

Date: Thursday, February 2, 2006
Commentary: Later than we think
By ARNAUD DE BORCHGRAVE, UPI editor at large

WASHINGTON, Feb. 2 (UPI) – The man in charge of hoodwinking the Western powers about Iran's now 18-year-old secret nuclear program believes the apocalypse will happen in his own lifetime. He'll be 50 in October.

President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad's Shiite creed has convinced him lesser mortals can not only influence, but also hasten the awaited return of the 12th imam known as the Mahdi. Iran's dominant "Twelver" sect holds this will be Mohammed ibn Hasan, the righteous descendant of the Prophet Mohammad. He is said to have gone into "occlusion" in the 9th century, at the age of five. His return will be preceded by cosmic chaos, war, bloodshed and pestilence. After this cataclysmic confrontation between the forces of good and evil, the Mahdi will lead the world to an era of universal peace.

"The ultimate promise of all divine religions," says Ahmadinejad, "will be fulfilled with the emergence of a perfect human being (the 12th Imam), who is heir to all prophets. He will lead the world to justice and absolute peace. Oh mighty Lord, I pray to you to hasten the emergence of your last repository, the promised one." He reckons the return of the imam who has been AWOL for 11 centuries is only two years away.

Ahmadinejad is close to the messianic Hojjatieh Society, which is governed by the conviction the 12th imam's return will be hastened by "the creation of chaos on Earth." He has fired Iran's most experienced diplomats and scores of other officials, presumably those who don't share his belief in apocalyptic conflagration.

The Iranian leader's finger on a nuclear trigger would be disquieting under any circumstances. Positively alarming would be a nuclear weapon in the hands of a man who badgers Israel, the United States and the European Union in the belief that a pre-emptive aerial attack on Iran's nuclear facilities will hasten the return of the missing Mahdi. Such an attack presumably would trigger anti-Western mayhem throughout the Middle East.

When he became Iran's sixth president since the 1979 revolution last summer, Ahmadinejad decided to donate \$20 million to the Jamkaran mosque, a popular pilgrimage site where the faithful can drop their missives to the "hidden imam" in a holy well. Tehran's working class faithful are convinced the new president and his Cabinet signed a "compact" pledging themselves to precipitate the return of the Mahdi -- and dropped it down Jamkaran's well with the Mahdi's zip code.

In Ahmadinejad's eyes, Iran is strong with oil inching up to \$70 a barrel and America, dependent on foreign oil, weak. He has said publicly America and Europe have far more to lose than Iran if the U.N. Security Council votes for tough economic sanctions.

He also figures if Israeli and/or U.S. warplanes strike Iran, all he has to do is give the United States a hard time in Iraq as American forces prepare to withdraw. Moving two or three Iranian divisions into Iraq and activating Shiite suicide bombers and hit squads throughout the region would not be too hard a job for a country that fought an eight-year war against Iraq (1980-88) and had no compunction about giving thousands of youngsters a key to paradise and 72 virgins before sending them across Iraqi minefields.

A top Ahmadinejad general, Brig.-Gen. Mohammad Kossari, who heads the political watchdog, or Security Bureau, of Iran's armed forces, recently taunted the United States when he bragged: "We have identified all the weak points of our enemies" and have sufficient cannon fodder -- i.e., suicide operation volunteers -- "ready to strike at these sensitive locations." Iranian television recently broadcast an animated film for Iranian children glorifying suicide bombers.

So far, Supreme Leader and chief of state Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, who sits in the holy city of Qom, has not expostulated. Ahmadinejad appears to have his religious rear well covered. His ideological mentor and spiritual guide is Ayatollah Mesbah Yazdi who heads the ultra-conservative acolytes who believe the return of the 12th imam is "imminent."

The son of a blacksmith, Ahmadinejad earned a doctoral degree in engineering and is a former member of Iran's notorious Revolutionary Guards at a time when dissidents and "counter-revolutionaries" were being executed by the thousands. Dr. A.Q. Khan, the father of Pakistan's nuclear arsenal, first showed Iran how to build a nuclear weapon 18 years ago. Khan also opened his nuclear black market to Iranian engineers and scientists.

The Bush administration is anxious to clear the decks in a democratic Iraq before facing the Islamist counterpart of the "Rapture" in the "Left Behind" series of books on the end of times by Tim LaHaye and Jerry B. Jenkins.

President Bush says all options are on the table. But the military option is probably the one the "twelvers" would look forward to. Some think tank strategic thinkers in Washington argue if Iran's Dr. Strangelove attacked Israel with a nuclear weapon, five Iranian cities would be vaporized next day.

It might behoove the United States to sit down with "axis of evil" Iran to find out if the MAD (Mutually Assured Destruction) doctrine that kept the USSR and the United States at peace for half a century could still be made to work.

In any event, one would have to be irredeemably myopic not to see that Iran has an active nuclear weapons program. The only question is how far this secret program is from delivering a useable weapon and then fitting it in the nose cone of a Shahab-3 missile with the range to reach Israel. The Israeli air force will be "overhead" Iran long before that.