

The Project for the Research of Islamist Movements (PRISM) Herzliya, ISRAEL

[www.e-prism.org](http://www.e-prism.org)

**THE PROJECT FOR THE RESEARCH OF ISLAMIST MOVEMENTS (PRISM)**

**Global Research in International Affairs (GLORIA) Center**

## **Global Security in an Age of Religious Extremism**

**By Prof. Hussein Solomon<sup>1</sup>**

**August 2006**

*We have just enough religion to make us hate,  
But not enough to make us love one another*

**Jonathan Swift**

### **A world caught between hope and despair**

We live in a world fecund with both hope and despair. Images of hope are aplenty. From Ireland, comes the story of the Irish Republican Army (IRA) formally giving up its armed struggle. From the Gaza strip, we see Israel's evacuation of Jewish settlers from occupied Palestinian land; and from Kashmir we witness rapprochement and reconciliation overcoming the enmity and quest for vengeance of the past. At the same time there is despair; which emanates from the fact that religion, which brings meaning to one's life and preaches peace, love and generosity has morphed into something ugly and violent. In Japan, we have seen Aum Shinrikyo (the Supreme Truth) cult release sarin gas in Tokyo's subways. From India's Gujarat State, we saw Hindu fundamentalists kill hundreds of their fellow Muslim citizens. In northern Uganda, Joseph Kony and his Christian fundamentalist Lord's Resistance Army aim to overthrow the secular government of Yoweri Museveni and to replace it with a government observant of the biblical Ten Commandments. In the process, the commandment "Thou Shall Not Kill" has been violated thousands of times. From the United States, we see people motivated by strong Christian principles bombing abortion clinics or federal buildings as in the case of Timothy McVeigh – the infamous Oklahoma bomber. The world has also witnessed Jewish fundamentalism in the form of Yigal Amir's assassination of former Israeli Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin after he signed the Oslo Peace Accords. The rise of a violent Islamic fundamentalism was vividly illustrated by the tragic events of 9/11 in New York and Washington and by the atrocities committed more recently in Amman, Jordan.

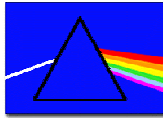
While the violent religious fundamentalism of these non-state actors constitute a grave threat to national, regional and international security – this article will focus rather on the threat posed by state-sanctioned religious fundamentalism. The underlying premise here is that when religious extremists capture state power, the threat posed to international security is infinitely worse than that posed by non-state actors given the control that they can now exercise over the resources of the state. Two cases illustrate the point well: the United States under George W. Bush and Iran under Mahmoud Ahmadinejad.

### **George W. Bush finds God**

In 1985 George W. Bush found God by way of a Bible study group and studied the scriptures intensely for the next two years. In the process he developed an ideology, which dovetailed neatly with the mentality of the conservative evangelicals in the US.

---

<sup>1</sup> Professor Hussein Solomon lectures in the Department of Political Sciences, University of Pretoria and is Director of the Centre for International Political Studies.



The Project for the Research of Islamist Movements (PRISM) Herzliya, ISRAEL

[www.e-prism.org](http://www.e-prism.org)

Later when he decided to run for public office, his political strategist Karl Rove drew the link between Bush's Christian beliefs and the evangelical sector.<sup>2</sup> This proved to be an immensely successful strategy given the evangelical voting bloc – one in three American Christians call themselves evangelical.<sup>3</sup> To put it another way, there are 80 million born-again Christians of voting age in the United States – George W. Bush is one of them<sup>4</sup> As he prepared for elections first as Governor and later for the presidency, whilst others candidates spoke about their political platform, Bush spoke about his faith. Thus when a reporter asked him who his favourite philosopher was, Bush replied: “*Christ, because he changed my heart.*”<sup>5</sup> Using religion to get elected, however, was one thing; acting on those strong Christian beliefs as president is quite another. Yet this is exactly what the Christian right sought to achieve – after all, their man occupied the White House. Their efforts ranged across the social spectrum from the issue of euthanasia to same sex marriage to the teaching of intelligent design (another term for creationism) as opposed to evolution in school textbooks.

However, it is perhaps in the realm of foreign policy that the religious views of George Bush hold the greatest menace. For one thing, he subscribes to Manichaeism that divides reality into Absolute Good and Absolute Evil. Juan Stam<sup>6</sup> notes that the Christian Church rejected this as heretical many centuries ago. Yet, time and time again George W. Bush uses this rather simple dichotomy of good versus evil. The US and its allies are good and have been ‘called’ by God to serve as his instrument against the evildoers. On the other hand – the other side is described as the “Axis of Evil”. Such a simplistic dichotomy is extremely problematic. First, does Iran and North Korea really have so much in common with one another that one lumps them together? Second, using phrases like “Axis of Evil” suggest that a regime, a country or a set of countries are merely evil but does not point to the level of factionalism occurring inside a country or how one might capitalise on it to serve one's own national interest. To sum up then “Axis of Evil” is a primitive and simple term for a complex world that is characterised less by black and white and more by shades of grey.

Beyond the terminology however there are even more serious problems with George W. Bush occupying the Oval Office and this relates to the idea that God speaks to him. Arnon Regular<sup>7</sup> writing in Israel's Haaretz newspaper reported that when George Bush met with then Palestinian Prime Minister Abbas in Aqaba he said: “*God told me to strike at Al-Qaeda and I struck them and then He instructed me to strike at Saddam, which I did, and now I am determined to solve the problem in the Middle East*”. Such statements do irreparable harm to US policy in the Middle East. How does one promote secular

---

<sup>2</sup> Juan Stam. *Bush's Religious Language*. The Nation, 22 December 2003.

<http://www.thenation.com/doc/20031222/stam>. Date Accessed: 19 December 2005.

<sup>3</sup> Tom Carver. *Bush puts God on his side*. BBC News, 19 December 2005.

[http://newsvote.bbc.co.uk/mpapps/page...ews.bbc.co.uk/2hi/americas/2921345.htm](http://newsvote.bbc.co.uk/mpapps/page?...ews.bbc.co.uk/2hi/americas/2921345.htm)

<sup>4</sup> Barbara Victor (2005). The Last Crusade: Religion and the Politics of Misdirection. Constable and Robinson Ltd. London.

<sup>5</sup> Stam, *op.cit.*

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 2.

<sup>7</sup> Arnon Regular. ‘*Road Map is a life saver for us, PM Abbas tell Hamas*’, Haaretz.com, 26 June 2003. Date Accessed: 12 December 2005.



The Project for the Research of Islamist Movements (PRISM) Herzliya, ISRAEL  
[www.e-prism.org](http://www.e-prism.org)

democracies in the Middle East when the President of the United States is himself undermining the First Amendment as it relates to the separation of Church and State?

Meanwhile Ira Chernus<sup>8</sup> raised other objections against such a statement: *“If he truly believes that he hears the voice of God, there is no telling what God might say tomorrow. This is a man who can launch the world’s biggest arsenal of weapons of mass destruction – biological, chemical, and nuclear at any moment.... When the President let’s God tell him what to do, it violates the spirit of democracy. In a democracy, it is the people, not God who make the decisions. The president is supposed to represent the will of the people. Yes, he must seek the best advice he can get and use his own best judgement. That means relying on facts, intelligent analysis, and rational thought – not divine inspiration. Once the President lets God’s voice replace the human mind, we are back in the Middle Ages, back in the very situation our revolution was supposed to get us out of.”*

Professor Ira Chernus’ perspective was echoed almost fifty years previously by that formidable First Lady, Eleanor Roosevelt: *“Anyone who knows history, particularly the history of Europe, will, I think, recognize that the domination of education or of government by any one particular religious faith is never a good arrangement for the people”*<sup>9</sup>

Throughout the Afghan and Iraqi wars, President Bush did not shy away from identifying God with his own project. Thus when he appeared in his flight suit on the aircraft carrier Abraham Lincoln, he said to U.S. troops: *“And wherever you go, you carry a message of hope – a message that is ancient and ever new. In the words of the prophet Isaiah, ‘To the captives, come out! To those who are in darkness, be free!’”*<sup>10</sup> It should be noted that Bush’s use of God and the Bible is unprecedented in U.S. political history and stands in sharp contrast to, for instance, President Abraham Lincoln. During the American Civil War, Lincoln did not claim that God was on his side. Indeed in his famous second inaugural address, he said that the war was a curse on both armies.<sup>11</sup>

### **Mahmoud Ahmadinejad and the Mahdi**

June 2005 witnessed the election of Mahmoud Ahmadinejad as President of the Islamic Republic of Iran. Amongst the people voting for him some cited his anti-corruption stance, others his desire to better the lot of the common Iranian man and woman, and still others his piety. Few could have guessed where this piety was to lead him and Iran as soon as he assumed the presidency. For one thing, the delicate balance between conservatives and reformists that the regime sought to preserve has been destroyed with Ahmadinejad’s election. Before the June elections, Iran’s supreme leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, stated that: *“...the existence of two factions [conservative and reformist] serves the regime, like the two wings of a bird.”*<sup>12</sup> But Ahmadinejad has been removing reformists as well as those conservatives allied to his political rivals from positions of

---

<sup>8</sup> Ira Cherus. *Did Bush Say God Told Him to Go to War?* Common Dreams News Center. 30 June 2003. [www.commondreams.org](http://www.commondreams.org). Date Accessed: 20 December 2005.

<sup>9</sup> Quoted in Victor, *op.cit.*, p. 257.

<sup>10</sup> Stam, *op.cit.*

<sup>11</sup> Carver, *op.cit.*

<sup>12</sup> Richard Ernsberger Jr. *Religion vs Reality*. Newsweek International Edition. 12 December 2005.



The Project for the Research of Islamist Movements (PRISM) Herzliya, ISRAEL

[www.e-prism.org](http://www.e-prism.org)

power and has been replacing them with incompetent cronies who share his ideological vision. The political establishment in Tehran is bound to experience further shocks following the announcement by Ahmadinejad's spiritual advisor, the extremist Ayatollah Mohammed Taqi Mesbah-Yazdi, that "...with a true Islamic government at hand, Iran has no need for future elections."<sup>13</sup> The delicate balance that Ayatollah Khamenei has sought to preserve has been utterly destroyed.

At this point it might be useful to ask what this pious ideological vision that Ahmadinejad subscribes to is. Much of his vision relates to his devotion to the 12<sup>th</sup> Imam, also known as the Mahdi who vanished in 941. According to Shiite Muslims this Imam will return at the end of time to lead an era of Islamic justice.<sup>14</sup> The fact that Ahmadinejad fervently believes in this should not be viewed as a problem. The fact that President Ahmadinejad is prepared to act out on this belief as Iranian President should be cause for alarm. As mayor of Tehran, Ahmadinejad refurbished a major boulevard on the grounds that the Mahdi was to travel along it upon his return.<sup>15</sup> Similarly, soon after winning the presidency, Ahmadinejad allocated the equivalent of 12 million British pounds of government funds to enlarge the shrine and mosque of the Mahdi.<sup>16</sup> Diverting public funds in this manner, from pressing social needs towards the "imminent" return of an Imam who has not made his appearance in eleven centuries, borders on either the criminal or the insane.

However, it is not only at the level of social expenditure that the Mahdi intrudes on Ahmadinejad's thoughts. Indeed, Ahmadinejad believes in reorienting the country's economic, cultural and political policies based on the Mahdi's return and judgement day.<sup>17</sup> Moreover, the urgency to reorient the country's policies emanates from Ahmadinejad's belief that the Hidden Imam will appear in two years.<sup>18</sup> How he knows that the Mahdi will appear in two years time is anyone's guess though some supporters of the Iranian President suggest that he must have heard it from the Mahdi himself. Ahmadinejad was also quite prepared to share his penetrating insights with the world when he addressed the United Nations in September calling for the reappearance of the Imam<sup>19</sup>.

Nevertheless, Ahmadinejad's address to the UN General Assembly was memorable for other reasons as well. When recounting his address to Ayatollah Javadi Amoli, one of Iran's leading clerics, Ahmadinejad stated that he felt that there was a light around him during his entire address at the podium "*during which time the world leaders did not blink. They were astonished as if a hand held them there and made them sit. It had opened their eyes and ears for the message of the Islamic Republic.*"<sup>20</sup> Some

---

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>14</sup> Golnaz Esfandiari. *Iran: President Says Light Surrounded him During UN Speech*. Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty, <http://www.rferl.org/featuresarticlepri.htm>. 29 November 2005. Date Accessed: 19 December 2005.

<sup>15</sup> Ernsberger, *op.cit.*, p. 1.

<sup>16</sup> Lindsey Hilsum. *Preparing Iran for Judgement Day*. New Statesman. 5 December 2005.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>18</sup> Esfandiari, *op.cit.*

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*



The Project for the Research of Islamist Movements (PRISM) Herzliya, ISRAEL

[www.e-prism.org](http://www.e-prism.org)

commentators have taken this mysticism of the Iranian President seriously and wonder if him saying these things serve a political purpose – transforming Ahmadinejad into the instrument of the Mahdi thereby placing him above political reproach. In that case, the comment by Ayatollah Mesbah-Yazdi on there not being a need for future elections does fit into this broader political strategy.

Ahmadinejad's strong belief in the imminent return of the Mahdi does hold grave foreign policy implications. The fact that the Mahdi will only return at the End Times – a period characterised by intense international turmoil, is in itself instructive and may help to explain Ahmadinejad's foreign policy. Some analysts commented on how unfazed he was following the tremendous international outcry after he stated that Israel should be wiped off the map. However, from his ideological position both his statement and the reaction to it only contributed to the intense international turmoil that is a necessary precondition for the reappearance of the Mahdi. In that sense any punitive measures embarked upon by the international community would, rather than prompting a moderation of Tehran's current bellicose foreign policy, prompt the hawks around Ahmadinejad to congratulate themselves on a job well done. Moreover, such punitive measures may also serve to push moderates in Iran into the camp of Ahmadinejad, not because they share his ideology, but in order to provide a united front in defence of the national interest.

### **The response**

So how does one defeat the religious fundamentalists occupying high office? The first thing to realise is that, whilst both Bush and Ahmadinejad need to be neutralised in that as presidents of their respective countries they have tremendous power in order to engage in their religious fantasies, we should not personalise the issue either. Both Bush and Ahmadinejad head up powerful constituencies who share the beliefs of their president. The Reverend Pat Robertson calling for the removal of Venezuelan President Hugo Chavez illustrates the point well. Thus the ideology of the movement that has brought them into high office needs to be delegitimised by their co-religionists. This is already happening in both the US and Iran.

In the US, clerics like Fritz Ritsch, Presbyterian minister in Bethesda, Maryland are deeply offended by Bush's simple dichotomy of good and evil and the characterisation that the US is on the side of angels. As he stated: "*It is by no means certain that we are as pure as the driven snow or that our international policy is so pure.*"<sup>21</sup> Indeed nearly all the mainstream Churches, including Bush's own United Methodists are opposed to the war in Iraq. Meanwhile, academics, journalists, and various civil society groupings in the US have started opposing various aspects of the agenda of the Christian right. Amongst the most prominent of these has been former US President Jimmy Carter. In his latest book entitled Our Endangered Values: America's Moral Crisis Carter, a devout Southern Baptist, raised serious concerns about the religious right's openly political agenda. He also argues that their open hostility to a range of sinners from homosexuals to the federal judiciary run counter to America's democratic freedom. Finally he calls for a clear separation of Church and State<sup>22</sup>.

---

<sup>21</sup> Carver, *op. cit.*

<sup>22</sup> Jimmy Carter (2005). Our Endangered Values: America's Moral Crisis. Simon and Shuster. New York.



The Project for the Research of Islamist Movements (PRISM) Herzliya, ISRAEL

[www.e-prism.org](http://www.e-prism.org)

In Iran, too, the religious, academic and political establishment have taken on Ahmadinejad in a dramatic way. Akbar Alami, an Iranian legislator, has questioned the President's claims of being surrounded by an aura of light, noting that not even Islam's holiest figures have made such claims.<sup>23</sup> Ayatollah Mohammed Ali Abtahi, a former vice president, expressed his concern with the use of religious slogans and Ayatollah Yusuf Saanei urged: "*We should rule the country according to Islamic law, but we should not use religious ideas in politics. Even Ayatollah Khomeini did not believe we should do this.*"<sup>24</sup> Professor Hamid Reza Jalaipour at Tehran University also casts doubt on the broader politico-religious project of the President: "*The question is, can his reliance on Imam Mahdi be turned into a political ideology? I don't think so. Even the leading theologians in Qum do not take these allusions seriously.*"<sup>25</sup>

The second aspect of a response relates to neutralising the incumbent politically. In the US, this process is well advanced and George W. Bush has been transformed into a lame-duck president. What is interesting is that Republicans have also turned against their president as they vote with the Democrats. From Plamegate and Scooter Libby to the spiralling deficit, to the war in Iraq, and to the issue of illegal wiretaps, the Bush Administration is under extreme pressure. In recent weeks, the Administration suffered two humiliating setbacks. The first relates to it accepting the anti-torture amendment proposed by Republican Senator John McCain after initially making clear its objection to it. This underscores the weakness of the Bush Administration at this moment. Second, Bush and his follow hawks had to fight tooth and nail to get the Patriot Act renewed. In the process major concessions were made on the part of the Administration.

In Iran, too, the process of vigorously neutralising President Ahmadinejad has begun. Inside the country, Ahmadinejad has been criticised for his seeming lack of tact and his confrontational style.<sup>26</sup> For instance, shortly after Ahmadinejad's statement that Israel should be wiped off the map, Ali Akbar Rafsanjani, a former Iranian President and currently a major ally of Ayatollah Khamenei, stated at Friday prayers in Tehran: "*We have no problems with the Jews and highly respect Judaism as a holy religion.*"<sup>27</sup> Those opposed to Ahmadinejad's bellicose foreign policy have also established discreet back-channel contacts with the Americans over Iran's nuclear programme.<sup>28</sup>

The Iranian Parliament has also moved to politically neutralise Ahmadinejad in two ways, firstly, by undermining his populist political programme. In this regard it has already dismantled the centrepiece of Ahmadinejad's populist programme – the Imam Reza Care Fund that sought to provide interest-free loans for young people to marry as well as various employment programmes.<sup>29</sup> Second, parliament has sought to weaken the President and strengthen the hand of Ayatollah Khamenei. For instance, the Speaker of Parliament, Gholamali Haddad-Adel urged support for the concept of *Velayat-e-Faqih* (leadership of the supreme jurisprudent), introduced by Ayatollah Khomeini. However

---

<sup>23</sup> Esfandiari, *op.cit.*

<sup>24</sup> Hilsun, *op.cit.*

<sup>25</sup> Ernsberger, *op.cit.*

<sup>26</sup> Esfandiari, *op.cit.*

<sup>27</sup> Ed Blanche. *Tempering tantrums in Tehran. The Middle East*. December 2005. Issue 362, p. 9.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 8.

<sup>29</sup> Ernsberger, *op.cit.*



The Project for the Research of Islamist Movements (PRISM) Herzliya, ISRAEL

[www.e-prism.org](http://www.e-prism.org)

Ayatollah Khamenei is also taking active measures to weaken Ahmadinejad. Recently he gave the Expediency Council, a 32-member non-elected political arbitration body sweeping new powers to supervise parliament, the judiciary and the executive. This body is headed up by Rafsanjani. More ominously for Ahmadinejad, the Expediency Council's secretary, Mohsen Razaie, announced: "*The adjudication of the Expediency Council is the final word. And even if other state actors do not agree with it, it is still the final word and they have to accept that.*"<sup>30</sup> Here it is interesting to note that Razaie used to be the commander of the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC). This has led some commentators to believe that the senior echelons of the Revolutionary Guards may still be loyal to Ayatollah Khamenei as opposed to Ahmadinejad.

The third response has been to capitalise on the failure of the incumbent, thereby neutralising him further. Iraq has been such a failure for the Bush Administration. According to US statistics, 2,071 US soldiers have lost their lives and 16,000 others were wounded. Moreover, 39 percent of soldiers returning from Iraq are suffering from psychological trauma. In addition to the human costs, the Iraq and Afghanistan wars have already cost the American taxpayer \$300 billion.<sup>31</sup> Seen in the light of the US budget deficit, these economic costs are staggering. Opponents of the Bush Administration – Republican and Democrat – have been quick to attack and they have pressed Bush for a timetable for the withdrawal of US troops from Iraq. The senior military echelons have also voiced their concern on the sustainability of current troop levels in Iraq vis-à-vis securing other US interests. Failure in Iraq has certainly tempered the messianic zeal of Bush's foreign policy hawks. Thus their approach to the nuclear programme of Tehran and the already nuclear-armed Pyongyang regime has been radically different to that of Baghdad under Saddam Hussein when they refused to give Hans Blix and his nuclear weapons inspectors more time.

Whilst it is still early days for the Ahmadinejad administration, it is equally clear that a strategy of setting the incumbent up for failure that would then be used against him is being pursued. Consider the way the Iranian parliament has been dismantling aspects of Ahmadinejad's populist programme as described above. Whilst Ayatollah Khamenei's supporters may hope that this might undermine Ahmadinejad in the eyes of his supporters in that he will be unable to make good on his promises, it is equally clear that such a strategy is a high risk one. Ahmadinejad might well fail in his social programme and this might well anger his support base. However Ahmadinejad could also direct this popular anger towards parliament, towards Ayatollah Khamenei and Rafsanjani. In the process, he could become stronger.

We also need to realise that Ahmadinejad is not simply passively allowing these machinations against him to take place. He has also gone on the offensive against his political rivals. For instance, he has recently purged the upper echelons of Iran's diplomatic corps. According to some reports, these may number as many as 40 of Iran's senior diplomats. These were inevitably allies of Rafsanjani or others who were appointed by the reformist Ayatollah Mohammed Khatami, Ahmadinejad's predecessor.

---

<sup>30</sup> Blanche, *op.cit.*, p.8.

<sup>31</sup> Palestine-info.co.uk. *Failure of American foreign policy and the diminishing imperial influence.* <http://www.mediareview.net.com>. 29 November 2005. Date Accessed: 20 December 2005.



The Project for the Research of Islamist Movements (PRISM) Herzliya, ISRAEL

[www.e-prism.org](http://www.e-prism.org)

Even more disconcerting is the fact that, amongst those purged were Iran's ambassadors to London, Paris, Geneva, Berlin and Kuala Lumpur. This has resulted in Ed Blanche<sup>32</sup> speculating on whether the purge of these particular diplomats was also an attempt on the part of Ahmadinejad to close the back-channel contacts existing between Tehran and Washington.

### **Conclusion**

As this titanic power struggle continues in Tehran, there are deeper questions that need to be posed in the short-to medium term. In the medium term, We do believe that the political power of the religious right-wing in the US will weaken as developments deteriorate in Iraq, Afghanistan and elsewhere, such as Latin America where we have seen the roll-back of American influence most dramatically in Evo Morales' Bolivia and Hugo Chavez' Venezuela. Indeed some pollsters are comparing George Bush's low popularity ratings with those of President Nixon at the time of the Watergate scandal. More importantly, the United States was established as a secular state and increasingly we see prominent individuals like President Carter as well as a plethora of civil society groups fighting back for the secular state promised in the US Constitution and the Bill of Rights. They seem to be winning the battle.

It is a very different situation in Iran. The 1979 Iranian revolution established a theocratic state that, in its current composition, cannot be secular. Nor, indeed can it be democratic. To understand, this we need to understand the fundamental split between Shiites and Sunnis in Islam. The democratic tradition is strong in Islam. Concepts such as freedom (*hurriyyah*), equality (*musawat*) and justice (*adl*) are all intrinsic to the Qur'an<sup>33</sup>. The fact that the first caliph after Prophet Muhammad's death in 632 C.E was elected by majority consensus by a council of various Muslim tribes is ample proof of the democratic credentials of Islam. But this very election of the first Caliph saw the split between Sunnis and Shiites. Shiites broke away from mainstream Muslims after the election of the first Caliph since they wanted Imam Ali who was the cousin and son-in-law of Prophet Muhammad to succeed as Caliph. The majority (Sunnis) did not vote for Ali on the basis of his youth and inexperience<sup>34</sup>. Thus the very origins of Shi'ism as a political doctrine lay in its anti-democratic foundations.

These anti-democratic foundations have been built upon by Ayatollah Khomeini, the founder of the Islamic Republic in 1979 when he established such concepts as the *Velayat-e-Faqih* or Leadership of the Supreme Jurisprudent. This concept has more in common with Plato's Philosopher-King and the Divine Right of Kings in the Middle Ages than with Islamic political thought and serves no other purpose than to consolidate the power of the ruling mullahs over a hapless population. It is important to understand this structure of the Iranian state in order to understand the limitation of reform of the state itself. This limitation was patently obvious during the presidency of Ahmadinejad's predecessor, Ayatollah Khatami. Despite him stressing moderation and a dialogue of

---

<sup>32</sup> Blanche, *op.cit.*, p. 9.

<sup>33</sup> Lubna Nadvi (2005). "Islam and Politics in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century," in Hussein Solomon and Firoza Butler (eds). Islam in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century: Perspectives and Challenges. Centre for International Political Studies, University of Pretoria. Pretoria, p. 75.

<sup>34</sup> Nadvi, *op.cit.* p. 71.



The Project for the Research of Islamist Movements (PRISM) Herzliya, ISRAEL

[www.e-prism.org](http://www.e-prism.org)

civilizations as opposed to clash of civilizations, the reform movement foundered on the bedrock of a totalitarian theocratic state. One should also bear in mind that even without Ahmadinejad, the Iranian state will continue to be a source of insecurity to its own people as well as to the region – notice here Tehran’s support for Hamas and Hezbollah.

In the short-term the most troubling aspect relates to Iran’s nuclear programme. Whilst the Iranian regime stresses that their nuclear programme is for civilian purposes, as Mohammed El-Khawas<sup>35</sup> notes the problem is that much of the technology used for civilian power generation could also be used for weapons as well. However the problem goes beyond merely dual use technology in that the Iranian government did conceal its nuclear programme for eighteen years. It should be noted here that failure to notify the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) is a clear breach of Iran’s nuclear obligations under the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT). Iran also failed to disclose to the IAEA **all** its uranium enrichment facilities. Other worrying indicators that Tehran may not be interested in nuclear energy for purely civilian purposes are the fact that “...IAEA inspectors discovered traces of highly enriched uranium far above the levels needed for civilian use”<sup>36</sup>. Moreover, El-Khawas<sup>37</sup> also notes that Iran is building the infrastructure for nuclear weapons production like the heavy-water reactor at Arak that can produce plutonium.

Still another reason to hold a somewhat sceptical stance towards the Iranian regime lies in the cat-and-mouse game it has been playing with the IAEA. In November 2004, for instance, Tehran agreed in Paris to freeze its entire uranium enrichment programme until a long-term agreement was reached. Some weeks later, however, when UN inspectors tried to confirm Iran’s compliance with the suspension, they were not permitted to put UN seals on some enrichment equipment at Natanz<sup>38</sup>. These developments clearly do not inspire confidence in the regime. In the final instance, the international community cannot allow President Ahmadinejad’s bellicose regime to possess nuclear weapons. More so, the international community cannot allow a man who believes in the return of the Mahdi and with him the End Times in two years time. The international community cannot allow a man who believes that a halo of light surrounds him to have his finger on a nuclear button.

---

<sup>35</sup> Mohammed A. El-Khawas (2005). “Iran’s Nuclear Controversy: Prospects for a Diplomatic Solution,” Mediterranean Quarterly: A Journal of Global Issues, Vol. 16, No. 4, Fall 2005, p. 20.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 27.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 27.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 30.