept the invitation.

"Those who do not comply with the call to move toward the truth cannot expect a happy fate," he said in September 2006. "I have heard the president of one such country [He meant George W. Bush] ... has said that the president of Iran is threatening him. I say to him, it was not I who threatened you, but the whole world threatens you, because the world stands firm against oppression and oppressors. [Turning to the Western states, which he calls, the "forces of arrogance"] You are nothing compared to the power of God. We invite you to the straight path, the path of the prophets, monotheism and justice. You are wrong if you think you can sit in your glass palaces and decide the fate of the world ... Our call [upon you] to walk toward the truth [springs from] mercy. We do not want you to become entangled, because as you know the result of oppression and lack of justice are perdition and destruction."

The Iranian daily, Rooz reported in October 2006 that "some of Ahmadinejad's associates speak often [about the need] to prepare the ground for the arrival of the mahdi, explicitly connect [the fate of] the Iranian nuclear program to this need According to reliable reports, they had stressed at various closed

meetings that the resistance to international pressure [on the nuclear issue] and the insistence on the right to enjoy nuclear power are among the ways of preparing the ground for the appearance of the imam.”

Ahmadinejad’s spiritual mentor, Ayatollah Mohammad Taqi Mesbah Yazdi, said at that seminar in October 2006 that the arrival of the mahdi would bring about the establishment of one government over the entire world and that the struggle against heresy and “international arrogance” prepares the ground and hastens his advent.

The noise and the reverberations aroused by Ahmadienijad’s utterances made him into a media hero, and giving him a status far greater than his true power in the Iranian regime. Not only was he neither number one nor number two in the power hierarchy, it was doubtful if he was even number three. But there was no doubt that he managed to recover for the presidency fairly wide powers, and he became a key factor that could not be ignored. There is also no doubt that he would have refrained from saying some of the things that he said if he did not have the backing, even tacit backing, from other sources, mainly Supreme Leader Khamenei.

Indirectly, Ahmadinejad’s sensationalist statements also served his rivals, Rafsanjani and Larijani, as they made them look like the mildest of moderates. The unrestrained utterances drew considerable criticism in Iran itself, chiefly from former president Khatami who accused the extremists in Iran of trying to “emulate Bin Laden” and “giving the enemy the best of pretexts to attack Islam and Iran.” He added that the extremists “compete with the Taliban in their calls for violence and the perpetration of extreme crimes that are contrary to religion.”^{xv}

In an April 2007 interview, Ayatollah Hussein Montazeri, the ousted heir apparent to Khomeini leveled sharp criticism at the regime, at the leadership of Khamenei and the policies of Ahmadinejad. He pointed out that “when the promises of the present government for economic prosperity failed to come true, and the workers and the teachers expressed their opposition and protested, in response they were subjected to arrest and violent conduct in several cities.”

Condemning the response of the government to its critics, Montazeri declared that “the protestors cannot be accused of conspiring with foreigners or be described as ... causing damage to national unity, without the presentation of evidence, proof, documents that attest to it.” Montazeri also deplored the government’s conduct

towards the struggle of Iranian women against discrimination and the arrests and penalties and violence with which the women have to contend in their campaign to secure a million signatures for changing the laws that discriminate women. Another target of his criticism was Ahmadinejad's nuclear strategy, pointing out that "the current crisis cannot be passed over by means provocative and useless slogans at a time when the world powers are displaying sensitivity [towards Iran's nuclear project]. Such statements only exacerbate that sensitivity and bring the powers closer to a consensus and a confrontation with Iran."

The cloak of piety and messianism donned by Ahmadinejad also raised the hackles of many senior clerics, who saw him as no more than an impostor. In March 2007, for example, Ayatollah Yusuf Sanei, a friend of Khomeini's and an opponent of both suicide bombing and nuclear weapons, who was head of the revolutionary courts for a long time, came out strongly against the foreign, internal and economic policies of the president, and especially his Holocaust denial: "There is no advantage in isolation, and an American air offensive or sanctions would be a disaster We must not do unto others what we do not want them to do to us, the Koran teaches us. The Holocaust is history. Can we change the history of the nations? I do not understand why we have gone into this matter. All of this is bad for Islam and for Iran."

Supreme leader Khamenei tried to soften the confrontation, and at least to keep an open dispute from erupting in the media. In public, he took Ahmadinejad's side, praising his performance and demanding the president not be attacked. In the wake of this call, the criticism leveled by Khatami against his successor was not quoted in the Iranian press. ^{xvi}

On the other hand, Khamenei himself was far from enthusiastic about messianic note that Ahmadinejad had adopted. Although he had been the prime obstacle to the reforms that Khatami had tried to introduce, soon after it emerged that the ultra-conservatives had won the election, Khamenei moved to balance the new situation by reinforcing the status of the head of the Expediency Discernment Council, Rafsanjani, and officially anchoring his position as number two in the country's leadership.

One of Rafsanjani's first moves after his powers were expanded was to return former president Khatami to the political arena, appointing him senior adviser to the council. Together with the Foreign Ministry, the two men acted to soften

Ahmadinejad's aggressive statements in two key areas in Iran's foreign relations: the nuclear program and the attitude to Israel. In two major interviews with the American media, CBS's 60 Minutes and Time Magazine, at the end of 2006, the president sounded a little less belligerent and hallucinatory. He said that he opposed the proliferation of nuclear arms and added that he did not expect that the United States and Iran would reach a military confrontation. However, a short time later he was back to his old tricks and let loose a barrage of bellicose declarations.

Another expression of the struggle within the Iranian leadership came with the seizure of 15 British marines and sailors in the Shatt al Arab waterway by an Iranian Revolutionary Guards force in late-March 2007, and their release a fortnight later. This action was an Iranian response to a series of moves that Tehran blamed on the west, including the imposition of sanctions by the U.N. Security Council, and a number of incidents of a more covert nature, which could have been the work of western intelligence agencies (and will be discussed in the next chapter). Someone in Iran wanted to flex some muscles.

It was double show of strength: Firstly, the aim was to deliver a message to the West that Iran would not tolerate what it perceived as violations of its sovereignty and its dignity, and that it had ways of responding. The second message was for internal consumption. Throughout the crisis, only Ahmadinejad's voice was heard. The other, ostensibly more moderate, leaders, like Rafsanjani and Larijani, were silenced. In the battle for the Iran's character, ideological extremists versus practical pragmatists, at least this time the former had the upper hand. The abduction of the British troops wasn't Ahmadinejad's first hostile move against the British. Material in Israeli Military Intelligence's file on Ahmadinejad shows that even before becoming president, while he was mayor of Tehran he was active in turning the anniversary of the occupation of the American embassy in Tehran on November 4 1979 into a day of anti-western demonstrations outside the embassies of western countries in the capital, especially the British legation. The American embassy compound, known today as the "Spies' Nest," was empty, but protests were traditionally held there too. Most of the demonstration were organized by the Bassij militia, which received funding for this purpose directly from the city coffers, and then from the President's Office after his election, according to a source inside the Tehran municipal bureaucracy recruited by the Americans.

In May and June 2005, a number of demonstrations were held outside the British embassy in Tehran. The participants (students, Bassij members, mosque-goers) called for the embassy to be shut down, and for the ambassador to be expelled, and for “a repeat of November 4 1979.” In the course of some of the protests, demonstrators burned the flags of Great Britain, the United States, defied the security forces and stoned the embassy.

After the adoption by the Security Council of Resolution 1737, in December 2006, dealing with Iran’s refusal to fully cooperate with the International Atomic Energy Agency, the president made a speech condemning the West in the former American embassy compound. After the decision by the Board of Governors of the IAEA to transfer the Iranian issue to the Security Council some 200 female members of the Bassij demonstrated outside the British embassy and burned American flags in February 2006.

The slogan “Death to England” was heard more and more frequently after Ahmadinejad became president. He blames Britain (or “the Anglo-Saxon empire,” as he calls it, not wishing to utter the correct name of the United Kingdom) for being responsible for the establishment of the State of Israel, because of the renowned Balfour Declaration of 1917, and for being the main ally of the United States in general and in particular in the conquest of Afghanistan and Iraq.

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“The revolutionary regime in Iran has long lost the justification for its existence,” says Reuel Marc Gerecht, who for five years from 1989 to 1994, ran the CIA’s espionage networks in Iran. “On the other hand, there is a tradition in the Middle East that a regime never relinquishes power of its own free will. A totalitarian regime that knows it is running on its last fumes of gasoline can become very devastating toward its citizens. The great advantage of the ultra-religious regime in Iran, as I perceive it through the perspective of what I was told by my agents, is the a-political nature of the population. The average Iranian simply wants to be left alone. They’d like the ayatollahs to get out of their lives, but without getting involved themselves. This works to the benefit of the regime, of course.”

What is the strongest group in Iranian society, from which the rebellion may come, in your opinion?

“That’s easy: the women. This is a very vibrant group, very strong and influential in Iranian society. The women also have one of the last flags of the revolution, forgive the expression, by the balls: the chador. The other flag is the hatred for the United States and Israel. The chador is the way in which the revolution is visible in every square, on every street. Through the chador, they create the sense of an Islamic revolution on the move. Take it away, and bye- bye ayatollahs.”

People who know both the CIA and Gerecht say that it is no wonder that he lasted no more than a decade at the agency. First of all, he is a Jew in an organization that for years has been known to prefer Wasps. Apart from that, he is a rebel, and he hated to accept the authority of an intelligence agency about whose rigid bureaucracy many thousands of words have been written. On top of it all, he has been described as an eccentric intelligence genius with a crazed look in his eye, a very short fuse, and unusual whims, in a body which prides itself for its strict discipline. And indeed, after five frustrating years at the head of the Iranian desk he resigned and went into business on his own.

The frustration began on his first day in the job, when he became aware of the American intelligence deployment in Iran: “The flaws were so fundamental that I was stunned. If you don’t speak Persian, you’ll never get it. In the CIA there today, after my departure , to the best of my knowledge, only one Persian-speaking person.”

Gerecht is convinced that there is no prospect for a revolution initiated from the outside. “When you speak of a revolution, two questions must be addressed: Is it possible to carry out a revolution in Iran with money or the with the help of outside organizations, and if so is the CIA capable of doing it? I’ll start with the second question. The United States does not know how to mount such an operation and is not capable of doing it. If they ever uncover the truth about how the CIA tried to subvert one regime or to prop up another one, it will be revealed that generally it ended in failure, and even if there was a success, it wasn’t due to us. As to the first question, in any case there is no chance of such an operation succeeding. There’s no way the external opposition organizations can be activated. They are small and weak and do not grasp the magnitude of the changes that Persian society has undergone since ’79. The fate of the Iranian people is really in its own hands, and that is the way it should be.”

Another secret of the regime’s survival has been the lack of an alternative, both inside and outside. Take for example Asad Homayoun, a deputy foreign minister

under the shah, sitting in his little office in Washington DC and wringing his hands in despair. Apart from periodical meetings with former colleagues in the shah's government, putting out a monthly newsletter and taking security measures against assassins, who are very unlikely to come anymore, he has nothing to do in his capacity as head of the Azagedan Foundation, one of the small and ineffectual groups that Gerecht was talking about. Homayoun understands that if the ayatollahs manage to acquire nuclear weapons, the chances of the counterrevolution that he is still hoping for ever happening will be greatly diminished. "From the moment that they get the bomb," he warns, "it will give them hegemony over the entire Persian Gulf, immunity from military intervention by the West, and an insurance policy for their regime for many more years to come."

Homayoun's realistic perception is a rare commodity. In the course of my research for this book, besides the shah's son I met many Iranians, including many very wealthy and influential ones. I heard innumerable prophecies on the impending demise of the government in Tehran. But the opposition groups that they represented could never manage to unite under one common umbrella, although they do share one thing in common: 28 years after the revolution, they all seem to be well aware that they have no realistic chance against the rule of the ayatollahs. Aware, but in denial.

At the bottom line, Israeli and American interest in Ahmadinejad's personality begins and ends at the question of whether he will push the nuclear button, if and when Iran acquires one. The reply, according to the best analyses, is double negative. Firstly, because no one will let him anywhere near the button, as the authority to do so is not his; and secondly, because even if he did have the chance to give the order, he is despite everything a realist, who has taken several measures which appear to be extreme in order to show defiance and thereby gain power, without connections to his belief in the things that he said.

Ahmadinejad, according to western assessments, is not the problem, but the symptom. The fact that a person like him occupies so senior a position and expresses such extreme ideas without being restrained truly represents a shift to the right in Iran, toward the ultra-conservative camp. That shift is of great importance, coming as it does despite the collision course between Iran and the west that Ahmadinejad is

gleefully galloping along. To a certain extent, he is playing into the hands of Rafsanjani and Larijani, by making them seem more moderate.

The sanctions which have been imposed on Iran over the years, and especially since early-2007, were relatively easy to handle, but its international isolation has caused it heavy economic damage. Since Ahmadinejad took over as president, not one new contract for the export of oil or natural gas has been signed. The boycott that the United States imposed on companies that maintain links with Iran blocked technological advances at the oil wells, leading to a 5-8 percent drop in production each year. In the state of affairs prevailing in 2007, Iran, which holds some 11 percent of the world's oil reserves, will be able to go on exporting only until 2015. Oil revenue accounts for some 50 percent of the government's income. The country's refineries are in such a wretched state that it has to import 40 percent of its fuel consumption. In order to stave off a popular uprising and survive, the regime has to subsidize the costs of fuel, gas, electricity by some \$20 billion a year, or 15 percent of the GNP. In April 2007, the attempts by the United States to exert economic pressure on Iran by "persuading" western companies to refrain from trading with it reached a peak. A number of large banks and financial institutions heard lectures from administration officials about what Iran does with the money that goes through their companies, and they said they would consider ending their relationships with Tehran. At the same time, in the assemblies of several of the states of the union bills were introduced to instruct the pension funds of those states to divest their stocks in companies doing business in Iran. In brief, as a direct result of its difficult international situation, Iran was embroiled in severe economic difficulties. Ahmadinejad, nevertheless, carried on regardless.

The extremism expressed in the Tehran regime's foreign policy, or at least by those in the regime whose views were expressed by Ahmadinejad, did not reflect public opinion, which was concerned principally with internal problems. The decline of the hardliners in elections for local government and the Assembly of Experts in December 2006 bore this out. But the public has very little to say and zero influence over issues like the export of the revolution and nuclearization. The shift of the leadership toward more extreme positions had additional implications for the future of the country, when it comes to the composition of the Assembly of Experts, the body that will have to decide who becomes supreme leader after Khamenei, who turned 68 in 2007 and according to persistent rumors was suffering from serious medical

problems. With the decline in the strength of the reformist camp, and the rise of Ahmadinejad, the future did not look encouraging.
