



## US Agents Probe Past of Iran's Leader

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Washington -- The murders started in the 1980s. Kazem Sami, who was the first Iranian health minister after the 1979 Islamic revolution but fell out with the ayatollahs, was one of the first of dozens of dissidents to die. He was working in a Tehran clinic in November 1988 when an assailant posing as a patient stabbed him repeatedly.

The following July, three gunmen burst into a Vienna flat and opened fire on a meeting of Iranian Kurdish exiles. Among three people killed was Abdul Rahman Qassemlou, the leader of Kurdish opposition to the ayatollahs in Tehran. The murders have never been solved.

Almost a decade later, a clandestine group of Iranian militants began plotting the murder of Salman Rushdie, the victim of a fatwa sentencing him to death for supposed blasphemy in his book *The Satanic Verses*.

For years there had been only the vaguest allegations of a link between those events. All that has changed with the election of Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, the hardline former mayor of Tehran, as Iran's new president.

Ahmadinejad's surprise victory in last month's poll has unleashed a flood of accusation, innuendo and investigation of his militant pedigree. Accused by his enemies of orchestrating a string of murders in the 1980s and 1990s, Ahmadinejad, 49, is also being scrutinised by US intelligence agencies over claims that he participated in the student takeover of the US embassy in Tehran in 1979.

Opposition websites are buzzing with reports of a leaked document that purportedly proves Ahmadinejad led a team of would-be assassins that plotted to murder Rushdie.

The document remained untraceable last week but a prominent opposition figure, Maryam Rajavi, of the National Council of Resistance of Iran, denounced Ahmadinejad as a "terrorist, torturer and executioner".

In a further twist, an Austrian newspaper claimed yesterday that the country's authorities were studying classified documents suggesting he played a key role in the Vienna killings.

Iranian officials have dismissed many such allegations as "absurd" and motivated by political malice. Asked by *The New York Times* whether he was among the hostage takers in 1979, Ahmadinejad replied: "It is not true. It is only rumours."

But a senior Washington official said "a lot of filing cabinets are rattling" as intelligence and law enforcement agencies search for clues to the Iranian strongman's past.

There was also concern in Europe that whatever the truth, a process of American-led "demonisation" has begun that will damage European efforts to solve the crisis over Iran's nuclear ambitions.

"If he has got that sort of [militant] form, it's going to be easy for the Americans to demonise him and the prospects for doing business with him becomes that much more difficult," said one European official.

Amid the political frenzy, it was not easy last week to separate fact from fantasy. Yet from details provided by US regional specialists, official Iranian websites and previously reliable opposition sources, it proved possible to piece together a sobering account of the new president's ties to ultraconservative anti-western factions. These include a unit long suspected by US intelligence agencies of directing state-sponsored terrorist activities abroad.

Born in the desert town of Garmsar, east of Tehran, in 1956, Ahmadinejad was the son of a blacksmith. He attended Tehran's Elm-o Sanaat University in the last years of the Shah's rule and was swept up in the wave of resentment that spawned the 1979 revolution.

With the return to Iran of Ayatollah Khomeini, the revolution's spiritual leader, Ahmadinejad became his university's representative in the student Office for Strengthening Unity, which would play a central role in seizure of the US embassy.

Several former embassy hostages claimed last week Ahmadinejad was among the students who held them captive for 444 days. But experts using advanced facial recognition technology have established that he is not the man identified on a widely distributed photograph

of hostages and captors.

As Islamic rule intensified in the early 1980s with purges of moderate students, Ahmadinejad joined the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC), an ultra-conservative group fiercely loyal to the ayatollahs.

A senior officer in the IRGC's special "internal security" brigade, Ahmadinejad's duties included the suppression of dissident activity, which, according to his rivals, involved the interrogation, torture and execution of political prisoners.

US intelligence sources and Iranian opposition figures believe he became a key figure in the formation of the IRGC's Qods Force, which has been linked to assassinations in the Middle East and Europe, including the murder of Qassemelou.

White House officials last week demanded that Tehran respond to questions about Ahmadinejad's past. "The Iranian government . . . has an obligation to speak concerning these questions," said Sean McCormack, a State Department spokesman.

Experts were divided over the impact of Ahmadinejad's election. "If the allegations are true, it becomes impossible to deal with him," said Ivo Daalder of the Brookings Institution, a Washington think tank. Other analysts said relations with Tehran were already so bad that Ahmadinejad could scarcely make them worse.

Europe had been hoping to embrace Iran as a means of defusing regional tension and resolving the nuclear issue. That strategy may be doomed.

How hostage-takers have fared

- Massoumeh Ebtekar, chief interpreter and spokeswoman of the revolutionary students who overran the US embassy, is environment minister and one of six vice-presidents
- Ezzatollah Zarghami, one of the leaders of the hostage-takers, became head of state radio and television in 2004
- Muhammad Hashemi, a key figure behind the embassy takeover, was until recently deputy secretary in the intelligence ministry
- Abbas Abdi has become a prominent reformer. He was jailed for criticising the regime but was recently freed

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