

True believers dial messiah hotline in Iran



Energized by president's beliefs, Islamic end-of-timers, waiting for the return of the Mahdi, redouble their outreach. How? By the creation of a hotline, in which people can ask questions, via phone or post, about what the current forecasts are about the Mahdi's return.

Have a quick question about when the Mahdi is coming to save mankind, according to Shiite Muslim adherents? Need to know the signs? Just call the new messiah "hotline." Or log on to Bright Future News Agency to get the latest religious readout - all part of the effort by freshly rejuvenated true believers in Iran to spread their message of the imminent return of the Mahdi, the 12th Imam who is expected to return to impose justice and spread peace.

"People are anxious to know when and how will He rise; what they must do to receive this worldwide salvation," says Ali Lari, a cleric at the Bright Future Institute in Iran's religious center of Qom. "The timing is not clear, but the conditions are more specific," he adds. "There is a saying: 'When the students are ready, the teacher will come.'"

Paving the way is a renewed commitment to "Mahdaviat" beliefs by President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, who lives so modestly that declared assets include only a 30-year-old car, an even older house, and an empty bank account. These ideologues see the creation of the Islamic Republic in 1979 and efforts to rekindle its revolutionary ideals, as critical to paving the way for the Mahdi's

return. They say that return - which they believe will happen soon - will prompt a global battle between good and evil, followed by an era of peace.

The Bright Future Institute is preparing the ground, a leaflet explains, by developing the "true culture" of waiting for the Mahdi, "reject[ing] wrong ideas and preparing scientific answers to respond [to] superstitions," while working to "accomplish an ideal society which Imam Mahdi wants."



While he waits, Morteza Rabaninejad sits at a new computer with a new telephone and a new headset, answering five calls and 10 letters a day. "Would you please explain all the signs of rising?" writes one correspondent. "What are the things we must do to make the Mahdi rise earlier than he is supposed to?"

Started in 2004, the institute is the eighth of its kind in Iran to study and even speed the Mahdi's return. But it is the largest and most influential, with 160 staff, a growing reach in local schools, children's and teen magazines, and unlimited ambition to spread the word.

The blend of modern technology and ancient prophecy echoes efforts of US evangelicals who use 45 categories - from liberalism to natural disasters - to predict the "end time," when holy people will experience "rapture" and go to heaven. For them, the ["Rapture Index"](#) is at 151; anything higher than 145 means "Fasten your seatbelts," because of what they deem a high level of prophetic activity.

In Iran, theologians say end-of-times beliefs appeal to one-fifth of Iranians. Jamkaran mosque, east of Qom and 60 miles south of Tehran, is where the link between devotees and the Mahdi is closest.

Mr. Ahmadinejad's cabinet has given \$17 million to Jamkaran. Staff at the Bright Future Institute downplay his interest, arguing the amount is just \$2-3 million, and that their effort is privately

funded. They claim that former President Mohammad Khatami also spent "a lot" on Jamkaran. But the new political impetus in Tehran has invigorated efforts here. "Mahdaviat is a code for the revolution, and is the spirit of the revolution," says cleric Masoud Poursayed-Aghaie, head of the institute. "It's the code of our identity, [and] I think this belief has been increasing. The Imam is the connection between the people and God. When a person is waiting for a pure and proper person, then he himself should be pure and proper, [so] he will be positive toward the future and will be released from the disappointments of life."

Critics in Iran and outside dismiss end-of-timers as unscientific, traditional followers of myths. To counter those critics, the institute's news agency, online at www.bfnews.ir, began churning out reports three months ago.

"There is a gap between us and the popular media," says editor-in-chief Sayed Ali Pourtabatabaie. "We started the idea of a messiah news agency of the Mahdi [because] we thought we needed a news agency to publish His news. We think the world is a place for peace, not war," says Mr. Pourtabatabaie, who says he campaigned for Khatami in 2001 and did graduate work in human rights. "We visited [Ahmadinejad], and I asked him about nuclear weapons. He laughed, and said: 'Does our religion allow it?' Imam Mahdi does not like nuclear weapons."



Still, Shiite writings describe events surrounding the return in apocalyptic terms, similar to those used in Revelations, which some Christian evangelicals believe predicts a final world war during which Jesus returns to win and reign for 1,000 years.

In one script, forces of evil would come from Syria and Iraq and clash with forces of good from Iran. The battle would commence at Kufa - the Iraqi town near the holy city of Najaf (and home to

the anti-US Iraqi cleric, Moqtada al-Sadr). The evil commander named Sofiani and the anti-Mahdi known as Dajol (comparable to the Christian antichrist), would both be killed. The forces of good would be led by a "man from Khorasan" - a province in northeast Iran. The Mahdi would return at Mecca, and fight. His victory would bring a government of God for a period of "seven," according to one reading. Seven months, years, or millennia is not clear.

Another text details a conversation, in which the Muslim prophet Mohammad describes the Mahdi as "God's ultimate thing," and that God "will conquer the Easts and the Wests of the earth through Him, and He will be absent from his followers [as he is now, known as the "hidden" 12th imam] to such an extent, no one can confirm his existence except the believer whose heart has been tested for faith by the Almighty."

The hotline is there to keep us informed about "progress" and whether confirmation of his existence is about.