

of Persia, which established a Tobacco Régie -- monopoly -- that forced all the producers and owners of tobacco to sell their goods to its agents. Given that the Persian tobacco industry then employed over 200,000 people, the concession was a terrible blow to the farmers as well as the bazaaris whose livelihoods were largely dependent on the lucrative business.

Protests that erupted in spring 1891 began what is known as the Tobacco Movement. To quell the protests, Naser al-din Shah ordered Sayyed Ali Akbar, a prominent cleric in Shiraz and a fierce opponent of the concession, to be exiled to what is now Iraq in May 1891. Before his departure from Iran, Akbar met with the progressive Muslim activist Sayyed Jamal al-din Asadabadi, also known as Afghani (1838-1897). At Akbar's urging, Asadabadi wrote a letter to the leading Shia cleric of the era, Mirza Hasan Shirazi, asking him to "save and defend [the] country" from Naser al-din Shah, "this criminal who has offered the provinces of the land of Persia to auction amongst the Great Powers." Shirazi issued his fatwa against the concession in December 1891, banning consumption of tobacco. Propelled by the fatwa, a nationwide boycott began. Eventually, Naser al-din Shah was forced to cancel the concession in early January 1892, and Shirazi annulled his fatwa on January 26.

During the Constitutional Revolution (1905-1911), the clerics played important roles, both in the constitutionalist and anti-constitutionalist camps. Such notable figures as Mohammad Kazem Khorasani (1839-1911), a major Marja' (source of emulation), Sayyed Jamal al-Din "Vaez" (preacher) Esafahani (1862-1908), Sayyed Abdollah Behbahani (1840-1910), Mirza Sayyed Mohammad Tabatabai (1842-1920), and Mirza Hossein Naini were supporters of the Revolution, while other notable clerical figures, such as Sheikh Fazlullah Nuri, Mohammad Kazem Yazdi, and Mirza Abutaleb Zanjani were opposed to the Constitutional Movement. It was Khorasani who declared Nuri a non-Muslim, which led to Nuri's execution.

On February 21, 1921, Sayyed Zia'eddin Tabatabai -- who had a reputation as an agent of the British empire -- and a little known Cossack officer, Reza Khan, staged a British-supported coup and took control of the government. Less than three years later, on October 26, 1923, the last monarch of the Qajar Dynasty, Ahmad Shah, went into exile in Europe, and Reza Khan -- by then known as Reza Khan Sardar Sepah -- took complete control of the nation. He and his supporters sought to emulate Mustafa Kemal Atatürk, the founder of modern Turkey, and transform the political system into a republic. But, here too, the clerics intervened to prevent the change. They included Sayyed Hassan Modarres (1870-1937), a progressive cleric and founder of the Hezb-e Eslaah-talab (Party of Reform) and Grand Ayatollah Sheikh Abdolkarim Ha'eri Yazdi (1859-1937), founding leader of the central Qom hawza (seminary). The latter was worried that if Iran became a republic, the constitutional article that declared Shiism the nation's official religion would be eliminated. Thus, Reza Khan founded the Pahlavi Dynasty and appointed himself its first king. Ironically, Modarres was eventually murdered on the order of Reza Shah. For interesting insights into Modarres and his thinking, see this article by Ali Afshari.

The role of the clerics in Iranian politics since the 1940s is well-documented

and needs no more than the briefest overview here. During the events that led to the CIA-MI6 coup of August 1953, which overthrew the democratically elected government of Prime Minister Dr. Mohammad Mosaddegh, the clerics were divided into three groups, just like the rest of society. Some, such as Ayatollahs Reza Zanjani (1902-1984), Mohammad Hadi Milani (1895-1975), and Mahmoud Taleghani (1911-1979), supported Mosaddegh; some, such as Grand Ayatollah Mohammad Hossein Tabatabaei Boroujerdi (1875-1961), the most important Marja' of his time, were silent and reluctant to intervene in politics, while others, such as Ayatollah Abolghasem Kashani (1882-1962) -- though he had previously supported Mosaddegh -- opposed him. And, of course, led by the charismatic Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini, the clerics played key roles in the 1979 Revolution. Ever since the death of the ayatollah in 1989, the clerics have again been divided, with some -- almost entirely reactionary and right-wing -- supporting the rule of Ayatollah Sayyed Ali Khamenei, and others opposing him or remaining silent.

In early 1953, before the coup, a very different development occurred. A Shia group was established that was roundly opposed to clerical intervention in the political system. That group is now known as the Hojjatiyeh Association.

The Hojjatiyeh Association

Sheikh Mahmoud Zaker Zadeh Tavallaei (1900-1998), universally known as Sheikh Mahmoud Halabi, was a cleric from the religious city of Mashhad in northeast Iran. When a seminary student, he and a colleague, Sayyed Abbas Alawi, had been approached by a Bahá'í missionary who wanted to convert them to his religion. The Bahá'ís argue that their religion supersedes Islam, and in particular Shiism. To Halabi's great surprise and chagrin, Alawi actually converted and became a Bahá'í. There is another version of the tale: It is said that Halabi and Alawi were ordered by their teacher, Mirza Mehdi Esfahani, to study Bahá'í, but as their study progressed, Alawi converted to the new religion.

Either way, Alawi's conversion transformed Halabi into an anti-Bahá'í activist who wanted to do nothing but defend Shiism. He began studying and then attacking the Bahá'í faith as early as 1941. He tried to persuade the Qom seminary establishment to help him train a cadre of young clerics to counter what he considered to be the rising Bahá'í influence. After he was rebuffed by Qom, he embarked on founding his own organization.

Halabi supported the government of Mosaddegh and ran, unsuccessfully, for the 17th Majles (parliament) in 1951. In early 1953, he founded the Anjoman-e zed-e Bahaiyat (Anti-Bahá'í Association). Four years later, when a charter for his organization was drawn up, he changed its name to the Anjoman-e Kheyriyeh Hojjatiyeh Mahdaviyeh (Hojjatiyeh Mahdaviyeh Charity Association), also known as Anjoman-e Imam-e Zaman (Association of Imam Mahdi, the 12th Shia Imam who the faithful believe is hiding and will some day return) or Anjoman-e Hojjatiyeh (Hojjatiyeh Association), for short, to carry out the task. He supposedly had a dream in which Imam Mahdi encouraged him to found the association. At the same time, Halabi's defeat in the Majles elections and the fissures between Kashani and Mosaddegh, which contributed to the defeat of the

oil nationalization movement and the success of the CIA-MI6 coup, are said to have contributed to his disillusionment with politics.

While still living in Mashhad, Halabi had little success in recruiting members to his organization. Thus he moved to Tehran. His goal: To counter what he perceived as the Bahá'í influence and to help prepare the society for the return of the hidden Imam, Mahdi. He had decided that whatever had gone wrong politically and in society at large was due to the influence of Bahá'í and, therefore, he had to confront it. The nucleus of his group was formed in the Tehran bazaar among the middle class.

After the 1953 coup, Shah Mohammad Reza Pahlavi allowed Hojjatiyeh to continue its activities, in return for its support of his reign. A well-known association member was Mohammad Taqi Falsafi, a skilled orator who lived in the author's neighborhood in Tehran. Between 1948 and 1953, Falsafi had spoken fiercely against the Tudeh (Communist) Party. Recognizing his oratorical skills, the clerics decided to use him against the Bahá'ís. At the same time, the Shah wanted to appease the grand ayatollahs after the CIA-MI6 coup. Grand Ayatollah Boroujerdi consequently asked Falsafi to seek an audience with the Shah to discuss with him the issue of the Bahá'ís. In his memoir, *Khaateraati va Mobaarezaati-e Hojjatoleslam Falsafi* (Memories and Struggles of Hojjatoleslam Falsafi), Falsafi stated that the Shah granted him the audience. After Falsafi spoke to him about the Bahá'ís, the Shah gave him permission to preach against them in his sermons at Masjed-e Shah, the grand mosque by the Tehran bazaar.

The Shah also authorized in March-June 1955 an extensive program of collaboration between his government and the clerics during which the Bahá'í national temple in Tehran, called the Hasir Al-ghods, was destroyed and its properties confiscated. Tehran's military governor, General Taymour Bakhtiar, personally took an ax to the temple in May 1955. (Bakhtiar was assassinated in 1970 by the Shah's security apparatus in Baghdad, in the first act of state-sponsored terrorism by an Iranian government.) The state radio broadcast Falsafi's anti-Bahá'í sermons. And for a time, it was even illegal to be a Bahá'í, which was punishable by two to ten years of imprisonment. That was perhaps the first "success" of Hojjatiyeh.

According to documents kept at the Center for the Islamic Revolution Documents (code 5327, date 29 Bahman 1360 [February 18, 1982], number 13.59), in addition to Halabi himself, the original board of directors of Hojjatiyeh included Mohammad Salehi Azari, Sayyed Hossein Sajjadi, Mohammad Hossein Sajjadi, Mohammad Hossein Attar, Gholamhossein Haj Mohammad Taghi Bagher, Sayyed Reza Aale Rasoul, Dr. Abd Khodaei, and Dr. Mohammad Mehdi Poorgol, among others.

These documents also indicate that two of the most important Islamic high schools in Tehran, Alawi and Nikaan, were founded by Hojjatiyeh. Alawi High School, founded in 1956 and led by Sheikh Ali Asghar Allameh, in particular was the original education and training ground for several important figures after the Revolution, such as former Foreign Ministers Kamal Kharrazi and Ali Akbar

Velayati, distinguished Islamic scholar and philosopher Dr. Abdolkarim Soroush, former Majles Speaker Gholamali Haddad Adel, former Iran Ambassador to the United Nations Mohammad Hadi Nejad-Hosseini, former Minister of Economy Mohammad Taghi Banki, and even Mehdi Abrishamchi, a leading figure in the present Mojahedin-e Khalgh Organization.

After the uprising of June 1963 against the Shah -- led by Ayatollah Khomeini and resulting in his exile, first to Turkey and then Iraq -- Falsafi openly spoke out against the dictator. He was jailed and banned for a few years from public speaking. After he was allowed to make public addresses again in the late 1960s, on many religious occasions, such as the Day of Ashura, my father took me to the gatherings where Falsafi was to speak. He appreciated Falsafi's superb ability to stir religious emotions, even though he did not agree with most of his religious pronouncements. He probably did this to strengthen my religious beliefs.

Halabi also persuaded Grand Ayatollah Boroujerdi to issue a fatwa that banned any transaction with the Bahá'ís. For nearly two decades, the association trained and educated loyal supporters to spread its philosophy. By the early, 1970s Hojjatiyeh was active not only all over Iran, but also in neighboring countries. At least two of my own high school classmates and childhood friends were active members of the association. Hojjatiyeh tried to present a modern image of itself. It was perhaps the first Islamic group in Iran that used chairs and tables in its regular meetings and sermons, rather than having its members sit on rugs in the traditional fashion. Members always looked very modern -- clean shaven and wearing sharp-looking suits. Many young Islamic students who emerged during the first few years after the 1979 Revolution were influenced by Hojjatiyeh.

Hojjatiyeh members looked to Grand Ayatollah Sayyed Mohsen Tabatabaei Hakim (1889-1970) as their Marja'. After he passed away, it was Grand Ayatollah Sayyed Abolghasem Khomeini (1899-1992) who became the group's source of emulation. Both grand ayatollahs lived in Najaf, Iraq, and both were opposed to the involvement of clerics in politics. By then, Khomeini, who was also living in Najaf, was also a major Marja'. Unhappy with Hojjatiyeh's turn to Khomeini, he ordered his followers not to provide financial help to the group.

Recognizing its widespread activities and the fact that the association was not interested in politics, SAVAK tried to use Hojjatiyeh in its clandestine political activities. Since the Shah no longer felt that he needed to appease the clerics, and at the same time there were at least a few Bahá'ís in important governmental positions, SAVAK encouraged Hojjatiyeh to become involved in another task considered urgent by the Shah -- countering the spread and influence of communism. Thus, the Hojjatiyeh was very active in anti-communist propaganda during the 1970s. At the same time, its rank and file penetrated the government, the universities, and even the armed forces. Apparently, the association's members and supporters even secretly penetrated the Bahá'í community, with the hope that they would convert some of its adherents back to Islam and Shiism.

Hojjatiyeh preached that a true Islamic government can be set up only when Imam Mahdi returns, because the Islamic ruler must be completely innocent, and only the Imam qualifies. In addition, association members believe that the return will happen only when the Islamic world is in chaos and sin prevails. Some have interpreted this belief as implying that the group's members believe that people should be allowed to sin in order to prepare society for the return of Mahdi. This has been disputed by others, who hold that Hojjatiyeh believes only that people should be preached to about the return of Imam Mahdi and the conditions for his return. I will come back to this shortly. Most importantly, an article of the association's charter stated,

The Association will not intervene in the political process, and does not take any responsibility for the political activities of those who do so in its name.

The basis of the Hojjatiyeh position regarding the Islamic government is the group's interpretation of Islam and Shiism. In Shiism, Islamic teachings are divided into two major groups, ahkam-e avaliyeh (primary teachings) and ahkam-e sanaviyeh (secondary teachings). The former are those that cannot be changed under any circumstance unless by an Imam. The latter can be modified depending on the needs of a given time. The Hojjatiyeh view is that formation of an Islamic government belongs to the ahkam-e avaliyeh and, therefore, must be done only by a sinless person -- that is, Imam Mahdi -- whereas Velaayat-e Faghih is considered part of ahkam-e sanaviyeh and, hence can be changed or set aside.

Because of its policy of not intervening in politics, Hojjatiyeh did not initially support the 1979 Revolution. In fact, it even appeared to oppose the uprising. In the summer of 1978, on the anniversary of the birth of Imam Mahdi, Khomeini and his supporters called on the population not to celebrate the occasion -- the Shah had encouraged extensive celebrations to shore up his religious credentials after the anti-government demonstrations by the ayatollah's supporters earlier that year. Hojjatiyeh supported the Shah implicitly by encouraging its members to help celebrate the occasion. That angered the ayatollah and the revolutionaries around him.

As the Revolution gathered steam in 1978, the very fact that it was being led by a deeply political and militant cleric, Khomeini, was shocking to Hojjatiyeh members. But when the Revolution toppled the Shah in February 1979, Halabi tried to maneuver his association into prominence, counting on its religious credentials. The group's charter was modified to reflect Hojjatiyeh's support for the Revolution, and Halabi approached Khomeini to offer help.

The day after the Shah's security forces killed dozens of demonstrators in Tehran on Friday, September 8, 1978 (known in Iran as Black Friday), Halabi is said to have told his followers, "I am convinced that what is going on is not led by leftists and communists. Therefore, we must also participate in what is going on." Ironically, when Khomeini returned to Iran in February 1979, he stayed at Refah and Alawi High Schools, both of which belonged to Hojjatiyeh.

But the animosity between the two sides lingered.

Former Interior Minister Ali Akbar Mohtashami-Pour, a close aide to Khomeini, has been quoted as saying, "Right after the Revolution, the Hojjatiyeh Association sent a message to the Imam [Khomeini] saying that 'we have many young educated members that can help run the country.' He responded that we do not need your youth. The young people who revolted can also run the country."

The animosity between Hojjatiyeh and Khomeini and his supporters had its roots in their distinct views of Islam and Shiism. Whereas the ayatollah preached a completely political Islam and (after the 1979 Revolution) the doctrine of Velaayat-e Faghih (guardianship of the Islamic jurist, as represented by the Supreme Leader), Hojjatiyeh preached nonintervention in politics and believed that Velaayat-e Faghih can be set up only when Imam Mahdi returns. For all practical purposes, Hojjatiyeh rejected Velaayat-e Faghih. In addition, after the Revolution, when the secret SAVAK archives were opened, many documents were found that indicated there was extensive cooperation between the dreaded security apparatus and the association, at the same time that the ayatollah was in exile and many of his former students and clerical supporters were in jail. Moreover, Halabi is said to have been a pacifist and rejected revolutionary violence.

There was another source of friction between Hojjatiyeh and Khomeini. The association was fiercely opposed to leftists and communists. But Mir Hossein Mousavi, known in the 1980s as the "Imam's Prime Minister" and strongly supported by the ayatollah, had leftist-populist tendencies. At the same time, "anti-imperialism" was the dominant idea of the day and considered a leftist idea. This was not to the linking of Hojjatiyeh, whose roots were in the bazaar and the middle class. Its supporters were thus some of the most important elements of the opposition to Mousavi in that era. Hojjatiyeh also targeted the Tudeh Party, whose members it called "agents of the Soviet Union." In response, the Tudeh Party referred to Hojjatiyeh as "agents of Britain and United States."

After Khomeini rejected Halabi's reconciliatory gestures, his supporters began criticizing the association. At the same time, however, many figures within the government were reputed to be secret members of the group. For example, Ali Akbar Parvaresh, a former minister of education, deputy Majles speaker, and member of the right-wing Islamic Coalition Party, who has been implicated in the explosion of the Jewish center in Argentina in 1994, is believed to be a member. Other reputed members include Ayatollah Abolqasem Khazali, a reactionary former member of the Guardian Council, and Ayatollah Ahmad Azari Qomi (1925-1999), the country's prosecutor general in the 1980s. The claim in Azari Qomi's case is bolstered by the fact that he questioned the system of Velaayat-e Faghih. After Khomeini was appointed Supreme Leader, Azari Qomi questioned his qualifications in an open letter in 1997. He was subsequently put under house arrest until he passed away.

On July 12, 1983, Khomeini declared,

Those who believe that we should allow sins to increase until the 12th Imam

reappears should modify and reconsider their position.... The Imam will return to eliminate sin, but we should sin so that he will return? Set aside such wrong thinking. If you are Muslim and if you believe in your country, get rid of this factionalism and join the wave that is carrying the nation forward; otherwise, it will break you.

He also accused Hojjatiyeh of opportunism:

Those who had declared the struggle [against the Shah] as haraam [sinful], and had tried to break the call against the Shah for not celebrating 15 Sha'baan [anniversary of the birth of Imam Mahdi] have become more revolutionary than the revolutionaries.

Khomeini also warned that the Hojjatiyeh might take control of the Revolution, and if they did, "it may be too late" to reverse the action.

Halabi responded the same day by announcing the suspension of Hojjatiyeh and all of its activities, but he neither admitted that the group was the target of the ayatollah's wrath, nor did he dissolve it. Hojjatiyeh did concede that although it could not contact the ayatollah directly to ask him for an explanation, parties close to Khomeini had informed the group that it was indeed the target.

Despite this, after nearly three decades, it is still a matter of debate whether Khomeini truly ordered Hojjatiyeh to stop its activities. Khazali was for a while Khomeini's representative to the group. His son Dr. Mahdi Kazali, who has supported the Green Movement over the past year, has defended Hojjatiyeh and rejected the idea that Khomeini ordered its closing. He reacted strongly when Hossein Shariatmadari, the hardline managing editor of Kayhan, recently claimed, "The struggle of Hojjatiyeh against Bahá'í in the Shah's era was a deviation [from the Revolution], which is why Imam Khomeini ordered them to stop their activities." The younger Khazali responded, "There is no document indicating a confrontation between Ayatollah Khomeini and the Association and, in fact, the Association followed the Imam's path. The best evidence for this is that Hojjatiyeh had many martyrs during the Iran-Iraq War."

The fact that Hojjatiyeh had suspended its activities did not stop attacks on it, even long after both Khomeini and Halabi had passed away. On August 26, 2002, Ali Yunesi, minister of intelligence during most of the administration of President Mohammad Khatami, told a press conference that a group of people in Qom had been arrested on charges of supporting the association and trying to fuel religious unrest. Some Majles deputies also accused Hojjatiyeh of "exacerbating the Shia-Sunni conflict." Khatami's chief spokesman, Dr. Abdollah Ramazanzadeh, said on January 8, 2003, that Hojjatiyeh members who infiltrated the government would be dealt with in the same way as other citizens. On May 4, 2004, Rassoul Montajabnia, a leading member of the leftist Association of Combatant Clerics (ACC), said that members and supporters of Hojjatiyeh had stopped their fight against the Bahá'í faith and focused on creating divisions between Shia and Sunni Muslims.

But Ayatollah Khazali defended Hojjatiyeh exactly two weeks later, according to Aftab-e Yazd, the unofficial daily mouthpiece of the ACC. Kazali said that stories about Hojjatiyeh having renewed its activities were not true and, referring to the group's members, "I know them very well. They are not active. They would have been active, had they thought that it would be good for Islam. Therefore, it is a complete lie when they say they have become active again."

Despite what Khazali said, the fact is, after Khamenei was appointed Supreme Leader in 1989, Hojjatiyeh began a silent comeback. One reason was that both Halabi and Khamenei were born in Mashhad, and the latter was relatively familiar with Hojjatiyeh's activities. In a 1981 speech, Khamenei said, "I believe there are honest, devout, revolutionary members in Hojjatiyeh that believe in the Imam [Khomeini], Velaayat-e Faghih, and serving the nation and the Islamic Republic, just as there are also cynical, nonbelievers, and professional protestors among them. Thus, the association contains a broad spectrum of people." During Khamenei's presidency in the 1980s, he had a Hojjatiyeh member, Javad Mader Shahi, as an advisor.

Halabi passed away in 1998. Even though Hojjatiyeh does not officially exist, his replacement as the association's leader is believed to be the aforementioned Dr. Sayyed Hossein Sajjadi. I will come back to him and what he has done shortly.

Mesbah Yazdi, the Haghani School, and the Mesbahiyeh

Although Hojjatiyeh officially stopped its activities in 1983, many pillars of its thinking have survived, to the point that they are being espoused even by Mahmoud Ahmadinejad and his administration, as well as a small but significant faction of the Qom clerics. One such cleric is the reactionary Ayatollah Mohammad Taghi Mesbah Yazdi, who has consistently declared that democracy, freedom, and human rights have no place in Islamic teachings.

He has denied that he was a member of Hojjatiyeh, despite which he has been continuously accused by leftist clerics to believe in at least certain elements of the same philosophy. For example, similar to Hojjatiyeh, Mesbah Yazdi and his followers constantly preach about the imminent return of Imam Mahdi. But Mesbah Yazdi and his followers differ from Hojjatiyeh in a very significant way, which will be discussed shortly.

Mesbah Yazdi is generally referred to as Ayatollah Mesbah. A few years ago a cartoonist was prompted to refer to him, in rhyming fashion, as Ayatollah Temsah (crocodile), because he has long advocated violence against the opponents of what he calls the Islamic government, the form of religious dictatorship he advocates. Many of the clerics who oppose him, particularly former students and close aides of Khomeini's, refer to Mesbah and his supporters as the Mesbahiyeh cult -- his followers essentially worship him and obey his instructions blindly.

Mesbah was born in Yazd in central Iran in 1934. After graduating from high school, he moved to Qom and began his religious education in the seminaries

there, studying with Ayatollahs Khomeini and Mohammad Taghi Bahjat Foumani (1913-2009) and Sayyed Mohammad Hossein Tabatabaei (1892-1981), usually referred to as Allameh Tabatabaei, a highly influential Islamic philosopher. Graduating in 1960, Mesbah himself is considered an expert in Islamic philosophy. He is an advocate of hekmat-e mota'li (transcendent theosophy), which was originated by Sadr ad-din Mohammad Shirazi (1571-1641), popularly known as Mullah Sadra.

In 1964, a religious school was founded in Qom by Ayatollah Sayyed Mohammad Hosseini Beheshti (1928-1981), a key aide to Khomeini and the first judiciary chief after the 1979 Revolution (he was assassinated in June 1981); Ayatollah Ahmad Jannati, current secretary-general of the Guardian Council; and others. Originally called the Montazeriyeh School, its mission was to make philosophy a core part of religious education. Some time later, a wealthy merchant from the bazaar, Haj Ali Haghani Zanjani, granted the school a sizable endowment and its name was changed to Haghani. Mesbah was a junior partner in the school, working closely with Beheshti. He also taught there for a decade between 1966 and 1976. Before the Revolution, Beheshti and former President Ali Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani published two journals -- Be'sat (Mission of the Prophet) and Entegham (Revenge) -- and Mesbah was involved in both.

The Haghani School also had close links with the Islamic Coalition Society (ICS), a right-wing Islamic group that has its roots in Fadayan-e Eslami, a fundamentalist group founded in 1946 by Sayyed Navvab Safavi that committed many acts of terrorism. The group is now known as the Islamic Coalition Party. Mesbah participated in the meetings of the ICS. He also began preaching about the Islamic government in a mosque on Iranshahr Street in Tehran.

But differences also began to emerge between him and others at Haghani, most notably with Beheshti, Rafsanjani, and others who were students and disciples of Khomeini's. The reason for the differences was twofold. One was that almost all of Khomeini's students were very active against the Shah's government. Mesbah, however, refused to participate in the struggle, a line of thinking identical with that of Hojjatiyeh. From 1963, when Ayatollah Khomeini led the 15 Khordad (June 5) uprising against the Shah, until he returned from exile in February 1979, his students issued many anti-Shah statements and calls to strikes and demonstrate, but Mesbah never put his name on any. Khomeini had very frosty relations with Mesbah and never appointed him to any position. He always referred to him as "hojatoleslam," a rank below ayatollah in the Shia hierarchy.

The second reason was the differences that Mesbah had with Ayatollah Beheshti regarding Dr. Ali Shariati (1933-1977), the sociologist and distinguished Islamic scholar. Shariati was against any special rights or privileges for the clerics, and some of his interpretations of Islamic teachings ran counter to what the conservative clerics preached. Mesbah despised Shariati and declared him an apostate, but Beheshti opposed the declaration. Hence, Mesbah left Haghani School in 1976 and joined another highly conservative religious school in Qom, Dar rah-e Hagh (in the path of God), founded in 1969 by Ayatollah

Sayyed Sadegh Kharrazi, the father of Khatami's foreign minister, Kamal Kharrazi.

After the Revolution, despite the frosty relations between Mesbah and Khomeini, many of the Haghani graduates were brought into the judiciary. The key behind the move was Ayatollah Ali Qodduzi, a teacher at Haghani and revolutionary prosecutor, who was assassinated in September 1981. As long as Khomeini was alive, Haghani graduates involved in government were almost entirely in the judiciary.

After Khomeini passed away in June 1989, Khamenei began purging the political system of the leftist clerics who were close to Khomeini and replacing them with right-wing ones. Many of them were graduates of Haghani School. That made it possible for Mesbah to gradually become more visible and active. Khamenei, who had praised Shariati in June 1980 as someone "whose absence is felt," called Mesbah the "Motahhari of our era" -- a high compliment, comparing him with Ayatollah Morteza Motahhari (1920-1979), a student and disciple of Khomeini's and a distinguished Islamic thinker who was assassinated on May 1, 1979.

Dr. Abdolkarim Soroush, the respected Islamic scholar and philosopher, rejects the ayatollah's assertion. He says that when it comes to feqh (Islamic teachings), philosophy, history, and literature, Motahhari was way above Mesbah's level. He quotes Mesbah as telling him right after the 1979 Revolution that "Motahhari has Marxist sympathies."

After Khamenei's baseless assertion, Mesbah's students began referring to him as the "Revolution's theoretician," which angered his opponents, mostly leftist clerics, because they knew that he had actually rejected political activism against the Shah. They began criticizing him harshly, accusing him of opportunism after not taking part in the Revolution. At first, Mesbah claimed that he had indeed participated in the Revolution, citing his work with Beheshti. When that did not stick, he claimed that his revolutionary activities were secret and that he saw no reason why he should speak about them. When that prompted an incredulous reaction, Mesbah finally conceded. He said, "In those [pre-Revolution] years, based on my own preference, I had recognized that the main pillar of such [revolutionary] activities was cultural, as the foundation for Islam is Islamic culture, and that this culture should be strengthened and taught by the clerics.... My main focus was scientific and cultural work and research."

As Khamenei consolidated his power, Mesbah also spread his influence through the Haghani graduates. Such hardline clerics as Ali Razini, Ebrahim Raeisi, Ali Mobasher, and Abbasali Alizadeh, who have worked within the judiciary for over two decades, are all graduates of Haghani. Since 1984, when the Ministry of Intelligence was formally established, every intelligence minister -- Mohammad Mohammadi Rayshahri, Ali Fallahian, Ghorban-Ali Dorri Najafabadi, Ali Yunesi, Gholam-Hossein Mohseni Ejehei, and Haydar Moslehi -- has been a Haghani graduate. Raeisi, Mobasher, and another Haghani graduate, Mostafa

Pourmohammadi (Ahmadinejad's first interior minister), played key roles in the execution of more than 4,000 political prisoners in 1988.

Raeisi is now chief deputy to Sadegh Larijani, the judiciary chief, while Mobasherri also holds a high position within the judiciary. Kazem Sedighi, one of the four Friday Prayer leaders of Tehran, is another Haghani graduate, as is Hossein Taeb, who heads the Revolutionary Guards' intelligence unit and played an important role in the violent crackdown on the peaceful demonstrations after last year's rigged presidential election. Many other Haghani graduates have occupied key government positions, most of whom are suspected of having Hojjatiyeh sympathies and roots. I will return to this shortly.

After Mohammad Khatami was elected president in a landslide victory in 1997, Mesbah became his most outspoken critic. He and his followers, particularly in the judiciary, attempted to stop, or at least slow down, the incremental reforms that Khatami intended to undertake. The judiciary used its power to arrest reformers, human rights activists, journalists, and critics of the hardliners, and closed newspapers and other publications. Without naming him explicitly, Mesbah continuously attacked Khatami. For a while he was one of the four Tehran Friday Prayer leaders, and in his sermons he consistently derided the Reformists. He once declared of political reform that "injecting such ideas is like spreading the AIDS virus" and claimed that \$5 million had been sent to Iran to be distributed among Reformist journalists and political figures. He also declared that "Islamic Republic" is a contradiction in terms, as a truly Islamic government does not hold elections. It got to the point that on the occasions when he led Friday Prayers, only small crowds would take part, an embarrassment to the establishment. He confessed, "Our thoughts have no buyer." Eventually, he was forced to stop leading the Tehran Friday Prayers.

Mesbah has consistently espoused violence against his opponents. He has said that he believes trials are not needed to convict and execute offenders: "If anyone insults Islamic sanctity, Islam has permitted for his blood to be spilled, no court needed either." When in June 2002, Dr. Hashem Aghajari, a professor of history and an Islamic leftist, said in a speech in the city of Hamadan, "People are not monkeys to blindly emulate the clerics," and called for Islamic Protestantism, Mesbah called for his execution for "insulting Islam." Hardline judges allied with Mesbah sentenced Aghajari to death, a verdict overturned a year later by Iran's Supreme Court. Investigative journalist Akbar Ganji accused Mesbah in December 2000 of encouraging his disciples to issue a fatwa for the murders of dissidents and intellectuals during what is known as the Chain Murders.

In 2007, after several young people were murdered in the city of Kerman, the culprits -- members of the Basij militia -- claimed in court that they had decided to commit the murders after hearing a speech by Mesbah.

After last year's rigged presidential election, Mesbah declared that obeying Ahmadinejad was equivalent to obeying God. He did not explain why the same principle could not be applied when Khatami was president. More importantly,

what Mesbah was saying was that not obeying Ahmadinejad was tantamount to disobeying God, an offense punishable by death.

Dr. Mohsen Kadivar, the noted Islamic scholar and a critic of Velaayat-e Faghih, once said, "If Islam is what Mesbah preaches, then I am a nonbeliever." Khatami has called Mesbah the "theoretician of violence." Without naming Mesbah and his inner circle, Khatami, on many occasions, has spoken against those who "theorize" violence and warned against their growing influence in the power structure. He has called them "backward," "medieval," and followers of "Talibanism." Soroush, for his part, believes that Khatami's choice of labels is too kind and that Mesbah and his followers are more backward than the Taliban. This is what he has to say about Mesbah:

I know Mr. Mesbah very well. He is neither a Faghih [Islamic scholar of the highest level], nor does he know anything about Islam's and Iran's histories. He neither has a good memory, nor does he have much knowledge. He is not aware of the literature, arts, modern science, and structured and modern politics. He has not been reading anything for a long time. The only thing that he knows is the classical Islamic philosophy. It would be embarrassing [for Iranians] and [we] must take refuge in God, if such a person ever becomes a political leader.

Soroush also believes that Mesbah's thinking is similar to that of Ahmad Fardid (1909-1994), a professor of philosophy at the University of Tehran whose thinking in many ways resembled fascist ideology. Fardid urged his students to disregard such concepts as democracy, human rights, and tolerance, calling them symbols of Iran's "Westification." See Dariush Ashuri's critique of Fardid's thinking, which characterizes him as a fraud.

Ashuri's piece is the definitive analysis of Fardid's ideology. Note the similarities between Fardid's and Mesbah's thinking on rejecting democracy, human rights, and freedom.

Currently, Mesbah leads both the Haghani School and Dar rah-e Hagh educational organization in Qom. He also founded and heads the Imam Khomeini Educational and Research Organization there. His mouthpiece is the weekly Partow Sokhan, run by his disciple Abolghasem Ravanbakhsah, an ultra-reactionary cleric. He receives at least \$10 million annually in aid for his school and organizations. He has close relations with some of the top Guard commanders such as Brigadier General Mohammad Baqer Zolghadr, now a senior advisor to Sadegh Larijani, the judiciary chief, and regularly addresses them and the Basij militia.

Ahmadinejad, Hojjatiyeh, and Mesbahiyeh

In many ways, Ahmadinejad's thinking resembles Hojjatiyeh's. Similar to Hojjatiyeh, Ahmadinejad constantly preaches about the imminent return of Imam Mahdi, including on his most recent trip to New York. The belief in the return of Imam Mahdi is, of course, common among Shiites, but Ahmadinejad's talk of its immediacy is highly unusual. In addition, when he was a student at the Iran University of Science and Technology in the late 1970s, the Islamic Association to which he belonged was filled with strongly right-wing and anti-communist

Hojjatiyeh members. In fact, Ahmadinejad was opposed to the takeover of the United States Embassy in November 1979, favoring a similar assault on the Soviet Embassy.

As I have explained elsewhere, despite Ahmadinejad's links with Mesbah and his followers, his ultimate goal may be expelling the clerics from government, which would also be in line with Hojjatiyeh thinking. Ahmadinejad has, however, denied that he is a Hojjatiyeh member, although that remains to be seen.

In 2005, right after he was elected president, a book was published by Hossein Sajjadi, the aforementioned leader of Hojjatiyeh: *Daheh Hashtad, Daheh Emergence Ensha-allah (The Decade of the Eighties, The Decade of Emergence, God Willing)* described the conditions under which Imam Mahdi will reemerge. The book also describes the main military commander that will help Imam Mahdi: tanned, skinny, with a thin beard, medium height, and from an area close to Tehran. These perfectly fit Ahmadinejad! Was this a coincidence, or opportunism on the part of Sajjadi, or is there a secret link between the two? It is not clear.

Shortly thereafter, another book appeared, *Ahmadinejad va Enghelaab-e Jahani Pish-e roo (Ahmadinejad and the Upcoming Worldwide Revolution)* which describes a man who will supposedly help lead the global revolution and has eerie similarities with Ahmadinejad. Another coincidence?

But whereas Ahmadinejad has come to power through the support of a part of the political establishment led by a cleric, Khamenei, and his son, Mojtaba, as well as Mesbah and a faction of the Revolutionary Guards, Hojjatiyeh believes in grassroots activism and staying away from politics.

At the same time, Ahmadinejad has never hidden the fact that his spiritual advisor is Mesbah, not Khamenei. He received considerable help in the 2005 election from Mesbah, who issued a fatwa to the Basij militia, telling them to vote for Ahmadinejad. Later he claimed that a man in Ahvaz had a dream in which Imam Mahdi had told him, "Get up and vote for Ahmadinejad."

And last year, a few days before the June 12 election, a fatwa was attributed to Mesbah that said that all that can be done must be done to get Ahmadinejad reelected. The fatwa, first reported by Tehran Bureau, was also reported widely within Iran and never denied.

Thus, in addition to all the other Haghani graduates that have immense influence in the judiciary, Ahmadinejad populated his cabinet in 2005 with Haghani alumni to return Mesbah's favors. His first vice president (Iran has eight vice presidents) was Parviz Davoodi, who was replaced last year by Mohammad Reza Rahimi. Davoodi is now a senior presidential advisor. His minister of intelligence was Mohseni Ejehei; his interior minister, Pourmohammadi. His deputy foreign minister was Manouchehr Mohammadi, and Morteza Agha Tehrani was appointed as the "moral teacher" of the cabinet. The chief government spokesman was Gholam-Hossein Elham, now minister of justice. Sayyed Mahmoud Nabavian was a senior religious advisor for the country's Fifth

Development Program. Naser Sagha-ye Biriya has been an Ahmadinejad advisor in various capacities, most recently for clerical affairs. Ruhollah Hosseinian, a Majles deputy, has been Ahmadinejad's advisor and ardent supporter. In addition, Abbas-Ali Kadkhodaei is a member of the Guardian Council, as was Elham. These are all graduates of Haghani.

Other alumni of the school serve in the Majles. One notable example is the cleric Hamid Rasaei, a hardline reactionary and strong Ahmadinejad supporter. Mojtaba Zolnour, another Haghani graduate, is Khamenei's representative in the Revolutionary Guards and yet another strong supporter of Ahmadinejad. He once said, "The Zionists are waiting for the return of Imam Mahdi, and intend to murder him as soon as they see him."

In 2005, shortly after Ahmadinejad's cabinet received a Majles vote of confidence, it was reported that the entire cabinet signed a letter to Imam Mahdi, promising loyalty to him, and dropped the letter in the Jamkaran well that supposedly is connected with the Imam.

The Ministry of Culture and Islamic Guidance denied the report, but the cabinet did approve millions of dollars for the development of the Jamkaran area. There is also a Jamkaran Press that publishes books about Imam Mahdi and his return, which is supported by the Ahmadinejad administration.

Leftist clerics have reacted angrily to the heavy presence of Haghani graduates in Ahmadinejad's cabinet and their influence in the government. Ayatollah Mohammad Reza Tavassoli (1931-2008), Khomeini's chief of staff, declared that the government, as well as the Guard Special Forces, had been taken over by Hojjatiyeh. In a speech in Mashhad a few months after Ahmadinejad's 2005 election, Khatami said,

Those who regarded the Revolution, during Imam Khomeini's time, as a deviation, are now [wielding] the tools of terror and oppression. These shallow-thinking traditionalists with their Stone Age backwardness now have a powerful organization behind them.

The most outspoken critic of Mesbah and Hojjatiyeh has been Mohtashamipour, Mir Hossein Mousavi's minister of interior in the 1980s and a student of Khomeini's. Referring to Mesbah and his followers as the "Mesbahiyeh cult," Mohtashamipour has accused them of thinking along lines similar to Hojjatiyeh's and warned against the danger that they pose to Iran. In a speech in Isfahan in June 2008, he said, "There is no difference between the Mesbahiyeh cult and the Taliban." A month later, in an interview with E'temad Melli, the daily mouthpiece of Mehdi Karroubi's National Trust Party, Mohtashamipour described Mesbah's opposition to Khomeini before the Revolution, as well as to Shariati, which he said was based on a SAVAK "request."

This was the first time that someone once part of the Islamic Republic's inner circle had publicly accused Mesbah of having relations with SAVAK, but it was not the first time that the author had heard it. During to a trip to Tehran in 1999, a friend who worked with Khomeini right after the Revolution told me that

the ayatollah appointed a committee to look into the SAVAK archives and draw up a list of the clerics connected with the intelligence service. He said that one of the most prominent names on the list was Mesbah, which explains why the ayatollah had frosty relations with him.

Others, including the conservatives, have also spoken about the role of Hojjatiyeh and Mesbahiyeh. Emad Afrough, a moderate conservative and a deputy in the seventh Majles, said that he believes that Hojjatiyeh played an important role in the aftermath of last year's election. He said, "If there is going to be a Velvet Revolution, it will be by the Hojjatiyeh Association." Hadi Khamenei, a brother of the Supreme Leader who is allied with the reform movement, has also publicly warned against the influence of Hojjatiyeh.

On many occasions, Khamenei has defended Mesbah (and, hence, Ahmadinejad). But then came the elections for the fourth Assembly of Experts -- the constitutional body that appoints the Supreme Leader and can theoretically dismiss him -- in December 2006. With the help of Ahmadinejad and his Interior Ministry, which supervises the elections, Mesbah and his supporters appeared to be planning to take over the assembly by introducing a large number of young clerical candidates, most of them Mesbah's students, under the name The Elites of Howzeh and University. As reported on December 20, 2006, by the conservative daily Jomhuri Eslami, behind the scenes, Khamenei intervened and made sure that a large number of Mesbah's supporters were not allowed to run. As a result, his followers form only a small faction in the body and Rafsanjani was elected assembly head, which was interpreted as a heavy defeat for Ahmadinejad.

This incident is what distinguishes Mesbah and Mesbahiyeh from Hojjatiyeh. Before the Revolution, like Hojjatiyeh, Mesbah did not believe in being politically involved. But he and his followers now dream of taking control of Iran and setting up their "Islamic government" -- a fascist religious dictatorship. Hojjatiyeh, in contrast, still maintains that such a government can be set up only by Imam Mahdi himself.

Since his election in 2005, Ahmadinejad has made many statements about the imminent return of Imam Mahdi. After his first speech at the United Nations General Assembly in September 2005, in which he invoked the return, he met with Ayatollah Abdollah Javadi Amoli, an important cleric and maternal uncle of the Larijani brothers. In that meeting, Ahmadinejad claimed that he had been surrounded by a sort of divine light during the speech. He denied making the assertion, even though a video clip clearly shows that he did make it. Lying is a hallmark of Ahmadinejad's.

One of his first pronouncements after getting elected in 2005 was that Imam Mahdi would return "within two years." Since then he has claimed that the reason the United States invaded Iraq was that it wanted to prevent Mahdi's return. He even claimed that he has documents proving his assertion. Later on, he asserted that the United States is the most important impediment to the return of Imam Mahdi.

In a speech in Mashhad, Ahmadinejad declared, "It is Imam Mahdi that runs the

world."

What is the objective of Ahmadinejad's many declarations regarding Imam Mahdi? According to those who believe in the doctrine of Velaayat-e Faghih, the Supreme Leader is Mahdi's deputy in his absence, and it is through him that people can connect with the hidden Imam. But if Ahmadinejad can constantly give people "news" about the hidden Imam, which means that he is directly "linked" with him, why would he need the Supreme Leader, or the clerics for that matter? The most recent evidence for this is Ahmadinejad's reaction when Mesbah criticized him for supporting Esfandiar Rahim Mashaei, his close aide and in-law. Ahmadinejad said, "Mr. Mesbah does not remember that before we took over [the government], no one took him seriously."

In my view, this is all part of an attempt to marginalize a great fraction, if not all, of the clerics. I am not claiming that Ahmadinejad does not believe in Imam Mahdi. He does, and deeply so. But, recall that Hojjatiyeh members -- who consider themselves the foot soldiers for the return of the hidden Imam -- believe that clerics should not intervene in politics and that the true Velaayat can be delivered only by the Imam. They may reject Ahmadinejad as one of their own, and even part of his preaching about Imam Mahdi as superstition, but the fact remains that some of the things that he claims have striking similarities with what Hojjatiyeh believes in.

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