Madism, Shi'a Ideology and Ahmadinejad's Docrtine

Přemysl Rosůlek

Abstract *This article argues that the rise of Mahdism within Shi'a political Islam during Ahmadinejad's presidency did not lead to a significant break with previous persuasions. The relevance of Mahdism within the politicised and ideologised Shi'a Islam in Iran has been on the rise since the second half of 20th century. The issue occurred in Shi'a political philosophy and theory prior to the Islamic Revolution in Iran and in the post-revolutionary period, Mahdism became an inherent part of the Islamic political system. The emphasis placed on Mahdism during Ahmadinejad's political career could be also explained by the complex relationships among key political, cultural, economic and religious actors. This article conceptualises Mahdism as a doctrinal catch within the Shi'a political Islam in Iran, focusing on the rise of Mahdism and on the roles key religious leaders played since 1978. In this regard, the role of political philosopher Ali Shariati and theoretician Ayatollah Khomeini are investigated. Revolutionary and post-revolutionary Iran is also evaluated in the text though more attention is paid to the issue of Mahdism. Specifically, the article looks at the "timing" of Mahdism during Ahmadinejad's period in office.*

Keywords: Iran, Shi'ism, The Twelve Imams, Islamism, Mahdism, Ahmadinejad

Introduction

In the 20th century, modern political ideologies penetrated and significantly transformed the political and social life of Iran. Running in parallel to imported ideologies such as Marxism and Western-styled

nationalism, Shi'a Islam went through its own process of politicisation and ideologisation rapidly, on the cusp of the 1979 Islamic revolution. This has produced significant consequences for Shi'a Islam and the dynamism surrounding the revolution led to the rise of major influential political figures such as Ali Shariati – a main ideologue of the Islamic revolution – and Ayatollah Khomeini, with the concept of *velayet*-e *faqih*, or Guardianship of the Jurisprudent; the first real theocratic structure in any Islamic sect.

Furthermore, both Shariati and Khomeini strongly contributed to Mahdism's merge with Shi'a Islam, helping it become the core of the rise of Mahdism in post-revolutionary Iran. The issue of Mahdi's return became – both implicitly and to a lesser extent explicitly – a constitutive part of the post-revolutionary constitution and political system in Iran. Further, Shariati and Khomeini also paved the way for Ahmadinejad's presidency (2005-2013) and its emphasis on Mahdihood within *Shi'ism*. In short, Ahmadinejad's presidential identity based on Mahdism does not represent a significant break with the past but can be explained by the complexity of factors which have taken place within Shi'a Islamism mainly from the 19th through the 20th century already in the pre-revolutionary period.

Ideologisation of Shi'a Islam in Iran

The term "Islamism" was analogical to *Christianisme* (Christianism) until the 19th century but did not have political connotations.[1] In fact, the notions "Islamic fundamentalism," "Political Islam" or "Radical Islamism" started to be quoted more frequently in previous decades in relation to the "Islamic revolution"[2] in Iran.[3] According to Paul, after the 1979 Iranian Revolution the word *Islam* stands 'not only for a belief system, but also for a highly dynamic political ideology based on the presumed fundamentals of this belief system.'[4]

* * *

Islamism derives its precepts from Islam and is transformed into political ideology. The difference between pure Islam and Islamism lies in the fact that religion is basically apolitical. On the other hand, Islamism includes religion but also the non-Islamic suffix "-ism," which shifts it from its narrow consideration as 'theological belief, private prayer and ritual worship.'[5] Pipes distinguishes between Islam, which he considers as 'a religion which today has close to a billion adherents,'[6] and Islamism, which could be defined as an ideology:

> that demands man's complete adherence to the sacred law of Islam and rejects as much as possible outside influence, with some exceptions (such as access to military and medical technology). It is imbued with a deep antagonism towards non-Muslims and has a particular hostility towards the West. It amounts to an effort to turn Islam, a religion and civilization, into an ideology.[7]

Islamism could also be defined on the basis of interrelated phenomena as 'a religious ideology with a holistic interpretation of Islam, whose final aim is the conquest of the world by all means'[8] or as 'a progressive model, independent of Western ideologies,'[9] which comprehends all social aspects of human beings. Further, it pursues an effective system in order to manage society, it is a system 'capable of resolving all social, economic and political problems of the modern world.'[10]

Islamism gains legitimacy via ideology and religion which requires a double loyalty—to an acknowledged leader and, mainly, to Allah.[11] The core concepts of Islamist ideology are the oneness of God (*tawhid*) the inseparability of religion and politics, sovereignty of God and the (*umma*), Islamic community which replaces nation and some other attributes such as equality and justice (etc).[12]

There are several major versions of Islamism in contemporary Islamic discourses. In the case of the Sunni community the golden age represented a caliphate, while the 'ideal reference point'[13] for the Shi'a community has been the just, right and legitimate *Imamat*.[14] The theory of *Imamat* belongs to the crucial aspect of the Shi'a Islamists. They found inspiration by the traditionalists: Imam is 'the most virtuous and perfect of men' and the only one responsible to guide the Muslims.[15]

The main pillars of Shi'a Islamism are identified here as:

1. Islam as a total way of life regardless of Occultation of the Imam,[16]
2. Islamic political and social philosophy on jurisprudence,
3. Religious government during the absence of the Imam,
4. Unity of state and religion in the Occultation age.[17]

Muslims are responsible for actively preparing for the emergence of a global just governance which is expected after the return of Imam Mahdi.

Islamic ideology in Iran, as formulated by Ayatollah Khomeini, has been also described by Lafraie as 'the most comprehensive revolutionary ideology,'[18] because it encompasses political consciousness, criti-

cism of existing social arrangements, a new set of values, an outline of the desired society, program of action, commitment to action, self-sacrifice and revolutionary patience, simplification and claim to truth.[19] Khomeini introduced the most comprehensive critique of the Shah's regime and Lafraie summarises Khomeini's criticism into seven major issues:

> (1) imperialism, foreign domination and relations with the Zionist state; (2) the unjust economic order and domestic and foreign exploitation; (3) misery, hunger and deprivation of the masses; (4) oppression and tyranny; (5) the ruling clique's luxury, wastefulness, incompetence, and burgeoning bureaucracy; (6) the prevalence of corruption, immorality, and materialism; and (7) the illegitimacy of the government with its un-Islamic politics and laws.[20]

Major contributors of the Shi'a Islamic ideology shared a common belief in the ideal future concept of society independent politically, economically, culturally and ideologically. Moreover, that ideal society should be moral and just based upon Islamic principles, co-operation of its members and decision-making based on mutual consultations.[21]

Though apostolic Mahdism potentially contains the scheme for an ideal society, the issue of Mahdihood did not belong to the major questions discussed by theoreticians in the pre-revolutionary period. Nevertheless, the issue of Mahdism was also not absolutely suppressed in the Shi'a Islamic ideology before the revolution. On the contrary, Mahdism became an integral part of Shi'a Islamic ideology in pre-revolutionary Iran. So, numerous scholars reflecting on Ahmadinejad's focus on the return of Mahdi emphasised that to the core values of the Shi'a Islam discourse belonged the Twelver Shi'ism, Occultation and the belief in the Hidden Imam.[22]

Mahdism in Shi'a Islam

The idea of the Mahdi reaches beyond the Islamic context in Persia and has historical precedent in ancient Zoroastrian beliefs. Abol-Ghasem Ferdowsi (935–1020), strongly inspired by the mythological history of pre-Islamic Iran, refers in the *Book of Kings* (*Shahnameh*) to a "noble man," who would appear in Iran, from 'whom will spread the religion of God to the four corners of the world.'[23] Messianic tradition and apocalyptic literature was brought into the Shi'a belief system by the Shi'i theologians as early as the 9th and 10th centuries. Twelver Shi'ism

is the official branch of Shi'a religion in Iran, the Imam Mahdi came as number twelve and he is last of the imams and left to the state of Occultation—Minor Occultation in the year of 873 and Great Occultation in the year of 941.[24]

* * *

To be sure, the Twelfth Imam, or Mahdi, has often been described by many superlatives as "guided Saviour", "the ultimate Saviour of humankind" on the "Day of Judgment,"[25] "Lord of Age" or "Lord of the Martyrs" of which the latter refers to the two main pillars of Shi'a religion: injustice and martyrdom.[26]

Shi'ism has always been a religion complaining about greater injustice. This identity adhered to Shi'ism after the first leader Imam Ali, who 'did not succeed the Prophet as the legitimate leader of all Muslims.'[27] That event became the initial part of Islam's unjust history.[28] The uprising against tyranny was headed by the Third Imam, al-Husayn, and ended up by his tragic fall during the battle of Karbala as Amanat noted: 'Mahdi's revenge of Husayn's blood will initiate an apocalyptic battle of cosmic proportion which precedes the day of resurrection at the end of time.'[29]

Shi'ism has been very much defined by the Karbala narrative. Eschatological speculations are also related to the Day of Judgement, salvation and damnation[30] and to a sense of failure.[31] In this, Iranian society has been more sensitive to "holy songs" around the tyranny of the Pahlavi rule, the Iran-Iraq war (1980-1988) and the threat posed by the "Great Satan" (US). Expectations for Mahdi's return are linked to his role as a protector of Islam who comes to beat and smash Islam's enemies.[32] After that Mahdi would restore justice, equity and peace in a world which suffers wrongs and oppressions.[33] He would lead the righteous against the forces of evil before the Day of Judgment.[34]

Mahdism and Politics in Modern Iran

Throughout history, Shi'ism was never fully detached from messianic speculations. Until recently, however, Shi'a authorities managed to neutralise messianism,[35] and episodic movements favourable to Mahdihood had either neutral or even passive political dimensions within Shi'ism.[36] In general, Shi'ites believe that all earthly governments have been corrupted. This situation will only cease on the return of the Hidden Imam.[37] The main current of Shi'a political ideology focuses against the supremacy of religion over the political realm, arguing that

any earthly government can be neither legitimate nor just in the time of Great Occultation. All other rulers or governing parties are, *a priori*, usurpers of the power or could be at most only temporary substitutes of the Hidden Imam.[38] According to the tradition of the Shi'a sect, the Hidden Imam would introduce just Islamic government after his return.[39]

Be that as it may, the Shi'a sect remained rather anti-messianistic throughout its history.[40] Nevertheless, the occasional debate on conditions and consequences of the Mahdi's return routinely surfaced, the latest of which is found in Iranian Shi'ism.[41] So, while it is important to emphasise that the idea of Mahdism was emphasised in popular imagination by the *ulama* in *madrasa* circles from the 17th to the 19th century,[42] this section fast-forwards to the 20th century (C. E.) strand.

Religious circles did not hold a unified approach to the issue of Mahdism during the constitutional revolution in Persia (1905–1911). Reformists – re: pro-European oriented circles – supported the idea of constitutional rule as a right and protection against tyranny while the Hidden Imam would be fully excluded from political life. A second major religious current, represented by moderates, advocated that reference to Imam Mahdi be entered into the constitution, which should also be a guarantee against tyranny. However, some moderates were opposed to revolution based on the European model.[43] Finally, the third and also most conservative element turned down the idea of rationalised parliamentarianism and promoted religious constitutional revolution and a constitution based closely on the holy Quran and Twelver Shi'ism.[44]

The issue of Mahdi's return was more strongly included in political thought in Iran during the second half of the 20th century[45] when Mahdism became an indivisible part of Islamist ideology and this course was also partly provoked by polemical responses to Marxists, secularists and Baha'i critics.[46] It is important to note that, unlike the conservative and reformist political-religious circles,[47] traditionalists further rejected the implementation of all thoughts of Shi'ism into political and social reality during the time of occultation. Equality was a matter of greater political concern. Contrary to the traditionalists and commonly shared opinion in the Shi'a community, both reformist and conservative circles – at the same time – reformulated some of the Shi'a teachings more towards ideological characteristics. In particular, the concepts of waiting for the Hidden Imam (*intizar*) and related mar-

tyrdom (*shahadat*) enabled mobilisation along the socio-political lines. Particularly conservatives, sometimes also called fundamentalists, relied on the state in their intentions to enforce Islamic teachings.[48]

There could hardly be any doubt that after World War II Ali Shariati and Ayatollah Khomeini belonged to the most important thinkers in the pre-revolutionary period in Iran.[49] Both paved the way for the success of the Islamic revolution (1979) despite that revolution in Iran 'was not predominantly Islamic at its beginning and in its early stages.'[50] Implicitly though, Shariati and Khomeini advocated a political system in which the concept of Mahdism was a notable component of Islamist ideology. In short, a revolutionary doctrine was formulated to encompass the idea of the Hidden Imam in a rather de-eschatologised way: the Shi'a sect and its charismatic leaders are necessary but not sufficient historical agents in the absence of the Hidden Imam.[51]

Ali Shariati and Revolutionary Messianism

In contrast to quietist faith[52] of traditional *ulama*, Shariati pursued revolutionary messianism and popularised the idea of Islam and the vision of establishing Islamic government from the masses, the youth and intelligentsia,[53] with significant impact on Iranian political discourse in 1970s.[54] Shariati's thinking about Islam could be summed up into four points: Firstly, Islam was 'the best and most complete religion for man.'[55] Secondly, authentic Islam could be preserved in Shi'ism. Thirdly, true Shi'ism is best represented in Twelver-Imam Shi'ism. And fourthly, 'Alid Shi'ism, which are followers of 'Ali,' not the Safavid version, 'is the true and most perfect form of the Twelver Shi'ism.'[56]

Shariati's intellectual persuasion lies in the fact that the core values of Twelve-Imam Shi'ism are social justice and revolution.[57] Twelve Imam Shi'ism could be newly understood under the terms "ultimate revolution" or "Mahdi's revolution" as Shariati re-contextualised the theological term Mahdi by turning it into ideological and revolutionary doctrine. Shariati assumed that after the advent of the Mahdi, authentic values such as social responsibility and just order would be implemented in society. Shariti was convinced that the Mahdi would reject political oppression and cultural degradation. The Mahdi's return could be expected if the life of humanity reached total bottom. Most importantly however, Shariati drew attention to earthly and political dimensions of Mahdism. He stated that the Mahdi could return only if Muslims would acquire new understanding of the expectations

(*intizar*) of Imam.[58] The right way to do so would be to establish a political system with leadership of democratically elected *faqih* as "general deputy" of the Hidden Imam.[59] Shariati believes that at the beginning of the Mahdi's rule he would strongly support values as justice and equality against exploitation, imperialism and tyranny.[60] The Leader should possess some special qualification for his position as *faqih* and his position of general deputy is not to be reduced into the political or social realm. In fact, the general deputy has 'a mission of guiding the *ummah* towards perfection, he is to be a learned person.'[61] The Imam, in his absence, has 'bestowed this role upon the pious and learned *ulama*.'[62]

Shariati's political system of guided democracy and committed religious leadership in the period of Occultation perhaps paved the way, although inadvertently and unintentionally, for a wider acceptance of his theory *Velāyat-e faqīh* in the tense pre-revolutionary political environment in Iran and helped to consolidate the leading position of Ayatollah Khomeini.[63]

Ayatollah Khomeini and Velāyat-e faqīh in the Absence of Mahdi

Ayatollah Khomeini's contribution to the Islamic revolution and Shi'a Islamic ideology 'is much more significant than that of any other Iranian leader or activist.'[64] Khomeini entered politics in the early 1940's with his work *Exposing the Secrets*, but his most important theoretical move was reformulation of Shi'a political theory in 1970/71 by introducing the concept of *Velāyat-e faqīh* (Guardianship of the Jurists), which was successfully applied to political practice in post-revolutionary Iran.[65] Originally, he presented the theory in series of lectures during his exile in Shi'a holy city of Najaf situated in Iraq. According to *Velāyat-e faqīh,* there is a government of a specific Islamic political order. He applied it to his Islamic government:

> Not to have an Islamic government means leaving our boundaries unguarded. Can we afford to sit nonchalantly on our hands while our enemies do whatever they want? Even if we do put our signatures to what they do as an endorsement, we are still failing to make an effective response. Is that the way it should be? Or is it rather that government is necessary, and that the function of government that existed from the beginning of Islam down to the time of the Twelfth Imam ('a) is still

> enjoined upon us by God after the Occultation even though He has appointed no particular individuals to the function?[66]

The political system should be founded upon "institutionalised and hierarchical" Shi'a clergy in which the jurists enjoy authority and replace Imam during the time of his Occultation.[67]

Khomeini stated that

> the two qualities of knowledge of law and justice are present in countless fuqaha of the present age. If they come together, they could establish a government of universal justice in the world. [68]

The concept of *Velāyat-e faqīh* is based on

1. Subordination of political institutions to Islamic law,
2. Governance of the *faqīh* (an expert in Islamic Law) over the legislative, executive and judicial branch of government,
3. The duty of every Muslim is to establish Islamic government.[69]

Religious and judicial authority of senior *ulama* extends over political and social issues and refers its legitimacy directly to the Hidden Imam until his advent.

In the contemporary period, in the absence of the Mahdi, as Kamrava accurately noted, Leadership is

> the most perfect, and thus the most deserving member of the community (…) in the absence of divinely ordained Imams, the right of leadership belongs to the person who comes closest to the purity of the Imams' hearts and their ethics, the depth of their knowledge, and their devotion to Islam.[70]

Such a person is *Vali-ye Faqīh* (Guardian Jurist) and the system of *Velāyat-e faqīh* and *Imamate* could be used interchangeably.[71] The ultimate source of legitimacy in the system *Velāyat-e faqīh* is not derived from the social contract, cultural norms, elections or constitution but directly from God. Therefore, during the absence of the Mahdi, the only legitimate holder of power would be the *Velāyat-e faqīh*, justified by God, the Prophet Muhammad and the Twelve Imams.[72] The person *Vali-ye Faqīh* does not have absolute power as he cannot change the basic principles of Islam and must protect them. On the other hand, he can intervene in all spheres of political life.[73]

The best alternative is the rule of Muslim scholars with knowledge of the God's will[74] and one final authority should be chosen as supreme leader with knowledge of *sharia*.[75] Sufficient knowledge of Islam means nothing but 'the ability to engage in *ijtihad*,' while *foqaha* is a term that

applies to scholars with most 'in-depth knowledge of religion and the laws of *shari'a*.'[76] The righteous person must perfectly accomplish dual position – the political *Velāyat* and the religious *Marja'iyyat*. The legitimacy of the post-revolutionary Iran after Khomeini's death was weakened because Khomeini's successor, Ali Khamenei, was not considered as an *Ayatollah* in the 1980s. This religious deficit within the political system may also have contributed to the rise of Mahdism in Iran since the 1990s.[77]

Similar to Ali Shariati's conception of revolutionary messianism, Khomeini's political theory *Velāyat-e faqīh* was unprecedented in Shi'a political thought because political authority was not left in abeyance until the reappearance of the Hidden Imam—the only legitimate ruler. Unlike Shariati, Khomeini was reluctant to direct election of a political leader and suggested more restricted opinion having argued that in Islamic order political ruler is subordinated to *fuqaha* who are experts on Islamic law.[78]

Mahdism after Islamic Revolution in Iran

The Islamic revolution in Iran was described by Lewis as one of the most important events of modern history comparable only to the Bolshevik's (1917) and to the French revolution (1789).[79] Moreover, Filiu noted that the 1979 Islamic revolution has often been reflected as a 'break with traditional Shi'ite quietism.'[80] Similarly, Tazmini considers the Islamic revolution as representing an outstanding change in politics and across Iran's entire social-spectrum which also contains a strong eschatological dimension. The Islamic revolution was, for him, 'a critique of the present and a break from the past to a future-oriented utopia.'[81] The Islamic Republic of Iran, by its structure, laws, practices and institutions was a step forward in preparation for the return of the Imam Mahdi.[82] Also the post-revolutionary constitution of Iran was closely linked to Shi'ism and Mahdism:[83]

Indeed, the Islamic Republic maintains a system based on the belief in

1. A single God (as stated in the phrase 'There is no God except Allah'), His exclusive sovereignty and the right to legislate, and the necessity of submission to His commands,
2. Divine revelation and its fundamental role in setting forth the laws.

Abrahamin points out that the Mahdi's narrative remained strongly

immanent in both constitutional provisions and other aspects of the political and social system. The Islamic political system is considered fully legitimate and should exist until the return of the Mahdi.[84] Shi'ism became Iran's official religion and only Shi'a Muslims could enter the cabinet. In the judicatory branch, courts are religious and all legislative acts in the country have to coincide with *sharia* which is implemented by the clerical oligarchy. The Guardian council has a right to veto any legislation and is meant to work until the return of the Mahdi.[85] In fact, the system itself became a substitute for eschatological expectations.[86]

Another symptomatic aspect of Mahdism in the post-revolutionary political system in Iran became the figure of Ayatollah Khomeini himself, a charismatic personality and leader of the Islamic revolution. Over the span of Shi'a Islam's history, the title "Imam" was 'exclusively reserved for Shi'i imams and not assumed by any Shi'i figure since the occultation of the Twelfth Imam in the 9th century.'[87] Khomeini was considered as a 'Mahdi-like leader' or as 'the deputy of the Imam of the Age.'[88] During and after the Islamic revolution Khomeini did not reject the title Imam. Therefore, he was considered only short of the Mahdi.[89] Accordingly, Ayatollah Khomeini did not suppress the spread of messianistic messages, which happened in November 1978 when thousands of his followers – in a collective hallucination – claimed they saw his face on the moon.[90] To sum up, Khomeini became the 'Guardian of Muslims' and representative of Mahdi in the 'First government of God' on Earth after the Islamic revolution.[91]

However, after establishing the Islamic republic in Iran, the question of the Mahdi's return was not explicitly emphasised in real politics and the discussion on the return of Mahdi was partially put aside.[92] In fact, Khomeini opposed political Mahdism and messianistic excesses and it was not permitted to speak about signs of Mahdi's return apart from within the clerical oligarchy.[93] Also, in the post-Khomeini era, during the mandate of the supreme leader exercised by Ayatollah Khamenei (1989–), there has been clear tendencies to repudiate political Mahdism from both clerical oligarchy and political leaders.[94] Khamenei's successors at the presidential posts, Ali Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani (1989–2007) and Mohammad Khatami (1997–2005), were even more hostile to political Mahdism[95] than Khamenei during his presidency (1981–1989).

Nevertheless, there were apparently rising tendencies of messianism in Iran from the middle of the 1990s. The reformist and anticlerical

approaches of Khatami triggered messianic feelings among the clergy in order to promote Mahdi 'as an absolute sacred source of authority' and ultimately weaken the political relevance of the President and Parliament.[96] From the second half of the 1990s, the conservative clerics launched anti-Khatami campaign and helped to promote the advent of Mahdism within the Shi'a Islamic discourse. A pre-millennial feeling could also partly contribute to rising apocalyptical expectations.

Madism, Shi'a Ideology and Ahmadinejad's Docrtine

In Khatami's second presidential term (2001–2005), the major attributes of his doctrine – civil society, rule of law and dialogue of civilizations – had weakened the clergy's position within the system and society and an existing ideological vacuum started to be replete with messianistic expectations. The rise of messianistic tendencies was partly – though paradoxically – fuelled by unfulfilled promises of the Islamic revolution and general dissatisfaction with revolutionary slogans. The cult of the Hidden Imam was attractive to new members of Basij and the Revolutionary Guards, and also for some senior clerical circles in Qom and Tehran who sought to promote the vision of Mahdi's return in the public imagination to attract wide public support in order to regain loyalty and popularity.[97] Consequently, the rising popular messianism was epitomised by the mosque of Jamarkan near Qom, which was recognised as the stomping grounds of the Mahdi.[98]

Additionally, some external events contributed to the rising popularity of Mahdihood such as the US-led invasion of Iraq in 2003[99] and the negative consequences or the fall of Saddam Hussein's tyrannical regime in Iraq.[100] After 2005, for Ahmadinejad, messianistic signs were made rather visible in the 'divine victory' proclaimed during the war between Israel and Hezbollah in 2006.[101]

Mahdihood and Mahmoud Ahmadinejad's Presidency (2005–2013)

Throughout the history of Twelver Shi'i, messianism hardly enjoyed such a high degree of institutional support as during Mahmoud Ahmadinejad's presidency in cooperation with part of the clergy.[102] Ahmadinejad found supporters for the issue of Mahdism among some conservative circles in Qom, particularly gathered around the Bright Future Institute and around the previously mentioned mosque of Jamarkan.[103] He was also backed by some influential ayatollahs – Ayatollah Mohammad-Taqi Mesbah Yazdi, Ayatollah Mohammad Yazdi and Ayatollah Ahmad Jannati Massah were among his main supporters

together with Hojjatiyeh society, who founded a theological school in Qom called Haqqaniya.[104]

After being elected president, Ahmadinejad announced the Third revolution in Iran. The shift into an Islamic republic by the end of monarchy in 1979 was considered as the First revolution. The anti-Western turn and occupation of the US embassy in Tehran were described as the Second revolution. By declaring the Third revolution, Ahmadinejad drew attention to poverty, corruption and discrimination all of which still remain in society.[105]

Ahmadinejad's vision of Islamic government was, according to Ahdiyyih, focused on the

> acquisition of nuclear weapons, elimination of Israel, the destruction of liberal democratic states and Western capitalism, and an end of the US as a superpower, which is perceived as the greatest threat to the Islamic Republic's survival and the main obstacle to accomplishment of its objectives.[106]

But Ahmadinejad's intention was also aimed at challenging the legacy of his predecessors in the presidential office, both pragmatic Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani (1989-2007) and philosophising reformist Mohammad Khatami (1997-2005). Consider his idea that

> Today we have managers in the country who do not believe in the ability of Islam to administer society, managers who approve of liberal ideas, managers who believe in progress only in the framework of individualistic, material and secular initiatives, managers who lack confidence in their own Islamic culture when confronting the cultural onslaught of the West. These managers are weak in front of the enemies and look down on their own people.[107]

But what motivated the new President to break so clearly with the past?

Firstly, during the electoral campaign, Ahmadinejad criticised prevailing corruption and existing poverty. Secondly, he received votes of (a) marginalised conservatives, for his criticism of the socio-cultural liberalisation process as, for example, a loose dress code for women, and (b) the Iranian poor, for his promises to narrow the existing wide gap between the rich and the poor. Thirdly, being backed by political elite with a military background, Ahmadinejad sought new legitimacy not tied to *Velāyat-e faqīh*, but rather directly oriented to the Twelfth Imam. This circle did not rely as much on ideology developed by Aya-

tollah Khomeini as on a kind of utopia.[108] Ahmadinejad highlighted the model of Islamic government as the 'wish of martyrs, the Prophets, imams and all Muslims,'[109] which could serve the World as an example. To sum up, Ahmadinejad

> came to represent a populist face of piety and commitment to revolutionary ideals among war veterans and radicals frustrated with post-revolutionary developments and with Khatami's relatively liberal message of civil society.[110]

The outcome of the 2005 presidential elections and the success of Ahmadinejad represented a turning point in Iran's political Mahdism.[111] Ahmadinejad's victory was accompanied by Mahdistic propaganda orchestrated and directed from Qom.[112] As early as his swearing-in ceremony, Ahmadinejad announced – in front of Ayatollah Khamenei – that his rule is only temporary and that he would soon hand his power to the Mahdi. He claimed that the Hidden Imam would return in two years.[113] Ahmadinejad selected several of his ministers mainly for their conviction in Mahdism. During one sitting of the government he told his ministers that

> We have to turn Iran into a modern and divine country to be the model for all nations, and which will also serve as the basis for the return of the Twelfth Imam.[114]

Ahmadinejad's presidency was known for its public speeches about Mahdi which were already narrowly analysed by many scholars. Therefore I would introduce this issue only briefly in the following lines.

On the occasion of his first speech at the UN General Assembly (UNGA) in 2005, Ahmadinejad warned political representatives of the world that there is going to be 'the emergence of a perfect human being who is heir to all prophets and pious men,'[115] and finished his speech publicly praying for a quick return of the Hidden Imam. Similarly, he repeated this on other occasions such as in 2007 during the meeting of Arab political leaders at the Gulf Cooperation Council in Doha.[116] In his 2009 speech at UNGA, he asked Allah to 'hasten the arrival of al-Mahdi.'[117] In his last speech before the UNGA in 2012, Ahmadinejad called for arrival of an 'Ultimate Saviour' who is 'a man who loves people and loves absolute justice, a man who is a perfect human being and is named Imam al-Mahdi, a man who will come in the company of Jesus Christ and the righteous.'[118]

However, it is important to note that Mahdism during Ahmadinejad's presidency never fully possessed wider political discourse in Iran.

For example, Friday Prayers (Sermons) in Tehran being held by the Supreme Leader has been an important part. Tensions between Ahmadinejad and Ayatollah Khamenei over the issue of Mahdism are also well-known.[119] Not all Iranian religious and political elites were favourable to Ahmadinejad's Mahdihood. Some clerics and reformist intellectuals either stayed calm or openly criticised Ahmadinejad's messianic orientation.[120]

Conclusion

The rise of Mahdism during two terms of Ahmadinejad's presidency does not imply a radical break with Iran's revolutionary past. Various political, religious, economic and socio-cultural reasons paved the way for the popularisation of a strongly politicised and ideologised Shi'a Islam before the Islamic revolution in Iran. The political factors which indirectly contributed to the rise of Mahdism can be put as follows. Firstly, creating the concept of a good and earthly society during the time of occultation by Shariati, Khomeini (among others) in the pre-revolutionary period. Secondly, Mahdism became an inherent part of the political system in Iran. Thirdly, during the revolution, Ayatollah Khomeini catalysed the apocalyptic atmosphere when he allowed himself to be titled "an Imam," which happened for the first time in Shi'a history. Fourthly, the Mahdihood was explicitly orchestrated by the clerical oligarchy in the second half of the 1990s as a shocking response to the rather liberal atmosphere and the rise of the role of civic society during Khatami's presidency. Fifthly, millennial expectations also contributed to the rising popularity of the issue of Mahdi's return. Sixthly, Ahmadinejad's desire for general popularity, original legitimacy and differentiation from his predecessor should be also considered as a relevant factor for the rise of Mahdism.

Religious reasons are also part of the heritage of the Shi'a Islam which is markedly based on martyrdom and occultation. These transcendental factors could be, under certain circumstances, utilised into political reality. Actual religious causes can be summed up in an ebbing period of revolutionary fever during the 1990s when Ayatollah Khamenei was appointed the successor of Ayatollah Khomeini without being considered as a religious *Marja*', and that was due to the weakening position of clerical oligarchy in general in the 1990s. In other words, the rise of Mahdism reflected, albeit partly, the conflict within the clerical oligarchy in Iran. Although not explored at large in the text, eco-

nomic reasons could not be underestimated either. High unemployment, particularly of the young population who were seeking to enter the labour market, indicated that at least one-fifth of the population was living below the poverty line in 2002,[121] economic stagnation after 2000 and again from 2008 onward, encouraged Ahmadinejad to opt for manipulative tendencies.

Madism, Shi'a Ideology and Ahmadinejad's Docrtine

There are also significant sociocultural factors that may have contributed to the rise of Mahdism in Iran. There has been a growing gap between revolutionary slogans and unfulfilled expectations in Iran, which are in stark contrast with the actual miserable reality in the country. Furthermore, there is an outstanding generation gap between the dynamism of anti-revolutionary and educated youth on one hand and conservative clerics on the other. The latter group has attempted to overcome the decreasing legitimacy of the concept of *velayet*-e *faqih* in post-Khomeini Iran by adding the concept of Mahdihood into Shi'a political Islam.

To summarise, the doctrine of Mahdism represented a significant part of Ahmadinejad's presidency, contrary to his predecessors. However, this factor must not be interpreted as a radical break with Shi'a Islamism either in the framework of the Islamic revolution and post-Revolutionary Iran or in the context of its development in the 19th and 20th century. By utilising this doctrine, Ahmadinejad was able to differentiate himself from his predecessors and legitimise his power among members of the clergy and rural society.

***

Přemysl Rosůlek is affiliated to the Department of Politics and International Relations at the University of West Bohemia in Pilsen, Czech Republic. He may be reached at: rosulek@kap.zcu.cz.

Notes

1 Mehdi Mozaffari (2007), 'What is Islamism? History and Definition of the Concept,' *Totalitarian Movements and Political Religions*, 8: 1, p. 19.

2 Despite the commonly shared notion "Islamic revolution," Ludwig Paul suggests that we use the more neutral term "Iranian revolution" arguing that the revolution was not only Islamic and that the revolutionary government did not constitute the only driving force of the revolution. See Ludwig Paul (1999), '"Iranian Nation" and Iranian-Islamic Revolutionary

Ideology,' *Die Welt des Islams*, 39: 2, p. 184.

3 Mozaffari (2007), p. 18.
4 Paul (1999), p. 183.
5 Mozaffari (2007), p. 22.
6 Daniel Pipes (1998), *Distinguishing between Islam and Islamism*, DanielPipes.org Middle East Forum, available at: <http://www.danielpipes.org/954/distinguishing-between-islam-and-islamism>, (*accessed 10 October 2013).*
7 Ibid.
8 Mozaffari (2007), p. 21.
9 Adel Hashemi–Najafabadi (2010), 'Imamate and Leadership: The Case of Shia Fundamentalists in Modern Iran,' *Canadian Social Science*, 6:7, p. 193.
10 Ibid.
11 Mozaffari (2007), p. 22.
12 Michaelle L. Browers (2005), 'The secular bias in ideology studies and the case of Islamism,' *Journal of Political Ideologies*, 10: 1, p. 86-87.
13 Mozaffari (2007), p. 23.
14 Ibid.
15 Hashemi-Najafabadi (2010), p. 193.
16 Occultation period means the 'inescapable presence of the Hidden Imam.' Ibid, p. 194.
17 Ibid. p. 193-194.
18 Najibullah Lafraie (2009), *Revolutionary Ideology and Islamic Militancy. The Iranian Revolution and Interpretations of the Quran*, I. B. Tauris Academic Studies, p. 175.
19 Ibid. p. 15-19 and 175-176.
20 Ibid. p. 181.
21 Ibid. p. 182-183.
22 Jean-Pierre Filiu (2009), 'The Return of Political Mahdism,' *Current Trend in Islamist Ideology*, 8, available at: <http://www.currenttrends.org/research/detail/the-return-of-political-mahdism> (accessed 08 *September 2013).* See also Abbas Amanat (2009), *Apocalyptic Islam and Iranian Shi'ism*, I. B. Tauris, p. 221-251.
23 Mohebat Ahdiyyih (2008), 'Ahmadinejad and the Mahdi,' *Middle East Quarterly*, 15:4, pp. 27-36.
24 *Amanat (2009), p. 49.*
25 Ghoncheh Tazmini (2009), *Khatami's Iran. The Islamic Republic and the Turbulent Path to Reform*, Tauris I. B, p. 172.
26 Hamid Dabashi (2000), 'The End of Islamic Ideology,' *Social Research* 67: 2, p. 482.
27 Ibid.
28 Ibid.
29 *Amanat (2009), p.* viii.
30 Ibid. p. 41.
31 Filiu (2009).
32 Ibid.
33 *Amanat (2009), p.* 49. See also Filiu (2009).

34 Ahdiyyih (2008), pp. 27-36.
35 Filiu (2009).
36 Ibid.
37 John D. Stempel (1979), *Inside the Iranian Revolution*, Indiana University Press, p. 42.
38 Rouleau (1980), p. 2.
39 Patrick Clawson and Michael Rubin (2005), *Eternal Iran: Continuity and Chaos*, Palgrave MacMillan, p. 89.
40 Ibid.
41 *Amanat (2009), p.* 48.
42 *Amanat (2009), p.* 50 and 244.
43 Eric Rouleau (1980), 'Khomeini's Iran,' *Foreign Affairs*, 59: 1, p. 3. See also Mansoor Moaddel (1986), 'The Shi'i Ulama and the state in Iran,' *Theory and Society* 15: 4, p. 531.
44 Michael M. J. Fischer (1980), *Iran: From Religious Disputes to Revolution*, Harvard University Press, p. 149.
45 *Rashid Yaluh (2011), 'Mahdism in contemporary Iran: Ahmadinejad and the occult Imam,' Arab Center for Research & Policy Studies, p. 2-5, available at: <http://english.dohainstitute.org/file/get/ef643c91-5988-46bc-b6b2-b1705c01ae66.pdf> (accessed 12 October 2013).*
46 *Amanat (2009), p.* 62.
47 The religious right in Iran could be divided into more currents. Mehran Kamrava segmented "right" in Iran into radicals and conservatives from which the latter group could be further divided into extreme radical rights (Hezbollah groups), rightists (traditional clerics in Qom and Tehran, Friday Prayers), Islamic councils and neoconservative thinkers as well as scholars (A. Montazerí) while only the group of rightists and neoconservative thinkers & scholars were production of ideology. See Mehran Kamrava (2008), *Iran's intellectual revolution*, Cambridge University Press, p. 82.
48 Hashemi-Najafabadi (2010), p. 193.
49 Abbas Amanat also counted Mehdi Bazargan's scientific approach contributing to the Return of Mahdi. See *Amanat (2009), p.* 62.

Mohebat Ahdiyyih emphasises the role of philosopher Ali Shariati but also the role of leftist and pro-Soviet intellectual Ehsan Tabari and the Hojjatieh Society which was founded after the First World War to suppress the Baha'i faith, whose founder has been labelled as a false Mahdi. See Ahdiyyih (2008), pp. 27-36.

Najibullah Lafraie emphasises most of all the teachings of Imam Khomeini and also Ali Shariati. But among major contributors to the Islamic revolution in Iran he places also ayatollahs Taleqani and Mutahhari as well as the scientific approach of Mehdi Bazargan and Abolhassan Bani-Sadr. See Lafraie (2009), p. 175-178.

Brad Hanson refers to 'Ali Shari'ati but also to Samad Behrangi (1939–1968), and Jalal Al-e Ahmad (1923–1969) as 'perhaps the three most influential lay Iranian intellectuals among dissatisfied, anti-regime Iranians during the 1960s and the 1970s.' See Brad Hanson (1983), 'The "Westoxication" of Iran: Depictions and Reactions of Behrangi, al-e Ahmad, and Shariati,' *Interna-*

tional Journal of Middle East Studies, 15:1, p. 1.
50 Paul (1999), p. 184.
51 Dabashi (2000), p. 493.
52 Hashemi-Najafabadi, (2010), p. 197.
53 Ibid.
54 *Amanat (2009), p.* 64.
55 Abdollah Vakily (1991), 'Ali Shariati and the Mystical Tradition of Islam,' *Master of Arts thesis*, McGill University: Montreal, p. 2-3.
56 Vakily (1991): p. 2-3.
57 Ibid. p.6.
58 *Amanat (2009), p.* 62-63.
59 Forough Jahanbakhsh (2001), *Islam, Democracy and Religious Modernism in Iran (1953-2000). From Bazargan to Soroush*, Brill, p. 122.
60 *Amanat (2009), p.* 63.
61 Jahanbakhsh (2001), p. 122.
62 Ibid.
63 Hashemi-Najafabadi (2010), p. 197. See also Jahanbakhsh (2001), p. 123.
64 Lafraie (2009), p. 178.
65 Jahanbakhsh (2001), p. 130.
66 Ayatollah Khomeini (no date), *Islamic Government*, Al-Islam.org. Ahlul Bayt Digital Islamic Library Project (DILP), available at: <www.al-islam.org/islamicgovernment/> (accessed 27 September 2013).
67 Browers (2005), p. 90-91.
68 Khomeini (no date), *Islamic Government*.
69 Hashemi-Najafabadi (2010), p. 198.
70 Kamrava (2008), p. 101.
71 Ibid.
72 Ibid. p. 102.
73 Ibid. p. 106.
74 Hashemi-Najafabadi (2010), p. 198.
75 Tazmini (2009), p. 29.
76 Kamrava (2008), p. 107.
77 Kamrava (2008), p. 109-110.
78 Jahanbakhsh (2001), p. 131.
79 Bernard Lewis (1988), *The Political Language of Islam*, University of Chicago Press, p. 1-2.
80 Filiu (2009).
81 Tazmini (2009), p. 29.
82 Ibid.
83 'Iranian Government Constitution' (1996), Manou & Associates Inc.
available at: <www.iranonline.com/iran/iran-info/government/constitution-1.html> (accessed 16 October 2013).
84 *Ervand Abrahamin (2008), A History of Modern Iran, Cambridge University Press, p.* 163-164.
85 Ibid. p. 48.
86 *Amanat (2009), p.* 67.
87 Ibid. p. 67 and 221. See also Filiu (2009).

88 *Amanat (2009),* p. 221.
89 Ibid. p. 36-37.
90 Filiu (2009).
91 Ahdiyyih (2008), p. 27-36.
92 Amanat (2009), p. 67.
93 Filiu (2009).
94 Amanat (2009), p. ix. Also see Ayelet Savyon and Yossi Mansharof (2007), 'The Doctrine of Mahdism in the Ideological and Political Philosophy of Mahmoud Ahmadinejad and Ayatollah Mesbah-e Yazdi,' *Inquiry & Analysis Series Report*, 4: 357, Middle East Media Research Institute, available at: <www.memri.org/publicdocs/doctrine_of_mahdism.pdf > (accessed 02 September 2013). See also Filiu (2009).
95 Filiu (2009). Eventhough Mohebat Ahdiyyih focus on Khatami's emphasis on Mahdi saying 'Lord of the Age will bring about a world government.' See Ahdiyyih (2008), p. 27-36.
96 Amanat (2009), p. 225.
97 Ibid. p. 245 and 250.
98 Ibid. p. 228.
99 Filiu (2009).
100 Amanat (2009), p. 226.
101 Filiu (2009).
102 Ibid. p. 244.
103 Filiu (2009).
104 Aroush Ehteshami and Mahjoob Zweiri (2007), *Iran and the Rise of its neoconservatives. The Politics of Tehran's silent revolution*, I. B. Tauris, p. 65. See also Ahdiyyih (2008), p. 27-36.
105 Kasra Naji (2008), *Ahmadinejad. The Secret History of Iran's Radical Leader*, University of California Press, p. 209-210.
106 Ahdiyyih (2008), p. 27-36.
107 Naji (2008), p. 209-210.
108 Eva Patricia Rakel (2008), *The Iranian Political Elite, State and Society. Relations, and Foreign Relations Since the Islamic Revolution*, University of Amsterdam, p. 73 and 81.
109 Naji (2008), p. 69.
110 Amanat (2009), p. 240.
111 Filiu (2009).
112 Amanat (2009), p. 228 and 239.
113 Naji (2008), p. 92.
114 Ibid. p. 93.
115 Ibid. p. 94.
116 Ahdiyyih (2008), p. 27-36.
117 Patrick Goodenough (2012), 'Ahmadinejad Includes Shi'ite End-Times beliefs in Speech to UN,' *CNS NEWS*, 27 September 2012, available at: <http://cnsnews.com/news/article/ahmadinejad-includes-shi-ite-end-times-beliefs-speech-un> (accessed 12 October 2013).
118 Al Arabiya (2012), 'Ahmadinejad hails imminent arrival of 'Ultimate Saviour, Jesus Christ,' 26 September 2012, available at: <http://english.alarabi-

ya.net/articles/2012/09/26/240346.html> (accessed 11 November 2013).

119 **Asaad Haidar,** 'Conflict Between Khamenei and Ahmadinejad May Indicate end of Iran Supreme Leader Role,' *Middle East Online*, 05 September 2011, available at <www.middle-east-online.com/english/?id=46017> (accessed 07 November 2013).

120 Savyon and Mansharof (2007), p. 7-9.

121 Shayerah Ilias (2010),'Iran's Economic Conditions: U.S. Policy Issues. Analyst in International Trade and Finance,' *Congressional Research Service*, CRS Report for Congress, 7-5700, RL34525, 22 April 2010, available at: <www.fas.org/sgp/crs/mideast/RL34525.pdf> (accessed 12 November 2013).