

Middle East

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Among scholars of Islam and some Muslims today, a curious misperception dominates: that only the Shi'a believe in the coming the awaited Mahdi. Sunni Arab views of the Mahdi since the Six Days War of 1967 have reached heretofore unplumbed depths of eschatological belief and the vigorous debate among the Arab intelligentsia concerning these beliefs, as well as the degree to which they impact the Muslim social and political realms, have followed suit.

Modern discourse, particularly in the American media, tends to distil Islamic ideological categories into only two: 'fundamentalists,' who are portrayed negatively, and reformers, who are depicted in a more positive light. However, this reductionist paradigm fails to take into account the eclectic views of many Muslims, not least that group which expects the imminent arrival of the Mahdi and attempts not only to anchor eschatology in current events but also to reconfigure the politico-military context so as to hasten his arrival.

Eschatological figures in Islam

The term 'al-Mahdi', meaning 'rightly-guided', surprisingly appears nowhere in the Qur'an. Rather, the characteristics and role of the eschatological Mahdi, as well as the political context in which he will appear, are described in a number of *hadith*, or traditions. Three of the six major 9th-century CE compilers of *hadith* – Ibn Mâjah, Abu Dâ'ûd and al-Tirmidhî – do mention the Mahdi. However, the two most authoritative compilers, al-Bukhârî and Muslim b. al-Hajjâj, eschewed such accounts. The source of Mahdist narratives plays into whether one accepts the idea as legitimate, as we shall see below.

Just who is this Mahdi, according to the traditions? He is one of the five major eschatological figures of Islam, along with Jesus, the Dajjâl or 'Deceiver' (Antichrist), the Dâbbah or 'Beast,' and the collective entity Yâjûj and Mâjûj, 'Gog and Magog'. The parallels with Christian eschatology, *mutatis mutandis*, are obvious: all of these end-time figures appear in the New Testament, especially its final book, Revelation. However, Jesus will reappear not as the Son of God and Judge but as the Muslim prophet sent back to assist the Mahdi in defeating the Dajjâl and establishing socio-economic and political justice on earth. The Dajjâl will be the miracle-working leader of the unbelievers and will be killed by Jesus. The enormous Dâbbah will emerge from the earth and mock unbelievers while the semi-human armies of Gog and Magog will escape from the prison built for them by Alexander the Great to pillage across the planet until destroyed by God at Jesus' behest. Other end-time events include earthquakes, great fires, appearance of false prophets, speaking animals, increase in immorality, the sun rising in the West, the striking of all words from the pages of every Qur'an and the predominance of unbelief. Finally, at some point Jesus and the Mahdi will die natural deaths and, in the eschatological denouement, the angel Isrâfîl will blow his trumpet twice: at the first all humans will die; at the second all will be resurrected for the Judgement.

Throughout Islamic history many religio-political leaders have claimed Mahdi-hood. Most rapidly faded back into obscurity. Some gathered followers, however, and a few took power. The most successful such movements were the Abbasids in the 8th-century CE Islamic heartlands, the Fatimids in 10th-century CE Egypt, the Almohads in 12th-century CE North Africa and, most recently, Muhammad Ahmad's followers in

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the 1880s in Sudan. Several other Mahdist-type movements in the last two centuries succeeded by transforming into separate religions: the Baha'is of 19th-century Iran, the Ahmadis of 19th-century India. In recent years only two such movements have developed in the Middle East: that of a self-styled Mahdi in Saudi Arabia in 1979, which met with a violent end; and the *sub rosa* movement that accompanied the success of the Ayatolloah Khomeini, in which whisperings that he was the Mahdi (Hidden Imam to Shi'ites) went un denied.

Mahdism today

The Muslim world today is devoid of Mahdist claimants – so far. However, an Arab debate about the truth of Mahdism, and its meaning today, has been gathering steam and began boiling over after the Six Days War of 1967. There are several reasons for this. One is that millenarian movements within the entire Judaeo-Christian-Islamic milieu escalate sharply in a period of societal angst, which 1967 proved to be for the Arabs.¹ Another is widespread frustration at the failure of Arab economies to effectively raise living standards, of Arab governments to achieve unity and of the embarrassing dependence upon the world's lone superpower, the United States. Finally, although non-millenarian in the true sense of the word – Latin *milleni* means 1000, a period of time which holds no resonance for Muslims – the Islamic world has been unable to immunize itself against the influence of the world's largest religion, Christianity, and its *de facto* world calendar. Secular millennial issues like the Y2K bug, in tandem with religious aspects like the second coming of Christ, have fanned eschatological flames within the Arab portion of the Muslim world.

The slice of this debate examined here is that taking place within the Arab print media – specifically books.² The analysis can be summed up in the following paradigm:

Literalists

1. Qur'anic – No Mahdi in Qur'an, so false
2. Hadith
 - a. Not in Bukhârî or Muslim, so false
 - b. In other compilers, so true

Figurativists

1. Mahdi pernicious superstition
2. Mahdi benign superstition

Many opponents of Mahdism take their cues from the brilliant Ibn Khaldûn (d. 1406 CE). This intellectual, considered by some as the father of sociology, saw the Mahdi as a pernicious Shi'î heresy which had crept into Sunnism via the Sufism. This is the view of two modern opponents of Mahdism, 'Abd al-Karim al-Khâtib in *The Awaited Mahdi and Those Who Await Him* (Cairo, 1980) and 'Abd al-Qâdir Ahmad Atâ in *The Awaited Mahdi between Truth and Superstition* (Cairo, 1980). In fact both adduce Ibn Khaldûn's motive for rejecting Mahdism: it is Sufi-transmitted Shi'ism. Al-Khâtib also calls upon the *ulema* to abandon such foolishness and turn their attention to renewing Islam, while 'Atâ maintains that the

true Mahdiyyah will not come by means of a supernatural individual but via renewing and reforming Islam.

This Sunni scepticism about the Mahdi has given way, in recent years, to positive conviction about him. Muhammad Ibrâhîm al-Jamal, in *The Aggression and the Awaited Mahdi* (1980), says the Mahdi will come amidst unmistakable signs, but that Khomeini is (was) not the one. Hamzah al-Faqîr in *Three Whom the World Awaits: the Expected Mahdi, the False Messiah, Messiah Jesus* (Amman, 1995), is one of a growing number of supporters of Mahdism who adduces Sayyid Qutb (d. 1966), the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood strategist. More than most writers, however, al-Faqîr attempts to link current events to those presaging the Mahdi's appearance: particularly, he sees the 'tyrannical rule' of the exploitative 'petty states' under which most Muslims live as crying out for redress by the Mahdi, who will also humble 'Pharaoh,' otherwise known as the United States. A more idiosyncratic view is that of Kâmil Sa'fân, *The Twenty-Fifth Hour: the False Messiah, the Mahdi, Gog and Magog* (Cairo, 1995), who manages to work the *Protocols of the Elders of Zion*, the Masonic Lodge and Jeane Dixon (the American psychic) into his philosophy of Mahdism. Amîn Muhammad Jamâl al-Dîn, in *The Life-span of the Islamic Community and the Nearness of the Appearance of the Mahdi* (Cairo, 1996), argues that the Mahdi's coming is very close and will be immediately preceded by a world war – which he terms *Harmagiddun* (Armageddon) – between al-Rûm, the West, and either China, Russia and the communist countries or Iran, Iraq and the Shi'a nations. A more 'ecumenical', less polemical approach is that of Bâsim al-Hâshimî in *The Savior between Islam and Christianity: A Study in the Cooperation between the Mahdi and the Messiah* (Beirut, 1996). He adduces Qur'an, *hadith* and New Testament to argue that the Mahdi and Jesus will cooperate to create a 'united world state'.

One final example of Mahdist believers is Fahd Sâlim who, in his 1996 book, *The Signs of the Hour and the Attack of the West before [the end of?] 1999*, maintains that the Mahdi will be preceded by an Iranian – Shi'î – Dajjâl. Sâlim is one of several Arab authors who conflate Francis Fukuyama's idea of the 'end of history' (the triumph of democratic capitalism) with Samuel Huntington's 'clash of civilizations' (religio-cultural fault lines between cultures engendering conflict) into an ancient plot by the West against Islam. Sâlim also has an interesting way of explaining the *hadith* references to end-time warfare being fought with swords: after America's nuclear Armageddon against the Muslims, those will be the only extant weapons. Also, interestingly enough, he adduces Nostadamus' 16th-century predictions in defence of his arguments.

The non-Mahdist Muhammad Farîd Hijâb, in *The Awaited Mahdi between Religious Doctrine and Political Meaning* (Algeria, 1984), has the most philosophical deconstruction of the Mahdist idea: that it is a conflation of the motifs of the ancient Near Eastern deliverer, Plato's philosopher-king, and Machiavelli's strong man which survives today as a

useful oppositional paradigm to unjust regimes. More prosaic is the criticism of Mahdism found in the anonymous work, *The Cutting Sword—The True Explication of the Book 'The Life-span of the Islamic Community and the Nearness of the Appearance of the Mahdi* (Cairo, 1998), which critiques that pro-Mahdist book for adopting irrelevant Western concepts like 'the end of history' and for fostering the dangerous idea that the Arabs must re-take Jerusalem before the Mahdi can come.

As this brief survey of modern Arabic works confirms, Mahdism, which has existed almost as long as Islam, shows no signs of waning. For although Muslims are a-millennial, they do expect the coming of a *mujaddid*, or 'renewer,' every 100 years – an idea which can be easily fused with that of the Mahdi. And since the next Muslim century begins in 2076, 'eschatological ideas will continue to play an important role in the Islamic world into the twenty-first century.'³ ◆

Notes

1. Thrupp, Sylvia, ed. (1970), *Millennial Dreams in Action: Studies in Revolutionary Religious Movements*. New York: Schocken Books, pp. 31-42 and Ajami, Fouad (1981), *The Arab Predicament: Arab Political Thought and Practice since 1967*. New York: Warner Books, Inc.
2. English translations are given throughout the article for Arabic titles.
3. Hamblin, William and Peterson, Daniel (1995), 'Eschatology,' *The Oxford Encyclopedia of the Modern Islamic World*, p. 442.

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