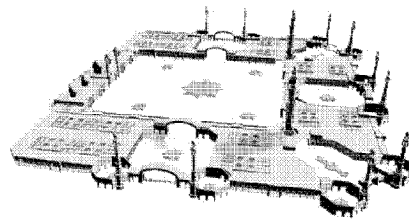


THE JAMKARAN HOLY MOSQUE

By Rami Yelda

*“O Mighty Lord, I pray to you to hasten the emergence of your last repository, the promised one, that perfect and pure human being, the one that will fill this world with justice and peace.”
(Mahoud Ahmadinejad, in his address to the U.N. General Assembly in 2005)*

These days, Iran’s uranium enrichment ambitions have taken the central stage of the country’s foreign policy. On the national level, a major phenomenon is taking place: the rebuilding of once obscure little Jamkaran Mosque, six kilometers east of the holy city of Qom, into a lavish shrine. The news has made significant impact on the Iranian street. It is believed that the still living but absent Twelfth Imam (saint) of Shi’as, the Mahdi, or the Wali al-Asr “Lord and Master of the Age,” will re-emerge from a Sacred Well in this Mosque and transform the world into a utopia of justice, peace, and righteousness.



By now, the main differences between the Moslem Sunni majority and the Shi’a minority are well known to most. Beside the debate about Prophet Mohammad’s succession after his death in AD 632 (where according to Shi’as, his cousin, Ali, was cheated from assuming the caliphate), there are other doctrinal differences. One of the main issues that splits the two sects is that of the Mahdi, the Islamic messianic figure.

The word messiah is derived from the biblical Hebrew word *mashiah*, meaning “The Anointed.” In the Old Testament this term is often used of kings who were “anointed with oil.” The most notable (among many) is the reference to David who would return someday and conquer the powers of evil by force of arms (I Sam. 16:12). In Christianity the term is exclusively applied to Jesus Christ.

In Islam, the al-Mahdi (*Lit.* The Guided One) is believed to be the ruler who shall appear upon the earth in the Apocalyptic Last Days. The Sunnis believe the Mahdi is not born yet but will be born and will descend from heaven, conquer all religions, and take vengeance on the wicked. Here is where the Shi’as differ from the Sunnis. Shi’as believe Muhammad Abu Al- Qasim, the Twelfth (and last) Imam, is the Mahdi who is still alive but in hiding and waiting to manifest himself someday. (This concept of the Mahdi is not mentioned as such in the Quran.) The earliest reference to the hidden Mahdi is attributed to Abdullah bin Saba, a converted Yemeni Jew, who

being familiar with the messianic traditions in the Bible, introduced it to the early followers of Ali, known as *shi'at'Ali* "the party of Ali." [Saba is the Arabic for Sheba, also called Sabea, or present day Yemen. Prior to the emergence of Islam, there were several Jewish and Christian Arab tribes in the Arabian Peninsula, Yemen included. In 1948, after the establishment of the State of Israel, most of the Yemeni Jews emigrated to Israel. There is still a small community of Jews living in Yemen who are renowned jewelers and goldsmiths.] Islamic historians are of the opinion that Abdullah bin Saba, as a prototype, had used the messianic return of the Mahdi to that of the ascendance of Elijah to heaven (II Kings 2:11) and the return of Jesus Christ during the apocalypse.

It was during this early period of the emergence of Shi'ism that clear-cut lines were drawn between the authority of caliphs -- the successors of Mohammad and the Imams. The Shia's always believed, and still do, that caliphs were mere humans who were appointed to follow the teachings of Mohammad and the Holy Quran. According to Shi'as, the Imams were different: they were endowed with divine wisdom, were infallible and were the true repositories of the Quran. It is for this reason that Shi'as -- unlike Sunnis -- believe in their Imams' Traditions in addition to the Prophet's *Hadith* (Traditions).

The trust in the Mahdi is the essential part of the Shi'a faith. From the very beginning, Shi'as, being the minority among Moslems, have been persecuted. The misfortune of the Shi'as started after Ali, the first Imam, was slain in 662 AD while praying in a mosque in Kufa, Iraq. Huseyn, his son and Third Imam, was defeated and beheaded in Karbala. Hasan, his other son and Second Imam, was allegedly poisoned in his harem in Mecca. The fate of the rest of the members of "the House of Ali" (from the Fourth to the Eleventh Imams) was not any better-- they were all either poisoned or put to the sword. The Twelfth Imam was spared from such a fate. According to Shi'as, in 873 AD, this Imam, while in his teens, disappeared in a well in Samarra, Iraq but is still alive, albeit in occultation. To the Shia's, this Hiding Twelfth Imam is the Mahdi.

Unlike Iraq and Saudi Arabia that lodge the mortal remains of ten Imams, Iran is rather poor in this respect. Reza, the Eight Imam, is the only imam buried in Iran. His sumptuous mausoleum in Mashhad is the holiest shrine in the country. Fatemeh, "the Innocent," is Reza's eight-year-old sister (not to be confused with the other more famous Fatemeh, Mohammad's daughter and Ali's wife) is buried in Qom, 154 kilometers (96 miles) south of Tehran. These two shrines are the two principal places of worship in Iran. The newly reconstructed and replenished Jamkaran Mosque has become the other major sacred place, overshadowing the "Innocent's" Shrine in Qom.

It was in Qom that Sheikh Hassan ibn Muthlih Jamkarani, a descendant of Arab immigrants, had said that he had met the Mahdi. According to him, on Tuesday the 17th of Ramadan 373 A.H. (Feb. 27, 984) he was awakened by several men and told to get up and meet the Twelfth Imam. After rising, he was led to the place where he was confronted by a thirty-year-old man sitting on a carpet and leaning on a pillow. The man had told him he was the Missing Imam. Next to him was another man called Prophet Al-Khizr [this Prophet is a dubious character in Islam and is referred to as "the green one" who, like the Mahdi, will reappear someday]. The

man had then told him to confiscate a piece of Holy Land nearby, and build a mosque and a well for him to reappear. The Sheikh did as he was told, located the farmer who owned the land and asked him to bequeath it. The farmer gladly accepted. Having secured the holy land, the Sheikh then built a small mosque and dug a sacred well for the Imam to reappear from his hiding. (When recounting this incident, the Shia authorities are adamant that the sighting was not a dream or a vision – it was reportedly a genuine face-to-face encounter.)

Up to fifteen years ago, Jamkaran used to be an obscure and humble yellow-brick mosque situated on the fringe of the *kavir*, that dry and inhospitable scorched land east of Qom, known and visited only by a few peasants who worked the harsh land in its vicinity. In the recent years, the shabby mosque has been generously adorned and transformed into a major complex and shrine. According to the Iranian Government's statistics, last year, five million pilgrims visited this Holy Masjed (Mosque) and the Government is expecting ten million to visit this year. When there, pilgrims pray, plead, circumambulate around the complex and drop their wishes in the sacred well for the Saint to minister to. During the nights, to add drama to the religious spectacle, the entire complex is illuminated by green spotlights, brightening the sumptuous shrine and making it visible for miles while loud speakers blare Quranic elegies in Arabic. All women are covered in black chadors, as the saint would expect them to be. Some pilgrims carry flashlights to light up the bottom of the well, hoping to see the Saint. The increase in the number of visitors is attributed by a *fatwa* issued by one of the *olama* (religious scholars) of Qom who had declared that anyone visiting the Shrine and its well forty times will meet the Saint.

After coming to power in 1979, Khomeini declared Iran to be a Shi'ite Islamic state, ruled by the *velayat-e fagih* "rule of Islamic jurist." i.e., the Supreme Leader is accountable for the Hidden Imam until He emerges. Khomeini had also decreed that the little Jamkaran Mosque, where the Saint will re-emerge, be turned into a major pilgrimage site and made the religious center and symbol of Iran. To meet Khomeini's edict, the present government of Iran allotted the equivalent of 20 million dollars to turn the little mosque into a major shrine. This new elaborate mosque now has a main dome covered with blue tiles and has two imposing minarets on the sides. Four other domes are added which will be gilded in the future. In addition to the two main minarets, ten other minarets are planned. To accommodate the female worshiper, a "sisters" prayer hall is built next to the "brothers" hall. A well-stocked library, information office for the pilgrims, an administration office, and a 20,000 car parking lot has already been completed. To facilitate the future pilgrims, a state-of-the-art, fast railway is being planned to run between Tehran and Qom.

With all the construction being underway in and around Jamkaran, a few issues have not yet been resolved by the *olama*. Everyone is in agreement that the Imam will resurface soon; but where? There was only one well for Him to re-emerge and it was in the "brothers" side. With all the attention to the Shrine by the sisters, another well was dug in their section. Now, where will the Imam re-appear? The consensus is that it will be in the brothers' side but there are some Islamic feminists who oppose it. Another unresolved issue is the day of the week that He will re-appear. There have been several opinions issued by the *olama* but the matter has not been resolved yet.

The new Jamkaran Mosque will, without a doubt, be Mahmoud Ahmadinejad's legacy to Iran and to the rest of the Shi'a world. As a devout Shi'a, he is convinced that the Twelfth Imam is alive and will reappear in Jamkaran soon. Ahmadinejad, in his undisputed zeal for the Hidden Imam, prior to announcing the names of his cabinet members, had visited the Shrine and after praying, had dropped the name of his ministers in the Sacred Well for the Saint to read and approve. After forming his cabinet, he held the first meeting with his ministers around the well, where they all prayed. They sat cross-legged on the rug surrounding it and asked for His guidance. After having done that, and to ensure success, they had dropped the government's hand-written platform down for the Imam to read and approve.

President Ahmadinejad's infatuation with the Wali al-Asr was also proclaimed during his speech in the UN in 2005. After his return to Iran, he had told some of the Ayatollahs (quoted amply by the local press) that as he was talking to the 'leaders of the world' the Twelfth Imam descended and lightened the hall. He also mentioned that for the 27 or 28 minutes that he talked, no one blinked!

Ahmadinejad believes, as all pious Shi'a do, that to enhance the Saint's return, it is essential to agitate, create chaos and lead the world to a cataclysm in order to facilitate the Mahdi's return and his ultimate triumph against all impurities. To that end, despite all the national and international objections, he is convinced that the development of Iranian nuclear technology will eventually create mayhem and expedite the imminent apocalypse.

With the total control of the press in Iran, there is no criticism of the grizzled President's extravagant spending for the new Mosque or his uranium enrichment dreams. In the Iranian diaspora (now numbering around 2.5 million worldwide), the matter is quite different. The Mosque, the return of its phantom resident, and the government's plan for building nuclear reactors are well visited *and* criticized. The Iranian economy having sunk (probably in a well), and with the rampant poverty, prostitution, drug addiction, suicide (especially among young women) and unemployment, questions are frequently raised about the squandering of badly needed funds on this mosque and nuclear plants that the country could do well without. This is the same Iran, where recently, the bus drivers of Tehran went on strike and demonstrated in the streets, asking for a-dollar-a-week raise and watched the bus drivers' union leaders being beaten and imprisoned.

Jamkaran has now expanded its grip outside of Iran. In Iraq, a new Shi'ite group, called the "Jamkaran Brigade" has joined the insurgency. This means we will hear more about the Holy Mosque and the Brigade in the future. STAY TUNED!