

THE AMERICAN THINKER  
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Ahmadinejad Awaits the Hidden Imam  
January 25th, 2006

At the end of his speech at the United Nations in the fall of 2005, Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad made an invocation to Allah to bring about the speedy reappearance of the Hidden Imam. The media and, sad to say, many academic persons were at a loss to explain this eschatological reference. The situation was complicated by later interviews in which Ahmadinejad reported that many of his co-religionists claimed that while he was making those remarks, they could see about him an aura of light. He recalled that he too was aware of a celestial light at that time. He also pointed to the fact that the “leaders of the world” were watching him at that time with a fixed gaze, apparently unable to look away.

The immediate question: who is this Hidden Imam to whom he referred? The American media, whose talking heads appear so authoritative on every subject, had no immediate answer. Many of these same pundits watched in February, 1979, as over two million lined the road leading from Mehrabad airport into Tehran during the return of the Ayatollah Khomeini, chanting “al-Muntazar.”

Khomeini immediately explained in a series of speeches that he was not al-Muntazar, one of the designations of the Hidden Imam, but that he had come to prepare the way for his appearance. In fact, Article Five of the constitution for the Islamic Republic of Iran, promulgated that same year, 1979, proclaimed that the basis for the constitution and its government was the authority of the Hidden Imam.

Moreover, the constitution promised that it would dissolve in his favor, following the Hidden Imam’s re-appearance.

The IRI (Islamic Republic of Iran) is, in actuality, an eschatological construct based on a messianic figure known as the Hidden Imam. With the ongoing pronouncements about the destruction of Israel and the war against the United States, all in the name of the Hidden Imam, it suddenly seems more important to know something about this whole concept.

To begin our overview of the theology behind the Hidden Imam, we have to recognize that the umma, the worldwide body of Muslims, is divided into two main sects, the Sunni and the Shi’a. The roots of this division go back to the period directly following the death of Muhammad and the conflict over who should be his successor, or caliph. The Sunni basically accept all the caliphs who have ruled as legitimate, no matter their genealogy, how they achieved the office, or how good a Muslim they were. The Shi’a differ. They posit that the true successor to Muhammad has to be a descendant of the cousin and son-in-law of the Prophet, an enormously important figure known to all Muslims, Ali. As a result, they are called the shiatu-Ali, or the “party of Ali.”

To complicate things further, the Shi’a are further subdivided into three main groups. These three groups are known by the number of Imams they accept. In the case of the Shi’a, the word for the designated prayer leader—imam with a lower case “i” — is also used to designate the descendants of Ali who were legitimate successors to Muhammad. Of course these select successors are marked with the capital letter: Imams.

This, the group of Shi’a which accepts four Imams is called the “Fourers” or “Zaydis” after the fourth Imam in their listing. The “Seveners” or “Ismailis” are known as such for the same reason. The “Twelvers” are the group which constitutes over 90% of the population of Iran and around 60% of the population of Iraq.

Now unlike the Sunni caliph, the Shi'a Imam inherited from Muhammad not just his civil rule over the umma but also his prerogative of interpreting the Quran, his infallibility, and his sinlessness (that connotation of impeccability seems far lost today). The eleventh Imam, al-Hassan al-Askari, died in 874. He was succeeded by the twelfth Imam, the youthful Muhammad, who "disappeared" in 274/878 in the cave of the great mosque at Samarra without leaving progeny.

He is now known as the "expected one," (al-Muntazar), the "promised one" (al-Mahdi"), or the "hidden one," (al-Mustatir). The theology of the Hidden Imam is that Allah realized at last that the rightful successor to Muhammad was not going to be accepted by Islam at large so he had to be taken into hiding and kept there until he would re-appear to purify the umma and take the world for Islam. The period of the Twelfth Imam's hiding was in two parts. The period from 878 until 941 would be known as the "Lesser Occultation," a time when the Hidden Imam was still active in this earthly realm, communicating by messengers. The Great Occultation began in 941, when all contact with the world was broken off. This date has been misinterpreted by some authors as the date of his disappearance. The Great Occultation continues to present and will end when he re-appears.

Media commentators and a great many academics mostly are not people of faith. For such intellectuals, the operational worldview of a people who believe in a messiah-like Mahdi, to the point that they are willing to base their government on that belief, is utterly alien and incomprehensible. Accordingly, the "experts" have little to say to the non-expert public about the characteristics and implications of a government predicated on such beliefs.

Today, the incumbent leader of a modern nation-state is making warlike and virulently anti-Semitic pronouncements with almost no knowledgeable comment from the visible pool of experts in the mass media.

When Hitler wrote of his intentions, the leaders of the Europe at that time could not comprehend someone saying and meaning the things he said. Our leaders at present seem similarly stultified in their thinking.

I suggest that we have to take Ahmadinejad seriously. I believe that he means what he says, and if given the opportunity will try to carry out his murderous plans. I furthermore suggest that we need to look around for the moral courage (the ability to make a stand on principle) to censure and punish those who call for the killing of Jews and the destruction of Israel.

Have we no memory? Have we no courage?

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