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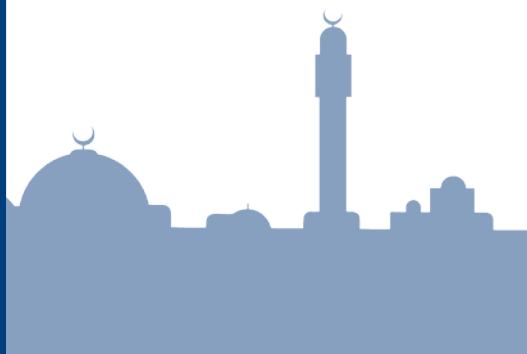
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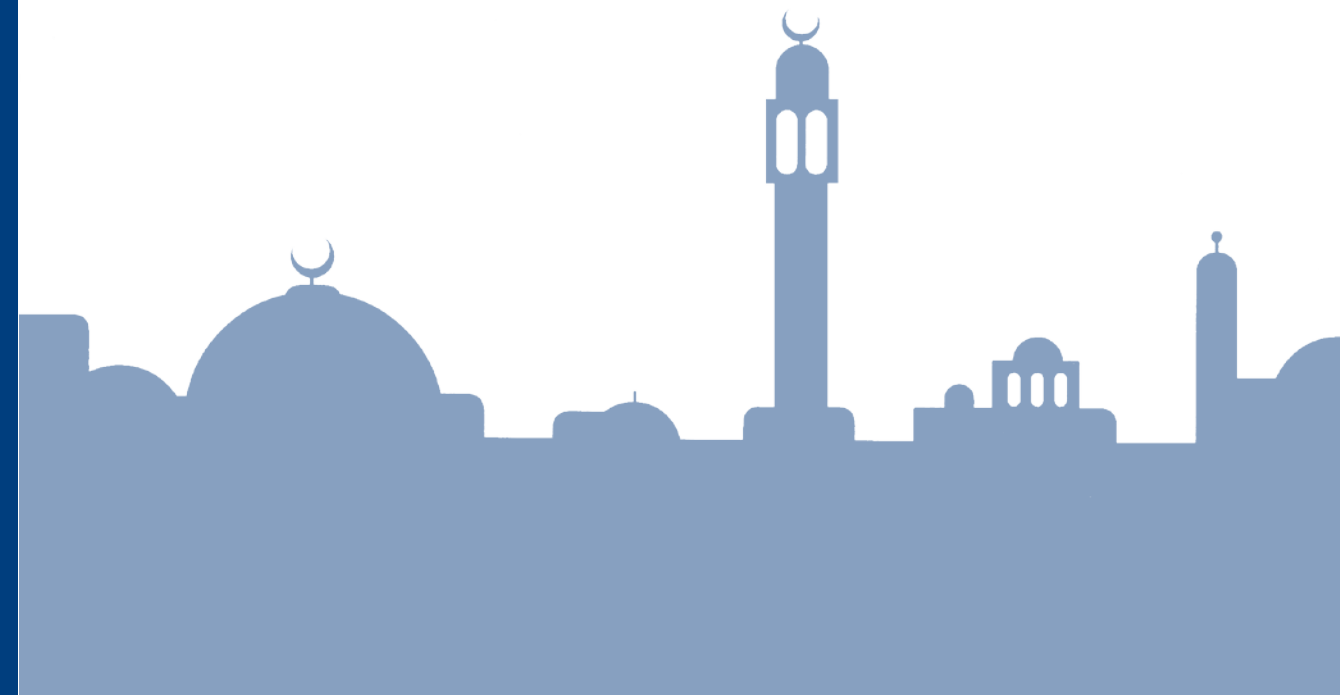
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The Mahdi's Arrival and the Messianic Future State According to Sunni and Shi'ite Apocalyptic Scenarios

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2014

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The Seventh Annual Levtzion Lecture was delivered at the
Hebrew University of Jerusalem, 12 June 2012

Abstract

In his lecture Prof. Cook pointed out that the study of contemporary Muslim apocalyptic literature both in its Sunni and Shi'ite variants is still in its infancy. Only in the last few decades has serious scholarly work, especially of a comparative nature similar to themes in Judaism and Christianity, been undertaken. Contemporary Muslim apocalyptic literature is based on the classical traditions ascribed to Muhammad and his closest companions, and predicting a series of cataclysmic or violent events due to take place before the end of the world and the final judgment. These events are designed to shock and to stir the audience to repent, and can be a profound, if somewhat overdramatic, social commentary. They can also be useful, occasionally, as historical sources. The Muslim world has seen a downturn in the prevalence of apocalyptic writing. The excitement of the 1990s and early 2000s among Sunnis has largely faded, while the Mahdaviyyat has lost influence in Iran among the Shi'ites. However, from an intellectual and religious point of view, the transformation of Muslim apocalyptic materials from the traditional citation style to the contemporary commentary and newspaper style of exegesis relating to current events will likely persist and influence future trends in apocalyptic movements.

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Addressing Suicide Attacks (with Olivia Allison) (Greenwood: Praeger Press, 2007). Cook currently works on the understudied subject of West African Islam, focusing on the vast Arabic literature of sub-Saharan Africa (especially in Nigeria). Other projects include finishing the trilogy of apocalyptic works with a work on the apocalyptic and millenarian foundations of Muslim civilizations.

David Cook

The study of contemporary Muslim apocalyptic literature both in its Sunni and Shi'ite varieties is yet in its infancy. Although contemporary Muslim predictions of the end of the world have been noted for more than a century, primarily by polemicists hostile to Islam and contemptuous of the believers in the end of the world, it is only comparatively recently that serious work on the subject has begun. Part of the reason for this comparative lag (at least relative to Judaism and Christianity) has been the total ignorance of the Sunni material, as it is still very common, even among academics, to associate the apocalyptic future or messianic state exclusively with Shi'ism. However, this approach is not justified by the material as it exists among Muslims.

Muslim apocalyptic scenarios start with the foundational traditions concerning tribulations—both in their undesirable presence as well in the necessity to undergo them prior to the end of the world—and the justice of the messianic state, which is to be led by either the returned Muslim Jesus or the Mahdi (the messianic figure). Tribulation or *fitna* is seen by the writers of the apocalyptic materials as being an unnatural state brought about by the absence of justice, and by the disunity of Muslims. Because disunity was not present (at least in the idealized version of history) at the time of the Prophet Muhammad, it follows that this disunity is also an unnatural state, which goes against the example (*sunna*) of the Prophet, and which must have been fomented by the enemies of Islam. The only way to return to the idealized state and to actualize justice in the Muslim community (*umma*) is through violent events that will purify the community and focus it away from internal enemies towards external ones.

This point, especially in Sunnism, is problematic and demonstrates one of the problems of working with contemporary apocalyptic literature--what is the connection between the form of classical prophecy and the reality of contemporary militancy, primarily of Salafi-jihadism? Sunni apocalyptic prophecies, like their Shi'ite

counterparts, consist of a large number of traditions ascribed to Muhammad (but in the case of Shi'ism, sometimes to the Imams or to their close followers), detailing events due to happen in a rather mixed sequence prior to the revelation of the Mahdi. From a purely historical point of view, most of this material should be dated to the 2nd-3rd/8th-9th centuries, mainly to the propaganda associated with the Umayyad dynasty (r. 661-747) and the 'Abbasids (r. 747-1258) who supplanted them, as well as to the ideological conflicts between the 'Abbasids and the groups that would later form the Imami Shi'ite community by the 4th/10th century.

Reading this material, one can easily divide it into two basic tendencies. The first is imperial, while the other is anti-imperial. The imperial apocalyptic narrative focuses upon the state as having realized the justice called for by the apocalyptic predictions, and upon the figure of the leader/caliph or his family (as in the case of the Imams) as having been the actualizers of this messianic state. Enemies and obstacles remain, but they are either outside (i.e., non-Muslims) or inside (heretics), they are not the state itself. In contrast, anti-imperial narratives focus upon the state and its attendant elites—either military or religious, but sometimes also economic—as being the primary obstacles to the realization of the messianic future.

From a geographical point of view, the apocalyptic material is mostly centered upon Syria and Iraq, with some action occurring in Iran. Very minimal attention is devoted to Egypt or to the west of the Muslim world, or to the other future developing Muslim arenas important today, such as South Asia, Africa or Europe. This fact becomes a problem as one moves into the contemporary world, as there is a large disconnect between the geographical regions described in the classical apocalyptic heritage and those which are of considerable interest to contemporary Muslims, such as Europe and the United States. Therefore, there is a strong need for contemporary Muslims to seek out new and creative interpretations of apocalyptic, or even new materials, to compensate for the lack in the classical sources. A good example of this problem is the well-known tradition associating the massacre of the Jewish followers of

the Dajjal (the Antichrist figure) after his slaying at the hands of Jesus: “The Hour shall not arise until the Muslims fight the Jews, and the Jews will take refuge behind the rocks and the trees until they will speak, saying: ‘O ‘Abdallah, O Servant of God, there is a Jew behind me, so come and kill him’.”¹

One might get the impression from the frequency with which this tradition is cited in contemporary literature—including the Hamas Charter of 1988—that there is a great deal of anti-Jewish material in the classical Muslim apocalyptic literature. In fact, the opposite is the case, and with the exception of the identification of the Dajjal as Jewish, and some of his followers as Jews, there is little mention of Jews at all in the classical apocalyptic sources. Most of the enemies prominent in this literature are Christians, and most specifically the Byzantines. In order to compensate for this fact, contemporary Sunni writers have turned to the Bible and to 19th and early 20th century anti-Semitic conspiracy literature for additional sources. Both of these sources—the Bible in its apocalyptic books and sections especially—contain selections that are useful.

If one reads the Bible through the popular interpretations of Christian evangelical writers such as Hal Lindsey, who are overwhelmingly pro-Israel and even fixated upon Israel as a fulfillment of biblical prophecy, then one understands the Bible’s usefulness for Muslim apocalyptic writers. In both the Christian and the Muslim conceptions, the crux of the tribulations of the end is resolved when Jesus returns to the earth to either found the messianic kingdom and convert the Jews (in the Christian conception) or to assist in the founding of the messianic kingdom and to convert the Jews and the Christians (in the Muslim conception). The overlapping functions of Jesus make it possible for Muslims to re-read and to reinterpret the biblical prophecies, as evangelical writers have already done the hard work for them. And because of the attractiveness of the contemporary exegetical approach, which allows classical texts to be read as if they closely predict the events of today, Muslim apocalyptic texts have regained relevance. Even forgers

¹ Nu‘aym b. Hammad, *Kitab al-fitān* (Beirut: Dar al-Fikr, 1993), pp. 348, 350.

writing in the 1990s utilized the apocalyptic form to predict the victories of Iraq over the United States and the Palestinians over Israel.²

One should note that the figure of Jesus in Islam is quite controversial. Although he is a type of messiah (according to the Qur'an), he is usually not given exclusive messianic powers, as his presence during the messianic future would highlight his actual Qur'anic function as the bearer of the revelation immediately prior to that of Muhammad. Were he to assume exclusive messianic powers, that would detract from the finality of Muhammad's revelation. For this reason he is specifically said to defer to the primacy of the Mahdi (or Muslim messianic figure), who can be a descendent of Muhammad, and will attack Christian symbols such as the cross, and kill swine, as well as affirming his complete identification with Islam as opposed to Christianity.

The principal difference between the contemporary evangelical interpretation and the Muslim interpretation has to do with the role of Israel: messianic and salvific in the case of the evangelicals, demonic and malevolent in the case of the Muslims. Probably this attitude is best illustrated by the Saudi *sahwa* shaykh Safar al-Hawali, who writing in 2000, at the beginning of the Second Intifada, wrote *Intifadat Rajab: hal bada bi-Yawm al-Ghadab (Is the Intifada of Rajab the beginning of the Day of Wrath [of God]?)*, a phenomenal hit, translated into both English and French, and available all over the internet.³ al-Hawali's book represents a major effort to reread the Bible in a Muslim manner—indeed, he specifically states that he will eschew Muslim sources in order to demonstrate to his readership that his points can be proven from the Bible—and to offer a counter to the pro-Israel biblical interpretations pushed by evangelicals.

An example of his exegesis is the following, where he examines Jesus's prophecies concerning the destruction of the Second Temple

² Michael Cook, "Eschatology, History and the Dating of Traditions," *Princeton Papers in Near Eastern Studies* 1 (1992), pp. 23-48.

³ E.g., <http://www.islamicawakening.com/viewarticle.php?articleID=908>;
<http://www.religioscope.com/pdf/The%20Day%20of%20Wrath.pdf>.

(which he relates to alleged attempts by Israelis to destroy the Dome of the Rock):

“Now as [Jesus] sat on the Mount of Olives, the disciples came to him privately, saying, ‘Tell us, when will these things [the destruction of the Temple] be? And what will be the sign of your coming and of the end of the age?’ And Jesus answered them and said to them: ‘Take heed that no one deceives you. For many will come in my name saying: “I am the Christ” and will deceive many. And you will hear of wars and rumours of wars. See that you are not troubled; for all these things must come to pass, but the end is not yet. For nation will rise up against nations, and kingdom against kingdom. And there will be famines, pestilences and earthquakes in various places. All these are the beginning of sorrows...then many false prophets will rise up and deceive many people...but he who endures to the end will be saved [through the preaching of]....this gospel [or message of good news] of the kingdom will be preached in all the world as a witness to all the nations and then the end will come.

“Therefore, when you see the “abomination of desolation” spoken of by Daniel the prophet standing in the holy place (whoever reads, let him understand) then let those who are in Judea flee to the mountains...”⁴

This text is a standard apocalyptic biblical apocalypse given in full by al-Hawali, remarkably free of any Islamic interpolations or clarifications. His further exegesis, however, is instructive as to how he reads the text:⁵

“As usual we have texts concerning tremendous events, whose vagueness is bewildering, and the Christian disputation concerning them is extreme. This is because of the distortion of emendations and omissions, yet despite this, there is only one possible, correct interpretation. The more Jews and Christians—as we hope—use the free keys of symbolic interpretation which we have given them, the

⁴ Matthew 24:4-16.

⁵ Cited from *Day of Wrath*, section 9, “The Abomination of Desolation.”

more they will discover the acceptable interpretations—on the condition that textual distortions are always a possibility. The key in this case is the ‘Son of Man’, who is Muhammad—Allah’s blessing and peace be upon him, who is mentioned in this page of the gospel for a clear purpose, which is to distinguish between him and between the Son of the Virgin, Jesus—peace be upon him. We already understand the abomination of desolation, so when it is established it will be the Son of Man who comes, in the form of his armies, not in person.”

It is very interesting that al-Hawali here has proposed a radical reinterpretation of the function of Muhammad, as a messianic figure through the Muslim conquest of Jerusalem in 636 CE. His obfuscation concerning the critical interpretation of “the abomination of desolation” allows him to mix the initial Muslim conquest (from the Byzantines) with a future Muslim conquest from Israel (cf. Qur’an 17:4-8).

Hawali further states: “Thus, the subject is a combination of what is found in the book of Daniel and what is in the gospel...Luke, however, explains the abomination in such a way as to support out interpretation: ‘But when you see Jerusalem surrounded by armies, then know that the desolation is near’.” (Luke 21:20) al-Hawali has very carefully imposed the situation of the Roman attack upon Jerusalem in 70 CE upon that of Jerusalem in 2000. Of course, it goes without saying that such an imposition could have been affected for a number of situations during the intervening 2000 years.

Hawali continues with his exegesis:

“I doubt that even the fundamentalists would dispute that. In that case, what is Christ’s advice to those who live to see that time, the time of the establishment of the ‘abomination of desolation.’ He most clearly warns against false Christs in the first part of his speech and in the last part, and he warns against being deceived by their claim that Christ has come or is present here or there. He strongly warns against remaining among unclean ones, emphasizing that one must quickly flee from among them because of Allah’s

painful chastisement of them at the hands of the armies of the other messiah, the Son of Man, not the Son of the Virgin, whose armies will attack the unclean, decaying Zionist state like eagles attacking unclean, decaying flesh.

It is great advice, and as clear as the sun, but do people like Jerry Falwell, Pat Robertson or Jimmy Swaggart understand it?⁶ And will the chosen people (the Islamic community) listen so that they will not fall into error like the Jews and the Christians? Perhaps the fundamentalists will debate the interpretation of this text, as usual, saying that the Son of Man is a heavenly personality. That may be, but what do they say about Christ's advice when the abomination is set up? Is it in harmony with the great commotion and clamor they create out of their joy and happiness over the establishment of the abomination of desolation, their announcement to the world that its establishment heralds the coming of Christ, their encouragement to their followers to visit and make pilgrimage to it so that they will be there when he suddenly comes and the strong pressure they put on America and the rest of the world to support the state of the abomination and enmity? Is this not a great contradiction and rejection of Christ's advice?

Furthermore, do not all their gospels attribute the so-called killing of Christ and the plots against him to the Jews [an imposition of the anti-Semitic tropes into the material]? Has any rational person heard of a community that venerates the killer of the prophet whom they worship, and fights those who love that prophet and believe in him? Does not Christ describe the Jews as broods of vipers, killers of the prophets, who worship to be seen of men, blind guides, and extortioners? It is enough for you to read the twenty-third chapter of Matthew. When will the millions of fundamentalists who follow these false Christs wake up?"

al-Hawali then concludes this section with: "Now we have seen the establishment of the abomination of desolation [Israel], in all its

⁶ All prominent evangelical pastors from the 1970s and 1980s.

abomination and its desolation, its barbarity and atrocity, its idolatry and blasphemy, its cancellation of the daily prayers in the al-Aqsa Mosque, and its destruction and burning. We ask Allah's protection from their evil and to preserve what remains of His Sanctuary. Now we will go back to Christ's statement about it so as to see whether these Evangelical Zionists are truly Christians as they claim, or followers of the Zionist beast, whether they know it or not."

While one can obviously dispute his historical interpretations and cannot say that his efforts have been noticed by many Christians, let alone evangelicals, the *Day of Wrath* represents the culmination of a great deal of Muslim apocalyptic thinking of the 1980s and 1990s. It also represents a decisive rejection of the pre-modern Muslim reluctance to conduct exegesis of the Bible (as the Bible is considered to be a corrupted document).

Anti-Semitic literature is a good fit as a source for contemporary Muslim apocalyptic predictions, as most of it presents the Jewish people as the malevolent driving force of history, a force that moreover is leading to a demonic, technologically-driven, anti-God society, a type of anti-messianic state. Here the overlap in apocalyptic expectations is actually with the Muslim materials themselves, as they present the Dajjal as being a Jew. While the use of anti-Semitic literature was popular during the 1980s and 1990s, in my opinion it has lessened in importance during the more recent past.

Apocalyptic has a cyclicity about it that is responsive to current events. This usually involves something of what scholars have described as "triangulation"—i.e., the conjunction of a contemporary event which can in some way be seen as a fulfillment of a classical prophecy, whether it is general in nature such as the foundation of the state of Israel or the appearance of a certain political leader, or perhaps an economic collapse, or a natural event or disaster, with some movement to give momentum to the fulfillment of prophecy. This triangulation can trigger an apocalyptic moment where events and predictions seem to feed into each other, creating something of a frenzy. A good example of this type of events

was the year 2000, where one witnessed a confluence between secular fears of Y2K, the religious feelings of expectations that Jesus would return 2000 years after the beginning of the Christian calendar, and the possibility that the Temple would be rebuilt that self-same year by Jewish radicals. All of these fears were channeled into Muslim apocalyptic expectations as well.

2012 has something of a similar grouping of apocalyptic expectations, mainly focused upon the Mayan calendar and its supposed prediction of the end of the world on December 21, together with the confluence of this with other astronomical disasters due to happen during this year. However, in contradistinction to the year 2000 there does not appear to be a widespread movement associated with 2012. For Muslim apocalyptic writers the most obvious apocalyptic moments were in the late 1990s, and they were especially associated with the Second Intifada of 2000. There were frequent linkages at that time to the well-known Hadith of Thawban:

“Thawban said: Allah’s Messenger, peace and blessings be upon him, said: Imminently, there will come a time when the nations gather against you, just as people gather around a feast. A man said: Will it be because we are few at that time, O Allah’s Messenger? He responded, No, you will be numerous in those times, but you will be as useless as the scum of the sea, and Allah will remove the fear of you that your enemies used to possess from their chests, and He will place *al-wahn* [weakness] in your hearts. It was said: What is *al-wahn*? he responded, Love of life and hatred of death.”⁷

The conjunction of this hadith and its seeming prediction of the situation of the 1990s, in which large numbers of Muslims believed that the entirety of the world was focusing upon persecuting and killing Muslims, was enough to lend Salafi-jihadi movements impetus, and an apocalyptic

⁷ Many citations in Sulaym b. ‘Id al-Hilali al-Silafi, *al-Fawa'id al-hisan min hadith Thawban* (Casablanca: Dar Ibn ‘Affan, 2001), from all the major collections.

flavor. The problem of apocalyptic prophecies, however, quickly manifested itself with regard to this specific tradition: is the prediction predictive, or in other words, is it God's decree for the future, or is it descriptive, in which case decisive action should and could be taken so that the prediction does not come about or is nullified. The second option would suggest viewing the prediction as a warning from God to the believers, while the first option would suggest a deterministic outlook towards the future.

In general, Islam has favored the deterministic interpretation of God's will, although this attitude has not been consistent, and Shi'ites especially are much more open to a non-deterministic view of the future. A good example of the problems inherent in the apocalyptic prophecies are those which Shaykh Bassam Jarir of Hamas has derived from Qur'an 17:4-8, from which he predicted the end of Israel in the year 2022 through the use of gematrical calculations. Quite aside from its utility, one should note as above that such exegesis, which is entirely new, demonstrates the contemporary Muslim need to find new sources for apocalyptic predictions. However, Jarir's prediction, issued in 1995, creates problems for Hamas as well that are illustrative of the dilemma above. If God has predicted the end of Israel for 2022, then why should anyone bother do anything about it? God's intent will be carried out, whether humans do anything at all about it. Or is the prediction that God will grant success at that particular date to a long effort leading up to that period? If so, what was the purpose of the prediction, especially given that a computer was required to figure it out in the first place? (Shaykh Ahmad Yassin recalculated the relevant date to either 2026 or 2027).⁸

Other major figures, such as the American-Turkish Muslim Harun Yahya, have subjected a number of Qur'anic verses containing eschatological content to analysis and calculated the importance of a large number of years ranging between 1959-2036.⁹ In fact, Yahya uses the very verses which Jarir uses to date the end of Israel to 2022, to date it to

⁸ Bassam Jarir, *Ziwal Isra'il 2022* (Beirut: Maktabat al-Biqā' al-Haditha, 1995). Trans. Mohammad Yasin Owadally (Kuala Lumpur: A.S. Nooreddin, 2002).

⁹ <http://harunyahya.com/en/51/categories/mahdi-jesus-and-the-end>.

2019. How is one supposed to know which is correct? This problem is endemic throughout Sunni materials.

Contemporary Shi'ite apocalyptic has a somewhat different trajectory than does contemporary Sunni material. Firstly, the injection of non-Muslim material that caused such an explosion among the Sunnis in the 1980s and 1990s made virtually no impression upon the Shi'ites. Contemporary Shi'ite literature from the period of the Islamic Revolution in 1978-79 until approximately 2005 is in close relation to the pre-modern material. It is all focused upon the Hidden Imam, the Mahdi, and his revelation, as imminent but not yet. None of the classical traditions are connected to contemporary events.

With the advent of the Mahdaviyyat in the early 2000s, and most especially with the election of President Mahmud Ahmadinejad of Iran in 2005, these traditions became actualized. One of the major manifestations of this change has been the development of the cult of Jamkaran, near Qum.¹⁰ This location has always been a possible dwelling or communication focus for the Mahdi from pre-modern times, but its veracity has either been doubted by top '*ulama*' or never fully endorsed by them. The very existence of an actual site associated with the revelation of the Mahdi sets Shi'ite apocalyptic aspirations apart from those of Sunnis, who have no such focus. Traditionally, even in Shi'ism communication with the Mahdi has been focused upon the vast reams of *tawqi'at* or notes, receipts from him, usually to prominent '*ulama*' and dealing with doctrinal issues, while placing all aspirations concerning his revelation, similar to those of Jesus in Christianity, outside consideration.

But with the revival of Jamkaran under the Mahdaviyyat an entire literature of the future has developed, focused upon the idealized society which will be led by the Mahdi. Literature available at Jamkaran includes detailed descriptions of the future society such as economic structures, its relations with non-Muslims, all major military policies, and even personal details of the Mahdi's family and his intimate connections. It is necessary

¹⁰ For a history of the site, see Muhammad Reza Fakh-Rohani, *Unseen, yet with us: A brief biography of Imam al-Mahdi* (Qumm: The Holy Mosque of Jamkaran Press, 2000).

to contrast this plethora of future planning with the Sunni lack of such material. Outside observers have long commented upon the nebulousness of the programs of Sunni radicals, who call for either a pan-Islamic or a caliphal state.¹¹ With some few exceptions, such as the proposed draft constitution associated with the Hizb al-Tahrir,¹² there exist few detailed descriptions of what a radical Muslim state would look like or how, from a practical point of view, it would actualize justice.

Indeed, with the rise of the Muslim Brotherhood in post-Arab Spring Egypt and Tunisia, the fault lines of these comparatively mainstream Muslim political parties have been revealed. In their all-encompassing opposition to the previous authoritarian regimes, they were able to escape delineating their political positions on a great many details which they are now forced to confront.

However, with the Mahdaviyyat these types of details of the idealized messianic society have been clarified. During the present period the problems of what will happen in the future are being hashed out. One such discussion was the document “al-Imam al-Mahdi, the just leader of humanity,” which records verbatim (apparently) the discussions that occurred between a number of different figures, religious, intellectual and scientific, on the subject of the Mahdi. The topics include the establishment of the idea that the Mahdi is indeed the figure hoped for by the traditional Shi‘ites (the Twelfth Imam), that he was just a boy of 5 years, that he could live for a period of some 1100 years—with an extensive discussion concerning the issue of human longevity.

The most interesting discussions, however, are those that concern the Mahdi’s future plans. These for the most part do not rely upon the classical narrations. One such example, from chapter 14, is the question of what will happen to the religious minorities during the period of the Mahdi:

¹¹ William Shepard, “What is ‘Islamic Fundamentalism’?,” *Studies in Religion* 17 (1988), pp. 5-26.

¹² <http://www.khilafah.com/index.php/the-khilafah/khilafah/15326-a-draft-constitution-of-the-khilafah-state>.

Will the Majority of the Peoples on the Earth Be Killed?

Engineer Madani: As you all are aware Muslims today are a minority in the world. The sizeable majority inhabiting the planet is non-Muslim. The Shi'a are also a minority in comparison to other schools of thought among Muslims. Among the Shi'a, it must be pointed out in all honesty, there are many evildoers and corrupt people. On the basis of the way things move in a society, in addition to some analogical deduction, this religious scene of the world is unlikely to change drastically. It is possible to speculate that at the time when the Mahdi appears the Shi'a will still be a minority. My question is this: Is it logical and credible to maintain that the majority of the world's population will simply submit and will not resist as they are being eliminated by the soldiers of the Imam of the Age? Moreover, if the majority of the inhabitants of the world are going to be killed, then this earth will look like a huge cemetery. Does it mean then that the Shi'a will rule over this large cemetery? Surely this action cannot be identified as an act of reform and such a government as the universal authority!

Mr. Hoshyar: Actually we do not have sufficient information about the future world. We cannot speculate about the future on the basis of the past. The Muslim assessment of the situation about the human condition is that humanity is already in a state of perfection in terms of capability and mentality. With the Mahdi's revolution they will be even more prepared to accept the truth. We often hear that many intellectuals in the east and the west have become aware that their own traditions and religions do not have the ability to satisfy their conscience. At the same time, the natural thirst to worship God and to search for a religion has not been entirely quenched and does not leave them in peace. As such, they are in search of a religion that is free from all sorts of superstitions and corrupt beliefs, and whose spiritual power can provide them with satisfying nourishment. It is in keeping with this human search for the path that can satisfy their spiritual quest that one can speculate about the future human society's movement towards discovering the

truth about Islamic knowledge and the permanence of its ordinances. At that point, it will become evident to them that the only creed which can respond positively to the inner needs and guarantee physical and mental happiness is Islam.

Unfortunately, we are not well equipped, both in terms of courage and means, to inform the peoples of the world about the Islamic truth and its pure teachings. Nevertheless, the people's search for truth, on the one hand, and the well stipulated ordinances of Islam, on the other, will ultimately allow the problem to resolve by itself. At such an opportune time, peoples of the world will convert to the Islamic faith in the thousands, making them a majority. In addition, on the basis of general prevailing conditions at the time of the appearance, one can speculate that when the promised Mahdi emerges and presents Islamic truths to the world, informing humanity about Islam's revolutionary and reformative aspects, large numbers of people will accept Islam. Hence, they will save themselves from being killed. For, on the one hand, they will have perfected their ability to perceive religious truth and, on the other, they will have witnessed the miracles performed by the Imam of the Age. Moreover, they will find the social conditions extraordinary and inexplicable, and the call of the leader of the revolution will reach their ears. These circumstances will lead thousands and thousands of people to convert to Islam at the hands of the Mahdi, thereby saving themselves from destruction. As for those who persist in their disbelief after all these signs, the Peoples of the Book, that is, the Jews and the Christians, will continue to receive the protection of the Islamic government. Other sinful and corrupt disbelievers will be killed by the universal upholder of justice, the Mahdi. The number of the latter group will, consequently, be insignificant.¹³

Many other similar exchanges and discussions could be adduced. It is interesting that basically the answer here is that people will want to

¹³ <http://yamahdi.com/new1/pdf/justlead.pdf>, chapter 14.

convert because of their attraction to the Mahdi, but that there is still the possibility that large numbers will in fact be killed by him. In many cases the future conversion of apparent enemies of Islam is the solution to problems. Sunni apocalyptic writers stated throughout the 1990s that were it not for the believers currently unborn in the United States, God would have destroyed the country.¹⁴

The “Imam al-Mahdi” discussions also make clear that the Mahdi’s rule will govern from the Iranian city of Qumm, away from the traditional Muslim centers of Mecca—Medina or even Jerusalem, which are listed in most texts, to the Irano-centered present Shi‘ite world.¹⁵ As one can imagine, the city of Qumm is hardly mentioned in the classical Shi‘ite apocalyptic materials.



Another manifestation of the reality of the Mahdi in Shi‘ism is his depiction on the covers of books and posters. Artistic depictions and cartoon drawings of sacred figures has recently become a controversial subject in Islam. Pictures of heroic figures such as ‘Ali b. Abi Talib, al-Husayn or Abu al-Fazl al-‘Abbas are often seen in contemporary Iran. I myself have purchased several in Isfahan. Their pictures are often idealized and emphasize their age and

nobility (‘Ali) or their heroic characteristics or self-sacrifice (al-Husayn, ‘Abbas).

Pictures of the Mahdi are traditionally much more reticent. But the recent literature has given us an opportunity to view the Mahdi, usually seen

¹⁴ E.g., D. Cook, *Contemporary Muslim Apocalyptic Literature* (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 2005), chapter 7.

¹⁵ <http://yamahdi.com/new1/pdf/justlead.pdf>, p. 227f.

with a powerful body, dressed in green, with a blinding lightburst over his face.



These images show the ideal of the Mahdi as Jesus Christ Pantokrator, so often seen in Christian churches, or even as Apollo, and prevents inordinate speculation as to his actual facial features. However, the burst of light also tends to blur the lines between the Mahdi as a human figure and one with

prophetic characteristics (such as the well-known light of Muhammad). Moreover, the Mahdaviyyat has retrojected the Mahdi's participation in recent but contemporary Shi'ite events in either Iran or Lebanon. For example, there is little contemporary evidence from the 1980s that the Mahdi was thought of as actually participating in the Iran-Iraq War (1980-88). In reality, as Werner Schmucker has detailed, the discourse at the time presented the conflict as one between the forces of al-Husayn and the evil Umayyad caliph Yazid.¹⁶ But today, books are sold in which



martyrs are greeted by the Mahdi, given medallions as regalia by him and are ushered into their martyrdom by him personally. Additionally, the Mahdi is described as having fought together with the Iranians against Iraq (ironically also largely Shi'ite) and having partaken in the battles.¹⁷

¹⁶ Werner Schmucker, "Iranische Märtyrertestamente," *Die Welt des Islams* 27 (1987), pp. 185-249.

¹⁷ E.g., Muhammad Riza Ramadannejad, *'Inayat-i Imam-i Zaman dar hasht-i sal-i difa'-i muqaddas* (Qumm: 'Asr-i Rahiya, 1386/2005).

Equally, there is no contemporary evidence that Hizbullah featured the Mahdi during its war against Israel in southern Lebanon (1985-2000). But from the 2006 campaign, named al-Wa'd al-Sadiq, there are a number of descriptions of the Mahdi personally participating in the fighting, deflecting Israeli fire, and most especially tanks, and otherwise aiding Hizbullah. In all this material there is a move away from the Mahdi as a distant figure towards one taking the place of either al-Husayn or Abu al-Fazl as a heroic figure. As one might suspect, this is not an easy sell, as the basic fact of the Mahdi's occultation does not suggest a heroic figure, but one who is in hiding, fearful of his life, in sharp contrast to the fact that al-Husayn went out at the cost of his own life in order to confront injustice.

None of this personal presence is reflected in Sunnism, neither in its mainstream nor its radical forms. Indeed, today among the radicals, the figure of the Mahdi is most commonly conflated with that of the caliph, as it was during the period of the Taliban (1996-2001) in Afghanistan, where the personality of Mullah 'Umar was given messianic titles. Radicals frequently deemphasize the genealogical connections of the messianic figure in any case, preferring to idealize one who is anonymous, perhaps even non-Arab, presumably in order to emphasize the universality of Islam, and one whose legitimacy comes from fighting to defend Islam.

Sunni and Shi'ite radicals together demonstrate a striking antagonism towards contemporary Islam, deeming it to be hopelessly compromised and claiming that "true Islam" is only characteristic of a small percentage of the world Muslim community. This attitude is expressed by the classical tradition "Islam began as a stranger, and will return to being a stranger, so blessed are the strangers."¹⁸ According to the logic of this tradition, history is cyclical and the minority status of

¹⁸ See al-Ajurri, *Kitab al-ghuraba' min al-mu'minin* (Damascus: Dar al-Basha'ir, 1992) for this tradition, and its explanation. The name *al-ghuraba'* has become popular among radical Sunnis as a name for many groups, such as that founded by Abu Musa'b al-Suri in Mazar-i-Sharif (1999), and the Indonesian radical group (headed by the son of Jamaa Islamiyya leader Abu Bakr Ba'asyir) exposed in Pakistan in 2003.

Muslims present at the beginning of Islam will recur at the end of time. This fact is difficult to resolve with the large number of Muslims apparently present in the world today, and can only be understood by the radical Muslim recourse to the dichotomy between “true Islam” and (presumably) “false Islam.” Of course, the former would be a small minority within the sea of false Muslims.

That Shi‘ite radicals are sympathetic to this viewpoint is clear from the “al-Imam al-Mahdi” document as well, in spite of the fact that Iran has been ruled by a doctrinaire Islamic government for the past 30 some years.

Mr. Hoshyar: In such *hadith*-reports the Prophet has not predicted more than a particular detail that there will be a time that the true Islam will disappear and no more than an image of it will remain; and that, although there will be Muslims, they will be far from the true Islam. However, this prediction is also in accord with Muslims being in the majority, because it is possible that in spite of being Muslims they will be little affected by the truth and spirituality of Islam. Yet the heavy dust of inconsistency and antiquated traditionalism that will have descended upon Islam will be eradicated by the very existence of the twelfth Imam, who will lay the foundation for a renewal of the religious edifice. In this regard it is worth recalling the Prophet’s tradition in which he said:

I swear by the One in Whose hand is my life that Islam and Muslims will always be in increase, whereas disbelief and those who associate other beings with God will be in decrease. He then added: I solemnly declare that wherever night reaches this religion will reach.

It is sufficient to point out that, first of all, it is predicted that before the twelfth Imam appears the Muslim community will attain a majority status. Second, when he appears many people will convert to Islam because the level of human perfection will have advanced to such heights that it will enable people to accept the truth of Islam, as many traditions have reported. In the following tradition Imam

[Muhammad al-]Baqir has declared: When our Qa'im [Mahdi] rises, God will stroke the heads of His creatures with mercy, thereby making their mind more flawless, and able to realize their dreams by means of it.¹⁹

Again, it is very interesting that the apocalyptic mindset of the discussants allows them to enjoy the fact of the majority Muslim population (in terms of numbers) at the same time as they are able to feel part of a minority status as “true Muslims” and believers. The obliviousness exhibited during the discussions, and the tacit assumption by the discussants that *of course* they are part of the true believers, is quite remarkable.

For most Muslims however, there is no particular immediacy to the revelation of the Mahdi, nor any concentration upon his specific ethnic or genealogical connections. In general, Mahdi candidates during the recent past who are Sunnis have in fact been non-Arab, appearing regularly in West Africa, Pakistan or Turkey, and have not been associated with radical Islam. Indeed, although one cannot say that apocalyptic themes are dominant in either classical or contemporary Islam, we can say in conclusion that they are present in the search for a just state, the *shari'a* state or the pan-Islamic state to be ruled by either a caliph or a Mahdi. Today these themes are both interpretive in nature, in the sense that they drive Muslims to seek confirmation from classical texts as to the predictions of current events—a change strikingly similar to that current in evangelical Christianity—and action-based. The latter tendency is manifested in purificationist movements that are usually of a Salafi-jihadi character, which collectively seek to purify the world of Islam from any manifestation that is seen (through a Salafi lens) to be of a Sufi or a syncretistic nature. Although there is not much evidence that Salafis can actually establish viable states, with a few marginal exceptions (Afghanistan under the Taliban, parts of Somalia, Pakistan and West Africa), their world-view does appeal to elements of the Muslim world.

What is more, even by those to whom this world-view is not appealing it is oftentimes seen as being normative, what “true Islam” (a

¹⁹ <http://yamahdi.com/new1/pdf/justlead.pdf>, p. 229.

nebulous term used by Salafis and radical Shi'ites) should be. Today, the wave of Salafi-jihadism prevalent in the 1990s and early 2000s has largely run its course, having demonstrated its inability to appeal to the broader Muslim public or to establish a successful state, but as an intellectual-religious current it will continue until the next apocalyptic wave, most likely appearing around the years 2020-22 according to their predictions.

The Nehemia Levtzion Center for Islamic Studies

The Nehemia Levtzion Center for Islamic Studies was established at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem in 2004. It aims to encourage and initiate research relating to Islam as a religion and a civilization from its advent in the seventh century C.E. until today, in the Arab world, elsewhere in the Middle East, in Asia and Africa, and in the West. To fulfill this goal, the Center organizes research groups, conferences, seminars and lectures; supports individual and collaborative research; grants scholarships; and encourages dialogue between scholars of Islamic studies and related fields. Islam is approached not only as a religion, but, more broadly, as a culture and a civilization. As such, the Center deals with a range of subjects that include religious thought and practice, material and intellectual culture, politics, society, economics, and interfaith relations.

To this end, the Center supports interdisciplinary research in religious studies, history, the social sciences, law and other fields. Innovative research projects within specific disciplines are also encouraged and supported. The Center directs some of its activities to the general public with the aim of bringing about greater understanding of the Islamic faith and civilization. The Center's publications seek to reach a wide audience of scholars as well as the public at large.

The Center is named in memory of the late Professor Nehemia Levtzion, a noted scholar of the history of Islam in Africa and the social history of Islamic religion and culture, who passed away in August 2003. He was also known for his public activities in the sphere of academic administration and related issues, both within the Hebrew University and on a national level.

The Annual Nehemia Levtzion Lectures bring distinguished international scholars to the Levtzion Center for Islamic Studies to deliver a talk on a subject of broad interest in the field of Islamic studies. They are held in cooperation with leading academic institutions in Israel, and are later published by the Levtzion Center.

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