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ESCHATOLOGY AS POLITICS, ESCHATOLOGY AS THEORY: MODERN SUNNI ARAB MAHDISM IN HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVE

DISSERTATION

Presented in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree Doctor of Philosophy in the Graduate School of The Ohio State University

By

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* * * * *

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ABSTRACT

Mahdism, the nearest Islamic analog to messianism, is generally seen by scholars as operative within Shi'ism but not within Sunnism. To the extent that the existence of Mahdism within Sunnî Islam is acknowledged, it is usually portrayed as being primarily the province of the past, and/or of only marginal elements in the modern Islamic world.

These stereotypes are false. There is a continuing belief among many of the world’s Sunnî Muslims in the Mahdi—the “rightly-guided one”—who will come near the end of time to cooperate with the returned prophet Jesus in combating the forces of evil and usher in a world-wide Islamic state.

The evidence marshaled for this observation is drawn from an analytical survey of a selected number of modern Arabic-language works dealing with the Mahdi written since the defining event of modern Arab history, the Six-Days War of 1967. An examination of such books, both pro- and anti-Mahdist, reveals that the idea of the Mahdi is very much alive and well in the Sunnî Arab world today.

An evaluation of the most influential and successful Mahdist movements in Islamic history—the 'Abbâsids, Fâṭimids, Muwahhids and Sudanese Mahdists—
reveals a nine-point paradigm for analyzing such movements across space and time: overt Mahdist claims, eschatological/utopian tenor, attempts to seize political power, Shi`i influences, peripheral origins, social justice orientation, `ulamâ‘ leadership, sufi involvement and conscious recapitulation of Prophetic models (particularly the hijrah).

Modern Sunnî Arab Mahdism exhibits some of these characteristics but, since the last Mahdist attempt to seize power failed in 1979, the belief has been relegated to the realm of abstraction. As such, it can be seen in a number of different ways: as a brand of fundamentalist Islam; as an eschatological meta-conspiracy theory; as a means of politically empowering those on the Islamic peripheries; as a yearning for social justice; as a religious fantasy; and as a malleable ideology for opposing any regime. Besides its abstraction, modern Mahdism exhibits two other characteristics that distinguish it from its articulation in the past: utilization of Christian, particularly Protestant, eschatological theorizing; and a heavy dose of anti-"Zionist" propaganda.
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I would like to thank my adviser Jane Hathaway for her time, invaluable suggestions and incisive criticism, as well as for exhibiting the patience of Job.

I also owe a great debt of gratitude to Dona Straley and Pat Visel. Their assistance in finding Mahdist-related works, and in chasing down cites both elusive and obscure, was vital; so, too, was their moral support.

Leila Rupp provided encouragement and assistance when I was at the lowest period of my graduate study. For that, I am grateful.

Thanks to Joby Abernathy for taking care of the requisite paperwork and other bureaucratic hurdles long-distance.

The prayers, encouragement and motivation of all my friends have been critical, but I particularly wish to thank Randy and Cassie Kline, Dan Hanson and Fr. Chuck Treadwell in this respect.

This dissertation would never have been completed without the love, support, motivation and formatting skills of my wife, Davina. Thank you, dear.

Thomas à Kempis wrote, “On the day of judgment we will not be asked what we have read.” If that happens to change, I am now prepared.

Most of all I wish to thank God for His grace and support.
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CHAPTER 1

No comprehensive study of the whole range of Mahdi themes and historical movements exists.¹

The political implications of the whole millennial idea in Islam...are very difficult to separate from the eschatological ones....The hope of something better to come has informed both theology and socio-political expectations, and the translation of the promise of a time of universal peace and justice is easily made from this age to the next (and back again).²

I. Purpose, Scope, Sources and Methodology³

The purpose of this dissertation is to examine the various viewpoints toward Mahdism, or Islamic messianism, that have developed since that great defining moment in modern Arab history: the 1967 War, sometimes called the Six-Days War. This requires a systematic study of published views among the


³ The approach to transliteration of Arabic terms and names employed herein is this: whenever the original Arabic text is available, rigorous Arabic-to-English transliteration will be employed. However, where the original Arabic is unavailable and cannot be reconstructed from the non-Arabic (usually English) text, I will defer to that source’s rendering. Also, commonly-used, Anglicized terms ("sufi," for example) will be retained. Finally, Arabic terms introduced in the text of this dissertation will be italicized the first time only, for emphasis, and not thereafter.
modern Sunnî⁴ Arab intelligentsia regarding the eschatological figure known to Islamic history as the Mahdi.⁵ I have chosen to differentiate between Sunnî and Shîʾî millenarianism and study them separately.

There were two reasons for choosing 1967 as a benchmark from which to begin a study of modern views of Mahdism. One is that, in general, millenarian movements within the Judaeo-Christian-Islamic milieu tend to occur within periods of societal frustration, humiliation and dislocation.⁶ The other is that in the twentieth century no event has elicited such negative repercussions in the Arab Muslim psyche, both collectively and individually, as the shattering defeat of the combined militaries of Egypt, Syria, Jordan and Iraq by the Israelis in 1967. In the wake of its victory Israel occupied the Sinai peninsula, West Bank, Gaza Strip, Golan Heights and East Jerusalem. Consequently, this war came to be seen not only as a stinging defeat on the battlefield but indeed as an indictment of Arab society in toto and of the entire post-independence pan-Arab leadership,

⁴ Sunnîs and Shîʾîs are the two major branches of Islam, with the former predominating in most of the Muslim world and the latter a majority only in modern Iran, Iraq and Azerbaijan. The split between them began as a disagreement over who could lead the early Muslim community after the Prophet Muḥammad’s death: the Sunnîs believed that the caliph should be chosen by community consensus, while the group that eventually became the Shîʿa staunchly maintained that only a descendant of the prophet Muḥammad through his cousin and son-in-law ʿAlî was acceptable.

⁵ A fuller definition and explication of the history of the Mahdi is in the next section below.

whose exemplar was President Gamal Abd al-Nasser of Egypt. Thus, for the Sunnî Arab world the 1967 war is the event whose resultant trajectory would most likely lead to an upsurge in millennial hopes. This theory is corroborated by comparing the number of books published in the Arab world on the topic of the Mahdi and Mahdism before and after 1967. Between that seminal year and today, there have been at least three dozen books published in Arabic on the Mahdi and Mahdist expectations. This is a substantial—and still growing—number, especially considering that in the entire rest of the twentieth century prior to 1967 only seven such works were published. Furthermore, such works are “not obscure [emphasis added] studies but popular and visible” ones, many of which have “gone through multiple editions.”

It is interesting to examine which periods of Arab history engendered an interest in Islamic eschatology, at least insofar as this interest can be gauged from book publication trends. Perhaps the most useful template for periodizing modern Arab history is that developed by the Moroccan scholar Abdallah Laroui. Writing in the 1970s, he posited four major epochs: 1) the nahdah, or “[Arab]

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8 This is the figure that I have been able to glean from card catalogs and WorldCat.

9 David Cook, “Muslim Fears of the Year 2000,” *Middle East Quarterly* Vol. V, No. 2 (June 1998), pp. 51-62, says this specifically in a survey of eschatological works on al-Dajjal, the “Deceiver” or Muslim analog to the Christian Antichrist but my research indicates that the same is true for books on the Mahdi.
Renaissance,” from 1850-1914, which witnessed an attempted resurrection of classical Arab culture; 2) the struggle for independence, from roughly World War I until 1948, when Arab states shed the imperialist—mainly British and French—yoke; 3) the “unionist” movement, from the early 1950s until the Six-Days War, when ideologies like Pan-Arabism and Arab socialism and leaders like Gamâl ‘Abd al-Nasser of Egypt were regnant; and 4) the “moral crisis” from 1967 onwards.10 The number of books by Arab authors on the topic of the Mahdi in each of these four periods is, respectively, one, none, six and three dozen.

Why has interest in eschatological figures like the Mahdi, as reflected in the popular and intellectual worlds of publishing, increased in the past three decades? Several factors present themselves. One, of course, is the aforementioned melancholy that has beset the Arab world since the defeat of 1967 and which includes subsequent developments such as the ongoing failure of Arab countries to modernize and to bring living standards into line with expectations; the collapse of the USSR and its patronage of Arab countries such as Libya and Syria; and the further erosion of “Arab unity,” as well as the embarrassing dependence of several Arab countries upon the United States, which is seen by many as the heir of colonial powers. This subservience was most tellingly proved by the Gulf War of 1990-91. Another factor is undoubtedly the influence of the Iranian Revolution of 1979-80, which brought the current

Islamic Republic to power. Despite the political, theological and ideological differences between Sunnî and Shî‘î Mahdism, the successful installation of a staunchly Islamic government in Tehran has served as a theocratic beacon to those who yearn for an Islamic state. Finally, for those writing in the last three decades of the twentieth century the looming advent of the Common Era’s second millennium, despite its Christian provenance and overtones, cannot be overlooked as it infected the popular culture of the entire planet with an eschatological fervor to which the Muslim world was not totally immune.

The source base for this examination of modern views of the Madhi comprise those books published on the topic in the Arab world in the three decades since the Six-Days War. My methodology consists of examining each available book and developing a comparative typology of viewpoints within the Sunnî Arab intellectual world regarding the Mahdi, and then comparing and contrasting these viewpoints in the post-1967 universe, as well as comparing them with antecedents in the broader range of Islamic history. This study, then, will be not only synchronic but diachronic in scope.

Preliminary research leads me to hypothesize that there are two broad categories of Sunnî Arab thought on the Mahdi: literalist and figurativist,¹¹ each with subdivisions. Literalists are those scholars and religious leaders who do not question the supernatural revelation that Muḥammad is said to have

¹¹ I have adopted the latter term, upon the suggestion of Dr. Sam Meier, as least problematic in a Muslim context.
received and who take Islam seriously as a system for ordering both individual and collective life. Figurativists, on the other hand, maintain that the Qur‘ân and ḥadîth can often be interpreted figuratively—allegorically or symbolically—rather than in a strictly literal sense.

Within the literalist category there are, ironically, two subgroups who hold opposing views about the coming of the Mahdi. One group of “strict constructionists” maintains that as the figure of the Mahdi is not to be found in any of the prophetic suras of the Qur‘ân, belief in his literal appearance on the world stage is nothing but a false bid‘ah, or “innovation.” We can call this group the Qur‘ânic literalists. The other literalist assemblage breaks down further into two groups. While both put more stock in the ḥadîth than do the Qur‘ânic literalists, they divide over the issue of the authority of the ḥadîth collections which mention the Mahdi.

There are six so-called “canonical” collections of these extra-Qur‘ânic sayings attributed to Muhammad which are accepted in the Sunnî world. The two most revered, those of al-Bukhârî (d. 256/820) and Muslim (d. 261/875), do not contain any reference to the Mahdi. However, three other canonical compilers—Abû Dâ‘ûd (d. 275/888), al-Tirmidhî (d. 279/892) and Ibn Mâjah (d. 273/887)—do list many traditions dealing with the Mahdi. Some Muslim scholars and religious leaders argue that the absence of such references in the pages of al-Bukhârî and Muslim makes belief in such a figure unsuitable. However, many would argue, on the contrary, that the inclusion of the Prophet’s numerous
sayings regarding the Mahdi in three of the authoritative collections makes Mahdism essential to Islamic belief and doctrine.

Among those who accept the prophecies of the Mahdi as found in ḥadîth, two further strands of thought can be discerned, hinging on the determinability of the Mahdi’s appearance. One school of thought maintains that calculating the exact time of the Mahdi’s appearance, like that of other Signs of the Hour presaging the Last Judgement—the sun rising in the West; the appearance of the Dajjâl, the Deceiver often likened to the Antichrist; the return of Jesus; etc.—is beyond humankind’s ken. The other school of literalists who take the ḥadîth at face value reasons that Muhammad would not have uttered prophecies about such matters as the Mahdi except as a warning to Muslims and that, therefore, such signs are amenable to interpretation in, for example, a modern political context.¹²

Within the other camp, that of the figurativists, two broad categories of thought regarding the eschatological figure of the Mahdi are discernible. One flatly denies any such belief as a superstition or fable which only serves to divert Muslims from the important task of shouldering responsibility for ordering their own lives and societies; that is, the Mahdist expectation is seen as something of an “opiate of the masses.” The other figurativist school of thought also rejects

the notion of a literal, physically present human Mahdi, but yet does not discount the possibility that the Mahdist idea might serve a useful symbolic role as, perhaps, an archetype or model motivating Muslims to a more pious life.

This conceptual paradigm is perhaps easier to grasp when seen in a schematic format:

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<th><strong>Literalists</strong></th>
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Scheme 1. Typology of Muslim Approaches to Mahdist Belief

This typology of approaches to the Mahdi within the Arab Muslim world will be utilized, at the conclusion of this work, as a lens through which to examine the following questions:

1) What role(s) has Mahdism played in Islamic history, and where can such movements be placed in the spectrum posited above?

2) How important has Mahdism been to post-1967 Sunnî Arab faith and thought?

3) Have Mahdist beliefs translated into political thought and action?

4) Has there been any utilization of Mahdist ideology by Islamist theorizers and groups since 1967?
5) If so, how have earlier Mahdist expectations and ideology been adapted to a late twentieth-century context?

There is a need for a study of modern works on Mahdism that asks questions such as these, as a review of the relevant literature indicates. There is simply no major study extant that examines Mahdism as a phenomenon of modern Arab history, let alone one that delves into any possible relationship between this belief and the Islamist movements so prevalent and influential in the Muslim world today, as we can see in surveying the germane works. John O. Voll’s “Wahhabism and Mahdism: Alternative Styles of Islamic Renewal” (Arab Studies Quarterly Vol. 4, Nos. 1 & 2 [1982], pp. 149-166) is analytically incisive but alludes to only some of the issues I wish to address. Riffat Hassan, in “Messianism and Islam” (Journal of Ecumenical Studies Vol. 22, No. 2 [1985], pp. 261-291) wonderfully describes the topic and why it continues to hold allure for Muslims (especially the dispossessed, like women) but does not consult modern Arab works on Mahdism. Wilferd Madelung’s article on “al-Mahdi” in The Encyclopedia of Islam, New Edition [hereafter EI²] is eminently scholarly yet looks strictly at pre-modern beliefs and doctrines, which is also the case for Sondra Campbell’s “Millennial Messiah or Religious Restorer? Reflections on the Early Islamic Understanding of the Term Mahdi” (Jusûr 11 [1995], pp. 1-11).

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13 Examples of such groups would include the Muslim Brotherhood in Jordan and Syria (although suppressed in the latter); the Muslim Brotherhood and al-Takfir wa-al-hijrah in Egypt; and the Islamic Salvation Front in Algeria.

There are several studies of Islamic eschatology, but none that deals explicitly with the Mahdi and Mahdism and/or with the subject in modern history. Jane Smith’s and Yvonne Haddad’s The Islamic Understanding of Death and Resurrection (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1981) is the best and most exhaustive example of this genre: a superb treatment of Islamic beliefs concerning what happens to humans after the end of the world but which treats the signs presaging this, like the Mahdi, only perfunctorily. A number of other articles consider eschatology but, like Smith and Haddad, do not deal specifically with Mahdist expectations. Examples here are Irfan Hamid’s “Islamic Eschatology” (Al-Mustansiriyah University Review 1 [1969-70], pp. 143-157); John Taylor’s “Some Aspects of Islamic Eschatology” (Religious Studies Vol. 4 [1968], pp. 57-76); Rudolph Peters’ “Resurrection, Revelation and Reason:
Husayn al-Jisr (d. 1909) and Islamic Eschatology" (in Hidden Futures: Death and Immortality in Ancient Egypt, Anatolia, the Classical, Biblical and Arabic-Islamic World, J.M. Bremer, Th.P.J. van den Hout, R. Peters, eds. [Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 1994], pp. 221-231); Jacques Jomier’s “The Kingdom of God in Islam and Its Comparison with Christianity” (Communio Vol. 13 [1986], pp. 267-271); and Emmanuel Sudhir Isaiah’s dissertation “Muslim Eschatology and its Missiological Implications: A Thematic Study” (Fuller Theological Seminary, 1988).

The work most analogous, at least in form, to what I am undertaking is an article by Sabine Schmidtke, “Modern Modifications in the Shi`i Doctrine of the Expectation of the Mahdi (Intizar al-Mahdi): The Case of Khumaini” (Orient 28 [1987], pp. 389-406). Like Abdulaziz Abdulhussein Sachedina’s Islamic Messianism: The Idea of the Mahdi in Twelver Shi`ism (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1981), Schmidtke’s article is a masterful work on the Shi`i outlook but, again, not particularly helpful for investigating modern Sunnî Muslim views of the topic. The Shi`a and their doctrines regarding the Mahdi, or Twelfth Imâm as he is commonly known among them, are largely outside the purview of this study, for both practical and theoretical reasons. Nonetheless, it is worth noting at this juncture that the major Shi`i departures from Sunnî Mahdism are the belief that the eschatological Imâm will return from centuries of

14 The more esoteric or gnostic bent of Shi`i Islam would require a largely different conceptual framework as well as extensive research utilizing Persian, as well as Arabic, sources.
ghaybah, or “occultation,” and that he will not only establish justice and distribute wealth but will vindicate the long-oppressed Shi‘i is by converting the whole world to their brand of Islam. Mahdist expectations have always simmered just below the surface in Shi‘i circles, whereas in Sunnism they have not been so easily released. Perhaps as a result scholars of Islam—especially Western ones—have tended to operate from the premise that Mahdism is a force to be reckoned with in Shi‘ism but not in Sunnism. This generalization is inaccurate. Of the four major state-building Mahdist movements in history—the ‘Abbāsids, Fāṭimids, Muwahhids or Almohads and Sudanese Madhists—two were decidedly non-Shi‘a (the Muwahhids and Sudanese); one was initially Shi‘i-leaning (that of the ‘Abbāsids); and only one (that of the Fāṭimids) was definitely Shi‘a. Furthermore, the last attempt to spark a Mahdist revolution, that of Juhaymān al-‘Utaybî and Muḥammad `Abd al-Qahtānî in Sa`ūdî Arabia in 1400/1979, was unambiguously Sunnî.

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17 See below, chapter six.
We can see, then, that a review of the literature on the Mahdi and Mahdism demonstrates that there is a serious need for a study of modern—post-1967—Sunnî expectations of the Mahdi and an analysis of such doctrines which places them in an Islamic historical context. To understand this need, however, we must first establish how those expectations came into being.

II. Sources and Development of Mahdism

The term "Mahdi" is derived from the Arabic root ḥâdâ (hadâ), meaning "to guide on the right path." Thus the Mahdi, or ḥâdî, is "the [one] rightly-guided." Although the term per se does not appear in the Qurʾân—being found, rather, in a number of ḥadîths, as will be discussed below—it was used even in the early days of the Islamic community as a term of respect, without any real messianic significance.¹⁸ Proto-Mahdist ideas developed first in the cities of Medîna, in modern Saʿūdî Arabia, and Kûfa, in modern Iraq, as persons of marginalized tribal status sought redress in the realization of eschatological elements in Muhammad's message, and perhaps also as non-Syrians chafed under the Syrian Umayyad dynasty's yoke. Thus, the context of Mahdism's

provenance and early development was one in which those without high sociopolitical status took solace in the thought of a deliverer who would provide them a more just share in the benefits of Islamic society.

The first person to claim the Mahdi-ship, at least indirectly, was Muhammad b. al-Hanafiyyah, a son of `Ali's second wife, whose right to the title was espoused by Mukhtār b. Abi `Ubayd, leader of the pro-`Ali faction during the second fitnah, or "civil war," among the Islamic community in 680-692 C.E. In doing so, Mukhtār began the process that ultimately resulted in the establishment, at least among the proto-Shī`a, of the idea that only the descendants of Muhammad through `Ali could lead the ummah, or "[Islamic] community." While he may have failed in that task, at least insofar as the majority Islamic community was concerned, al-Mukhtār seemingly did succeed in creating a paradigm, later utilized by other Shī`a groups, of a messenger who claims to speak for the Mahdi. Eventually this evolved into the idea of the representative of the Mahdi who manipulated the affairs of the world from behind the scenes. The Mahdi thus came to be seen as occupying the position of, as it were, the "wizard" to the "great Oz" of his more mundane and visible earthly representatives, called wukalāʾ (singular wakīl) or nuwwāb (singular nā`īb), meaning "proxies."^^

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19 The Shī`a believe that, at some point in Islamic history, the Imam went into ghaybah, or "occultation;" that is, he withdrew from public view to a transcendent state of being whence he will return as the Mahdi at some unspecified time when the community is in greatest need. Twelver Shī`a are so-called because they believe the 12th Imam—the 11th after `Ali—went into this concealment. Seveners, or Ismā`īlīs, believe that it was the eighth—the seventh post-`Ali—
Imám who disappeared. This occultation, further, has two stages, at least in Twelver doctrine: in Persian, they are known as the ghaybat-i sugrá, "lesser occultation," from 260 AH/872CE until 329/939, in which the Imám was occulted but in communication with his followers via his proxies, and the ghaybat-i kubrá, "greater occultation," since 939 wherein the Imám is incommunicado. See 'Allámah Sayyid Muhammad Husayn Ṭabáṭabá’í, Shi’î Islam (Albay: State University of New York Press); Madelung, "Shí’a" and "Ismá`îlya," EI².
Since the idea of the Mahdi in the early Islamic community lacked any real eschatological significance and referred more to a just and pious temporal ruler, several Umayyad caliphs allowed others to apply the honorific “al-Mahdi,” largely devoid of its later eschatological overtones, to them: Sulaymân (r. 715-717), his immediate successor `Umar II (r. 717-720), Yazîd II (r. 720-724), Hishâm (d. 743) and his direct scion al-Walîd II (r. 743-744). Despite these pretensions, however, the Umayyad dynasty,\(^\text{20}\) which had seized power in 661 CE, was conquered by the `Abbâsids,\(^\text{21}\) who ruled the Islamic heartland from 750-1258 CE. During their tenure a number of `Abbâsid caliphs—notably al-Saffah (r. 750-754) and his successor al-Manṣûr (d. 775)—also claimed Mahdist stature, whether actively or passively. In fact, the `Abbâsids came to power at least partly by dint of their support for, and manipulation of, Shî`î beliefs such as the primacy of `Alî’s line and the expectation of the Mahdi. However, it should be emphasized that Mahdist hopes were rather vague and protean at this juncture in Islamic history, so leaders could openly assert, merely imply, or simply refuse


to disavow others’ claiming for them Mahdist stature without necessarily having to demonstrate that they met any sort of Mahdist prerequisites.

In early Islamic history and even up to `Abbâsid times, then, there was a great deal of overlap between Sunnî and Shî`î beliefs about the Mahdi. However, over time Shî`î doctrines of the Mahdi diverged from those of the majority Sunnîs, and eventually came to include the following tenets: 1) a belief in his literal coming (which, in contrast to Sunnî thought, became central); 2) his temporary ghaybah until the time was ripe; 3) his outranking of Jesus when returned to Earth (the opposite of Sunnism in this respect); 4) his infallibility by virtue of special illumination from God; and 5) the conversion, upon his appearance, of the whole world to Shî`î Islam. In addition, in Shî`î discourse the terms “Mahdi” and “Imâm” became virtually synonymous and indeed interchangeable.

Sunnî traditionist thinking on the Mahdi rather early on coalesced around several similar expectations: 1) that he would be not only rightly-guided but a storehouse of esoteric knowledge, albeit not infallible as in Shî`î doctrine; 2) that he would become religious leader of the entire planet, not just the Muslim world; 3) that he would be a chiliastic figure linked to the Second Coming of Jesus; and,

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22 As the Ayatollah Khomeini did during the Islamic revolution in Iran, 1979-80.

23 The Shî`a’s perception that the `Abbâsids’ turn to Sunnism was tantamount to a betrayal of their alleged `Alid loyalties was a factor in this process, on which more below.

in common with the Shi`is, 4) that he would be of the ahl al-bayt, or “people of the house” [of the Prophet]. However, the Mahdi concept never became an integral part of institutionalized Sunnî thought to the extent that it did in Shi`ism, although it did become entrenched in popular Sunnism. And over the centuries, the Shi`i theology of the Mahdi diverged further from that of the Sunnîs, especially on three major points. First, the idea of him as illuminated directly by God came to the fore, whereas in Sunnism he came increasingly to be seen, somewhat more mundanely, as a mujaddid, or “renewer,” of Islamic society. Second, the Shi`is more and more looked for the Mahdi to usher in a new era, whereas Sunnîs hoped for the restoration of the halcyon days of the past: the time of the original community, the ummah, led by the Prophet during his lifetime. Finally, Shi`is expected the Mahdi to supersede the Sunnah of the community, not merely refurbish and reinstate it as in Sunnî expectations. Both Sunnîs and Shi`is agreed, however, that the Mahdi—or, as he came to be known among the various Shi`ah groups, the Hidden Imam—would (re)establish justice and equity on Earth, ensuring that all had an equal share of wealth.

What of the sufi, or Muslim mystic, stance regarding such eschatological expectations? Much of sufi thought on these issues seems to derive from that of the great Andalusian sufi Ibn al-`Arabî (d. 1240), whose ideas on the Mahdi were that 1) he would be the “seal of the saints” as Muhammad was the seal of the prophets; 2) he would rule via the Sunnah and Jesus would be one of his wazîrs, or advising ministers; 3) he would be infallible in matters of Islamic law,
capable of ijtihād—that is, formulating religio-legal judgments via independent reasoning—and thus able to eschew qiyās, or merely derivative analogical reasoning; and 4) sufis would recognize and support him while the fuqahā', or Muslim jurisprudents, would oppose him.²⁵

These are some of the ideologies regarding the Mahdi that grew up in the first several centuries of Islamic history. Between the time of the formulation and codification of views on the Mahdi in the early Islamic community and the so-called “modern” period of Islamic history—the last two centuries, particularly since Napoleon’s conquest and brief occupation of Ottoman Egypt, 1798-1802—the prevailing opinions of the Sunnî `ulamā’ were elucidated by the writings of the great Muslim social historian Ibn Khaldûn (d. 1406 CE). However, before examining his summary and analysis of the theories regarding the Mahdi that had developed between the classical period and his own, we should examine the three prominent examples of successful Mahdist state-formation that preceded him: the Sunnî, albeit Shī‘î-influenced, `Abbâsids, whose empire encompassed both the central Islamic lands and North Africa, 750-945 CE; the Ismâ`îlî Fâṭimids who, from the tenth through the twelfth centuries CE, ruled north-central Africa, Egypt and, intermittently, portions of Syria and the Ḥijâz (the western Arabian coast, encompassing Mecca and Medina); and the Sunnî

Muwaḥḥids, traditionally known as the Almohads, of the twelfth- and thirteenth-centuries CE in northwest Africa and the Iberian peninsula. These three state-creating Islamic movements were, to varying degrees, Mahdist movements as well and, along with the nineteenth-century state in Sudan led by Muhammad Ahmad, by far the most successful such movements in Islamic history in terms of political autonomy and territorial extent. In addition we need to examine one non-Mahdist movement, Khârijism, for its influence in North Africa and elsewhere in the Islamic world was far out of proportion to the number of its adherents and its success at state formation.

III. The Realization of Mahdism in Islamic History

The four most influential Mahdist movements in Islamic history were, in chronological sequence, those of the `Abbāsids, Fāṭimids, Muwaḥḥids and Sudanese Mahdists. These movements can be analyzed in terms of the following factors: 1) the degree to which each was overtly mahdist; 2) whether each movement was pro-`Ali or nascently Shi`î; 3) if it was utopian in its opposition to the establishment/center; 4) if it began as a peripheral movement, either geographically or socially; 5) whether it ever transformed into a successful state-building ideology; 6) the degree to which it utilized the concept of social justice in its ideology; 7) if it was mystical or metaphysical in outlook, whether sufi or esoterically Shi`î; 8) the degree to

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26 Chapter three, below, will deal specifically with the Sudanese Mahdist state.
which its leadership consisted of knowledgeable `ulamâ'; and 9) whether it was recapitulative of Prophetic paradigms, primarily the persecution-hijrah-return-conquest one. Just exactly how many of these characteristics need to be present to constitute a "pure" or "strict" Mahdist template is debatable but I would maintain that the three most important defining factors in a successful Mahdist movement are an overt claimant, utopian criticism of extant leadership and the takeover, or formation of, a state based on these principles. The other six factors—Shi`î influence, origins on the peripheries, stress on social justice, esoteric or sufi involvement, `ulamâ’ leadership and re-enactment of Muhammadan paradigms—are not intrinsically part of the Mahdist equation but, as we shall see, have often become part of the ideological mix. In any event, taken as a whole these nine stipulations provide a framework within which to analyze Islamic opposition movements in general and Mahdist movements in particular across time and space.

The distinctly oppositional, but non-Mahdist, Khârijîs were “those who went out” from the party of `Alî, the prophet’s cousin and the fourth caliph, following his negotiations with rivals after the Battle of Šîffîn in 657 CE. The Khârijîs, as they came to be known, claimed that `Alî had sinned by treating with Mu`âtîwîyah, the Muslim governor of Syria and rival for the caliphate who became the founder of the Umayyad dynasty. The Khârijîs withdrew from `Alî’s ranks and in fact launched an unsuccessful attack upon their erstwhile comrades. In revenge, a Khârijî murdered `Alî in 661. Khârijî communities were established in southern
Iraq and in eastern Arabia, but their beliefs—chiefly their radical egalitarianism and their requirement of sinlessness for the community’s Imâm—made them a thorn in the side of any ruling regime. Under pressure from the Umayyads, and imbued with missionary zeal, the Khârijîs sent propagandists as far afield as Oman and North Africa during the eighth and ninth centuries CE, establishing states in Sijilmasa, in modern Morocco, as well as Tahart and Tlemcen in modern Algeria.

Throughout North Africa Khârijî ideas provided a ready-made ideology of opposition for many non-Arab Berbers to use against the conquering Arabs in their garrison towns. Taking advantage of the power vacuum in North Africa that existed while the Umayyads were preoccupied with the nascent `Abbâsid opposition, the Khârijîs set up communities headed by allegedly sinless and, ideally, infallible Imâms. These existed as independent statelets for several centuries but never coalesced into an imperial Khârijî state and were subsequently defeated by Muslim opponents such as the Zanata Berbers in 742 CE, the `Abbâsids under the command of Ibn al-Ash`ath in 761 CE and the Fâṭîmids in 909 CE.

While Khârijism is not mahdistic or messianic per se, it is utopian in many of its ideas: the requisite sinlessness of Muslims in general and the leader of the community in particular; the rejection of ethnic (Arab) or familial (ahl al-bayt) descent in choosing the leader, demonstrated by rejection of the term khalîfah, or


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“successor” (usually Anglicized to “caliph”), in favor of Imâm, or “one who stands before [the community]”; the duty to remove any Imâm who vitiated Islamic standards. Foremost among these standards was that of social justice: the true Imâm was expected to redress the social and economic inequalities that had grown up under Umayyad rule, according to Khârijî (and contemporaneous proto-Shi`a) groups. Eventually this potentially potent critique of any Muslim ruler—that he was not dispensing justice for all—“was increasingly postponed to the next world,” or, alternatively, at least until the Last Days when the Mahdi would come to balance society’s scales. Indeed, by the the third century AH/ninth century CE this deferral of social justice was codified by the inclusion of the aforementioned Mahdist traditions in several canonical collections. Khârijism began as a socio-political peripheral movement and transformed itself into a geographically marginal one by relocating (for the most part) to North Africa. The Khârijîs certainly wielded the club of justice and beat upon any and all establishment regimes. And they did partially succeed in state-building, albeit more on the city-state than imperial scale. So while Khârijism itself does not stress Mahdist expectations we

28 See Abun-Nasr, pp. 37-8, in particular.


30 Marlow, p. 174.

can nonetheless see in it another example of a group on the periphery of the Islamic world wielding religious sectarianism and utopianism as a weapon against the religio-political establishment, much like the `Abbâsids did in their rise to power and using a similar proselytizing program.

The `Abbâsids conquered the Umayyads in 750 CE and their line of caliphs ruled, for some two centuries, from modern Afghanistan to, at times, the Straits of Gibraltar. The dynasty claimed descent from the prophet’s uncle `Abbâs, whence the name was taken. They also claimed that the aforementioned Muhammad b. al-Ḥanafiyyah recognized their line as leaders of the Banû Hâshim. `Abbâsid propaganda was successfully disseminated first in the eastern Iranian province of Khurâsân by Abû Muslim, an influential proselytizer. Many pro-`Alî elements supported these `Abbâsid claims and teachings, particularly that of returning the caliphate to the family of the Prophet, because they were seen as synonymous with their own.\(^{32}\) Beginning about 745 Abu Muslim and the `Abbâsids skillfully utilized the grievances and hopes of all those opposed to Umayyad rule—most notably the the pro-`Alî groups and supporters of the ahl al-bayut’s supremacy—in order to win hearts and minds, equip an army carrying black flags as eschatological symbols and, by 750, conquer all the way to Damascus. Once in

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Figure 3. The 'Abbâsid Caliphate c. 800 CE. From Arthur Goldschmidt, Jr., A Concise History of the Middle East (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1991 [1979]), p. 70.
power, however, the `Abbâsids—perhaps realizing the different approaches required by rulers and revolutionaries—turned increasingly to Sunnî orthodoxy. The dynasty continued to hold real military and political power until 945, when the Shi`ite Iranian Buyids occupied Baghdad; they were in turn displaced by the Sunnî Seljuk Turks in 1055. Under these regimes, the `Abbâsid caliphs were reduced largely to religious figureheads. The Mongol sack of Baghdad in 1258 CE put an end once and for all to the `Abbâsid empire, although a line of nominal caliphs survived in Cairo under the Mamluk sultanate.33

The `Abbâsids, then, utilized Mahdist prophecies and expectations—such as the hadîth that “a people will come from the East bearing black banners”34—in order to seize control; but Mahdist ideology was not used as a building block of the `Abbâsid state. In contrast the three subsequent major groups in Islamic history which employed Mahdism as a means to hegemony—the Fâtimids, Almohads and Sudanese Mahdists—continued to capitalize on Mahdism in the establishment and administration, not just the creation, of their states. One might argue, then, that the `Abbâsid caliphate was not truly a Mahdist state, in that its rulers jettisoned eschatological discourse once it had served its purpose: seizing the reins of power. Covertly Mahdist, guardedly Shî`a, originally peripheral,


34 This, and other Mahdist, hadîth will be examined in chapter two.
openly egalitarian, oppositionally utopian, state-creating: the `Abbâsids were to Mahdism arguably what they were for Islamic history as a whole—prototypical and paradigmatic. Later opposition movements would more overtly proclaim their leaders’ Mahdi-hood, however.

Whereas the `Abbâsids were anchored in the Islamic heartlands and ruled as a Sunnî regime largely devoid of Mahdist fervor once it was established, the Fâtîmids and Muwâḥîhids were North African Islamic powers whose very raison d’être drew upon messianic tendencies: the Fâtîmids openly, and militantly, Shî`î; the Muwâḥîhids just as combatively Sunnî. Each employed the language of opposition, albeit drawn from different sources: the Fâtîmids from their brand of Shî`ism, the Muwâḥîhids from the Khârîjî legacy of North Africa (although it is very possible that the Fâtîmids, also, were influenced to some extent by Khârîjism).

The first major example of an unequivocally Mahdist state was that of the Fâtîmids, an Ismâ`îlî Shî`î dynasty that began in the Maghrib in the early tenth century CE and ruled Egypt from 969 to 1171 CE. An Ismâ`îlî missionary named Abu `Abd Allâh al-Shî`î won the loyalty of converts, and an army, among the Kutâma Berbers to the imâmate of `Ubayd Allah, who soon claimed to be the Mahdi and a descendant of the prophet through `Alî and his wife Fâtîmah, Muhammad’s daughter. The Berber armies accepted his Mahdist claim and conquered in his name to the extent that by 969 the Fâtîmids ruled a vast expanse from Morocco to Damascus and Mecca. On taking Egypt, they founded the city of
Cairo as their new capital. By the late eleventh century CE, however, they had lost control of most of their Maghribi provinces.

Ideologically the Fāṭīmids welded Mahdism to an esoteric cosmology drawn from both gnosticism and Neoplatonism. Unlike most other Shī`ī groups, however, the Fāṭīmids were powerful enough to contemplate seriously the aim of uniting the entire Islamic world under their Shī`ī rule. To this end they overtly utilized their military against the Sunnī `Abbâsids, as well as the nearby Crusader states—albeit rather ineffectively—and they covertly supported Ismâ`îlî pockets of resistance within other Islamic states; most influential were their dawâ`īn, or “religious propagandists,” who actively worked to undermine the `Abbâsid caliphate. Ultimately the Fāṭīmids failed in their attempt to convert the whole Islamic community to Ismâ`îlî Shī`ism, although they did establish the famous al-Azhâr mosque, long thought to have been the seat of their da`wah, which later became a center of scholarship in the Islamic world. Following a century of internal conflict that saw the Fāṭimid Imâm brushed aside by a de facto military dictatorship headed by the Armenian military strongmen known as wazîrs and weakened by Crusader invasions, the Kurdish general Šalâh al-Dîn al-Ayyubî assumed the office of wazîr and ultimately put an end to the Fāṭimid caliphate in 1171.35

In the Fâtimids we can see a state that was both in opposition to the establishment center, the `Abbâsids in Baghdad, and Mahdist, in that their leader was a purported descendant of Ismâ'îl, ruling from his throne in Cairo, not in occultation. The Fâtimids, however, did not emphasize the social justice dimension of their Imâm; instead, they accentuated the legitimacy and religious authority of their Shî`î Ismâ`îlî leader and created a state around his office. They also began as a peripheral movement and indeed arguably remained so throughout their existence in that they were never able to seize the Islamic heartlands, even though Cairo arguably supplanted Baghdad as the civilizational center of the Muslim world. And finally theirs was, if not a mystical movement, at least a gnostic one—but one more Shî`î than sufi; in this respect they were unique among the examples adduced here, being the only openly Shî`î movement that seized and held onto power.

Another key example of Mahdist fervor leading to political formation in medieval North Africa is the Muwaḥḥīds. From 1130 to 1269 Spain and the Maghrib were conquered and ruled by the Muwaḥḥīds, traditionally called by Western scholars the Almohads. Their founder and leader Ibn Tûmart (d. 1130) had claimed to be the Awaited Mahdi. Divine Unity, or tawhîd, was the Muwaḥḥīds' central belief and rallying point. On one level, proponents of tawhîd tended to emphasize God's transcendence more than his immanence; on another, they took issue with a strictly literal reading of the Qur'ân which seemed to
Reconquista in the 13th century

Kingdom of Granada 1230-1492

Pamplona

Castile

Aragon

Sudanic Lands, ca. 1050

Murabit advance from Sudanic Lands, ca. 1050

Marrakesh

Tada

Agmat

Sijilmasa

Tarudant

Muhammad Empire, ca. 1130-1269

Advance of the Banu Hilal and Banu Sulaym, ca. 1050-1100

Qal'ah Bani Hammud

Bougie

Tunis

This tawhîd concept can be traced back to Hellenistic ideas, such as monism, which were absorbed into Islamic intellectual life above all through the 'Abbâsid effort to translate ancient Greek works of science and philosophy.

The Muwahhids accused their immediate predecessors, "al-Murâbiṭûn"—the Murâbits, traditionally called "Almoravids"—of unbelief insofar as they engaged in this error of anthropomorphism which, ultimately, led them to confuse God's eternal essence with his attributes. However, like the Murâbiṭ movement, that of the Muwahhids was one of dispossessed Berber groups, in this case the Masmûda in particular, who utilized their own distinct interpretation of Islam, combined with Mahdism, as a motivating ideology for seizing power. Following Mahdi Ibn Tûmart's example, the Muwahhids advocated a return to the Qur'ân—interpreted less literally and more allegorically than by the Murâbiṭs—and the Sunnah or "tradition" of the Prophet, as well as a more stringent imposition of Islamic values such as the outlawing of alcohol and musical instruments. Ibn Tûmart taught his followers along these lines after their hijrah, or "flight," emulating that of the Prophet and

36 Such anthropomorphists claimed, for example, that "sitting at God's right hand" did not simply mean enjoying his favor but that the fortunate one was literally at the deity's right hand.

his followers from Mecca to Medina in 622 CE, to the High Atlas mountains of Morocco, whence they returned to conquer northwest Africa and Spain. Besides the differences with the ruling Murâbiṭ center in terms of belief and praxis, however, the first Muwâḥḥid leader’s claim to be the Mahdi gave him the authority to reject the `Abbâsid caliphate ruling in Baghdad. After Ibn Tûmart’s death his successor `Abd al-Mu`min, who took the title of caliph—as a Berber the first non-Arab to do so—completed the conquests and established a Sunnî Mahdist state that lasted over a century, until 1269 CE.38

The Muwâḥḥids constitute the first openly and clearly non-`Alid/Shîa Mahdist movement in Islamic history. They also began as an outsider movement among a particular Berber tribe, and they critiqued the extant Muslim rulers not on the grounds of social justice but rather in terms of insufficiently pious practice of Islamic norms. They were led, at least in the beginning, by a vociferous Mahdist claimant who established a large territorial state that endured for over a century. While the Muwâḥḥids were not an openly sufi movement, their conscious reenactment of the hijrah paradigm did partake of, and resonate with, the isolated monasticism of some North African sufi orders. The Muwâḥḥids, however, despite their ideological and military success on the western periphery of the Islamic world, proved to have far less of an impact on the Islamic center

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further east than did their contemporary, the scholar and mystic Ibn ‘Arabî.  

IV. Ibn Khaldûn on the Mahdi

At this juncture it seems appropriate to adduce the observations of the great fourteenth century CE Muslim scholar Ibn Khaldûn, insofar as his writings summarize the views current in his time and provide us with the trenchant analysis of an elite Sunnî intellectual of that time.

The Shi‘î Mahdist Fâtimids and the Sunnî Mahdist Muwahhîds, as well as the quasi-Mahdist `Abbâsids, were the reference points that Ibn Khaldûn had to look back upon when he was writing about the Mahdi in his famous work al-Muqaddimah, the "Introduction" to his larger multi-volume work, a universal history, which he finished in 1377 CE. Any, or all, of these religious empires thus would have influenced Ibn Khaldûn’s viewpoint on Mahdism. In addition, Ibn Khaldûn and his contemporaries retained a very real memory of the dire straits the Muslim world had been in just a generation earlier, caught between the Mongol invasions from the east, the Crusader incursions from the northwest, and the Spanish Reconquista in the far west. In speculating why such tribulations had been visited upon the world of Islam many Muslims took refuge in the idea of a Mahdi who would set matters aright again; in fact, during Ibn Khaldûn’s own era, shrines thought to be potential materialization points for the

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Mahdi were maintained throughout the Maghrib. These shrines represented the latest manifestation of the longing for an Islamic deliverer that had deep roots in that culture, as we have noted. Therefore, by Ibn Khaldûn's time (1332-1406 CE) the concept of the Mahdi was well-established in Islamic tradition of all stripes, albeit more prominent in some than in others.

Chapter three of the *Muqaddimah* deals with royal authority and types of governments and political leadership. This is the context in which Ibn Khaldûn discusses the views of the Mahdi held in his day. This influential treatment of the Mahdi concept can be broken down into six major categories. First is a terse recapitulation of extant Muslim beliefs concerning the Mahdi, his mission, and his role in assisting Jesus in the destruction of the Dajjâl, the "Deceiver" or Antichrist:

*It has been well-known among all the people of Islam, over the course of all the ages, that inevitably, at the end of time, a man from the people of the family [of the Prophet] will appear who will support the faith and manifest justice. Muslims will follow him and he will make himself master of the Islamic domains and will be called "the Mahdi." Hard on his heels will be the emergence of the Dajjâl [Deceiver, or Antichrist] and the subsequent signs of Judgement Day, predetermined and irrefutable. After him, Jesus will descend and kill the Dajjâl, or else Jesus will help the Mahdi kill him and Jesus will perform the prayers with the Mahdi.*

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41 Any translations are my own and were made from selected passages of the Arabic text of Etienne Marc Quatremère, *Prolegomènes d'Ebn Khaldoun*, Vol. II (Paris: Didot, 1858), pp. 142-176.
Next comes a succinct discussion of the relevant source material, i.e., hadîth. Third, Ibn Khaldûn presents a rather lengthy outline of sufi views on the topic, and in particular how these were influenced—and, indeed, corrupted—by the various relevant Shi`î theories. Fourth, he analyzes how his core concern, `aṣabîyah, relates to the Mahdist ideal. `Aṣabîyah is Ibn Khaldûn’s key formulation: it is the “group solidarity” which energizes every nomadic group and which often enables such groups to conquer the less vigorous city-dwellers. But `asabîyah degenerates after several generations of post-conquest sedentary life, whereupon a group still possessing this vital spirit will start the cycle all over again. Thus, Ibn Khaldûn sees history as cyclical, insofar as each dynasty has an organic life-cycle, fueled by `aṣabîyah, with a beginning and end.

Next, Ibn Khaldûn derides the hoi polloi for their ingenuous expectations of the Mahdi: that they can predict the time and place of his coming, in particular, so that they travel to one or another of these locales and wait for him to appear! And finally Ibn Khaldûn discusses recent trends in the Maghrib towards implementing the Sunnah without utilizing Fâtîmid propaganda. Let me now deal with the issues raised by each of these sections of Ibn Khaldûn's text.

Ibn Khaldûn's summary of commonly-held Muslim beliefs about the Mahdi is straightforward and requires little commentary, except to point out that he tacitly acknowledges the difference of opinion on the relative ranking of Jesus and the Mahdi.

Regarding his reference to ḥadîth concerning the Mahdi, it is interesting
that the *Ṣaḥīḥ* (literally “true” [ḥadīth]), which Ibn Khaldūn mentions as containing information on the End Times, are the collections of al-Bukhvārī and Muslim—which do not mention the Mahdi at all.\(^{42}\) Thus, Ibn Khaldūn can plausibly be seen here as expressing his own skepticism about the very idea of the Mahdi, in that he adduces authorities that are silent on the subject of the Mahdi.

Before delving into Ibn Khaldūn's analysis of sufi views on the Mahdi, it seems appropriate to ask whether he himself was a member of any sufi order. Historical records leave no clear indication, so we are thrown back upon inference. At one point in his life Ibn Khaldūn was appointed by one of the Mamlûk sultans to the leadership of the khânaqâh, or sufi lodge, originally endowed by the first Mamlûk sultan al-Zâhir Baybars (r. 1260-1277)\(^{43}\) in Cairo. Upon his death, he was buried in the sufi cemetery outside that city. One can certainly interpret these events as strong circumstantial evidence, albeit not proof, that Ibn Khaldūn was a sufi. Perhaps the safest claim in this respect would be that he definitely manifested some sympathy for mysticism, like many

\(^{42}\) Doubt about the Mahdi figure may account for his absence from the collections of the two most authoritative compilers, Muslim and Bukhvārī, although three other “canonical” collectors of ḥadīth—‘Abū Dâ‘ūd, Ibn Tirmidhî and Ibn Mâjah—do mention him in their sets. See chapter two.

of the elite of his time.\textsuperscript{44}

Ibn Khaldûn states that the sufis do not rely upon hadîth alone for opinions of the Mahdi; rather, some of them utilize alleged \textit{kashf}, or "divine illumination," as well. But what really had led the sufis astray in the matter of the Mahdi, Ibn Khaldûn felt, was the heterodox doctrines and beliefs that they had imbibed at the well of Shi`îsm. The first Shi`î sect that Ibn Khaldûn mentions in this context is the Imâmîs (or Twelver Shi`a). Next Ibn Khaldûn discusses the Râfidah, a proto-Imâmî Shi`î group that developed in Kûfa, in modern Iraq, and later became established in Qom, in modern Iran, in the eighth century CE. Politically quietist and anti-Sunnî, the Râfidîs claimed not only that the Prophet had designated `Alî his successor, but that the Sunnîs had changed the text of the Qur`ân in order to hide this appointment! Furthermore, they regarded their imâms as not just divinely-guided but actually infallible.\textsuperscript{45}

One can certainly discern similarities between the Râfidî doctrine of the infallible imâm and those of Ibn al-`Arabî on the Mahdi's distinctive ijtihâd, which borders on infallibility. Ibn Khaldûn continues with his contention that the Shi`a's "pernicious" influence on the sufis grew even stronger thanks to the Ismâ`îlîs, or Sevenner Shi`îs, and their heavily Neoplatonic, esoteric cosmology. Of course, the most influential, or at least longest-lived, Ismâ`îlî movement that

\textsuperscript{44} On this matter see Stephen Casewit, "The Mystical Side of the \textit{Muqaddimah}: Ibn Khaldûn's View of Sufism," \textit{Islamic Quarterly} 29 (1985), pp. 172-185.

\textsuperscript{45} See E. Kohlberg, "al-Râfida," \textit{EI}².
Ibn Khaldûn would have been familiar with was that of the Fâtimids in Egypt and North Africa. Perhaps that explains why he prefers the term "Fâtimî" over "Mahdist" when referring to Islamic messianic movements. But while Ibn Khaldûn evidently accepts as historically accurate the Fâtimids' 'Alid line, he nonetheless leaves no doubt as to his disapproval of the seepage from such Shî`î sects into sufi Mahdism, particularly concerning ideas on deification of the imâms and the qutb, the sufi "pole" or "axis" upon which the Earth figuratively, if not literally, turns.46

Some other observations on Ibn Khaldûn's treatment of sufism's corruption by Shî`î ideas are significant. He holds the great "sober"47 mystic al-Junayd (d. 910) at least partly to blame for setting this pattern of corruption by Shî`ism, insofar as he sees Junayd as lending his prestige to the sufi incorporation of Shî`ah concepts, such as the shaykh's passing on of his cloak to his disciple. He criticizes the sufis, like the Shî`is, for falsely setting `Alî above all other pious Muslims as a model to be followed. And, finally, he implicitly derides both sufis and Shî`is for blind reliance upon astrological predictions of


47 Sufis practice various methods of coming into contact with God (long prayer vigils, rhythmic breathing during prayer, repetitive movements during prayer, etc.). "Drunken" Sufis advocated staying in such a state of "intoxication" with God, once achieved, and escaping the world while "sober" mystics, following the lead of al-Junayd, sought to use the mystical insight gained thereby in the temporal world rather than to escape from it.
the coming of the Mahdi.

In the next section Ibn Khaldûn incorporates the 'ašabīyah concept into his analysis of Mahdist movements. He states that

[T]he requisite truth that should be settled in everyone's mind is that religious or political propaganda does not succeed unless the impetus of some group feeling exists to produce victory, or until God's purpose comes to pass regarding it (p. 172).

By way of illustrating what happens to those who lose their group solidarity, Ibn Khaldûn adduces the Fâtimids, the Prophet's tribe of Quraysh and the Ṭâlibîyah. The last were a sect active centuries before Ibn Khaldûn, who considered all descendants of the prophet's uncle Abû Ṭâlib, the father of ʿAlî, as potentially worthy of the imâmate, rather than restricting the line to only ʿAlî's children through Fâţimah. Ibn Khaldûn does imply that the Ṭâlibids among the Bedouin in the Arabian peninsula can theoretically be reunited with the larger umma, but only if God provides a Mahdist figure from their ranks with the power to win them over. It seems there are two ways of reading this passage: that such an event is not going to happen, or that a Mahdi would be successful only by dint of the miracle of God turning people's hearts and minds toward him.

In his section on the rabble's beliefs regarding the Mahdi, Ibn Khaldûn mocks those "stupid" ones who frequent shrines like Mâssah, a locale in the

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48 On the Ṭâlibids, a group which few scholars seem to have studied, see W. Madelung, "Ibn ʿUkda," ET², where he says that Ibn ʿUkda (d. 944) "seems to have supported the views of the Ṭâlibiyya."
Maghrib, and await the Mahdi's appearance. He is at a loss to explain their
gullibility, except perhaps in terms of their location on the fringes of civilization
which, presumably, makes them susceptible to such beliefs.

In Ibn Khaldûn's final section on the Mahdi, he discusses—curiously
enough—recent attempts in the Maghrib to implement the Sunnah without
utilizing "Fâṭimî" propaganda. This may be an implicit criticism of those who want
the Mahdi to come and change society and their lives for them rather than
relying upon their own actions in submission to God. Perhaps, also, Ibn Khaldûn
is pointing out the impotence of even well-intentioned religious movements when
they lack the impetus of 'aṣābiyah.

So what was Ibn Khaldûn's opinion regarding the Mahdi, in the final
analysis? It is obvious from his withering criticisms of Shî`î ideas creeping into
sufism that he had little sympathy for Shî`î views on the matter. But does that
necessarily imply that he favored, or accepted, Sunnî concepts regarding the
Mahdi? Even taking into account that Ibn Khaldûn was one of the few Muslims
to openly criticize Mahdist beliefs, I would argue that Ibn Khaldûn was

49 Such an observation further corroborates the theory that Mahdist movements are especially
appealing to those living on the frontiers of Islamic civilization. See Bulliet, Islam: The View from
the Edge: "the impetus for change in Islam has more often come from the bottom than from the
top, from the edge than from the center" (p. 195) and "popular piety...represented by wonder-
workers, wandering dervishes, and local pilgrimage rites...represent[s] a volatile, occasionally
politicizable element that responds more to emotion and charisma than to specific doctrines and
policies" (p. 205).
castigating various groups for awaiting—indeed, longing for—a premillennial Mahdi who would appear (or return from concealment) and miraculously correct all societal and personal ills sans human efforts. Ibn Khaldûn's keen analytical mind kept him from taking this route. His view, I would argue, was more post-millennial or, perhaps, even amillennial. Thus, he may not have rejected the idea of the Mahdi's appearance, but may have believed instead that should it happen it would be at the End, when normal historical forces and processes (the kind he had spent a lifetime studying) no longer would apply. Alternatively, being aware of Mahdist claimants who had come and gone over the span of Islamic history—the Muwahhîds, the Fâtimids, for example—unaccompanied by Jesus and failing to unite the whole world under the banner of Islam, he may have come to harbor serious doubts about the future historicity of such an extra-Qur'ânîc figure.

Therefore, it seems that Ibn Khaldûn was definitely a skeptic on the issue of the Mahdi and, in all likelihood, did not believe in such an eschatological figure at all. As a Sunnî Muslim he seems to have considered belief in the eschatological figure of the Mahdi a superstition, an "opiate of the masses" at

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50 All variations on the term "millennialism" are borrowed from Christian eschatology but useful here nonetheless. "Premillennial" means the belief that the eschatological Christ will come first, before the Judgment, and usher in 1,000 years of God's peace. "Postmillennial" signifies the belief that the eschatological Christ will appear only at the end of the millennium, which will be ushered in by other forces. "Amillennial" refers to the belief that Christ will not rule temporally at all. *Mutatis mutandis*, these terms can be applied to Mahdism. There will be more on these terms in the next chapter.
best and a dangerous Shi' a heresy at worst.\footnote{Regarding Ibn Khaldûn's thought on Mahdism and related topics, see al-Azmeh, \textit{Ibn Khaldûn}; `Amad al-Dîn al-Khalîl, \textit{Ibn Khaldûn Islâmîyan} (Beirut: al-Maktab al-Islâmî, 1985); Fuat Baali and Ali Wardi, \textit{Ibn Khaldûn and Islamic Thought Styles: A Social Perspective} (Boston: G.K. Hall and Co., 1981); Muhammad M. Rabi', \textit{The Political Theory of Ibn Khaldûn} (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1967); M. Talbi, "Ibn Khaldûn," \textit{EI}²; and Ibn Khaldûn, \textit{Al-Muqaddimah}, N.J.Dawood, ed., Franz Rosenthal, trans. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1987).} Nonetheless, as Ibn Khaldûn's own criticisms indicate, the Mahdist expectation was firmly established in the minds of many Muslims—just as it is today. Ibn Khaldûn's analysis of Mahdism is invaluable because his own rationalistic, dispassionate critique of Mahdist ideology mirrors that of the largely unsuccessful attempt among the Arab figurativists of our own time—his modern epigones—to wean Muslims from what the figurativists see as their dependence on such an outmoded religious superstition. Even more broadly, the summary and analysis of Mahdist views by this medieval Islamic social historian puts the Mahdist movements of his, and earlier, times, into perspective, particularly on two issues: that Mahdism was often not only a state-creating but also a state-sponsored ideology; and that there was clear Sunní hostility to Mahdism primarily because of its Shî`î influences.

Since Ibn Khaldûn's time the most successful openly Mahdist movement has been that of Muhammad Aḥmad (1844-1885) in the region of Sudan. There were a number of movements in late eighteenth- and nineteenth-century Africa termed \textit{jihâds}, but his was the only one that claimed unreservedly to be led by the prophesied Mahdi. As the jihâd concept is not one that was operative
among the `Abbâsids, Fâtimids or Muwâḥḥids, we should explore it in more
detail.

V. The Concept of Jihâd in Mahdism

Jihâd is an Arabic noun that derives from the verb jahada, “to strive,
struggle” and has two major connotations: that of fighting against one’s own
internal sinful inclinations—this is the “greater” jihâd against the flesh, the world
and the devil—and that of “holy war” against the unbelievers, or non-Muslims,
which is known as the “lesser” jihâd. In early and medieval Islam, the lesser
jihâd was primarily aimed at expanding the scope of Islamic rule, of wresting the
largest amount of territory possible from the Dâr al-Ḥarb, or the non-Muslim
“Abode of War,” and bringing it under the aegis of Dâr al-Islâm, the “Abode of
Islam,” where Muslims rule and Islamic law is enforced. Jihâd has also been
construed and practiced defensively, as during the Crusades. Defensively or
offensively, jihâd is normally directed against non-Muslims, like the Franj,
literally “Franks” or western Europeans, in eleventh-century Jerusalem. However,
it has also been declared, not infrequently, against Muslim rulers who, by dint of
their perceived lack of pious practice, are deemed virtual unbelievers: the
`Abbâsids did so against the Umayyads; the Fâtimids against the `Abbâsids; the
Muwâḥḥids against the Murâbiṭs; and, most recently, the followers of Muḥammad

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52 On jihâd see E. Tyan, “Djihâd,” EI²; F.E. Peters, Jihâd in Classical and Modern Islam (Princeton:
Markus Wiener Publishers, 1996); Bernard Lewis, The Political Language of Islam (Chicago:
University of Chicago Press, 1988), pp. 72-76, 77-80, 82-90, 145-47. Ḥadîth references to jihâd
can be found in A.J. Wensinck, Concordance de la tradition Musulmane, Tome I (Leiden: E.J. Brill,
Ahmad in nineteenth-century Sudan against their co-religionist overlords, the Ottomans.

The Sudanese Mahdist jihâd was the most successful nineteenth-century jihâd directed against imperialism (whether Ottoman, British or both). Muhammad Ahmad summoned the Sudanese people to a Mahdist holy war against the ruling Ottoman Egyptian regime headquartered in Cairo. This quasi-autonomous Ottoman provincial government consisted largely of Turkish-speaking, non-Arab officials sanctioned by the Ottoman sultan and left in place by the British when they occupied Egypt in 1881-82 to put down the nationalist army officers' revolt led by the Egyptian colonel `Uarbî Pasha. Muhammad Ahmad raised an army, expelled all foreign forces from Sudan, and established a theocratic Islamic state. This state survived for seventeen years until it was crushed by Lord Kitchener's British expeditionary force in 1898.

VI. The Sudanese Mahdi: A Brief Overview

By the 1860s Muhammad Ahmad was convinced that he was the Mahdi, although he would not openly proclaim this status for some time yet. Like other African jihâd leaders, he had visions of hadrahs, literally "presences," wherein the

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Prophet, famous sufis and unnamed shaykhs of his own order, the Sammânîyah, appeared and gave him sanction and directives. Also, in the face of opposition to his seemingly pretentious claims, he took his followers on a hijrah in 1881 to Jabal Qadîr in southwestern Sudan (Fashoda province), whence they returned to conquer as a holy army of Arab-descended, cattle-owning Baqqâra nomads, devotees of an Islamic state, and slave-traders chafing at the British-inspired interdiction of their livelihood. Between 1881 and 1885 the Mahdist forces defeated all armies sent against them. By Muhammad Ahmad’s death in 1885 most of what is now Sudan was part of the Mahdist state. Before his death the Mahdi appointed four caliphs in conscious imitation of the Râshidûn, the first four caliphs who were known to Sunnis as “rightly guided;” this was part of his attempt to re-create Sudanese society along the lines of the early Islamic community. He repudiated the Ottoman sultanate and caliphate; the former connoted political power, the latter religious authority stemming from the Prophet himself. The Mahdi even tried to dissolve all sufi orders, including his own Sammânîyah, so that loyalty to sufi shaykhs would not undercut his authority; he also called for the abolition of the four madhâhib, or Sunnî schools of religio-legal interpretation—Shâfi`î, Ḥanafî, Ḥanbalî and Mâlikî—on the basis that they had not existed in the

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earliest, pristine Muslim community. Islamic law as defined by the Mahdi was stringently enforced, and belief in Muhammad Ahmad’s Mahdi-hood was made a pillar of the faith. Alliances were attempted with other Muslim states, but with little success, presumably because few other leaders would accept Muhammad Ahmad’s extravagant claims. The caliph Abdullahi ruled in Sudan following the Mahdi’s death, but by 1898 the British, in order to ensure control of the Nile and the Suez Canal route to India in the face of French and Italian intrusions in central and eastern Africa, destroyed and occupied the Mahdist Sudan. Sudan became part of the Anglo-Egyptian Condominium, and Muhammad Ahmad’s followers were incorporated into the British administration while his son and grandson became leaders of the Ummah Party, which today constitutes the outlawed opposition to Hassan al-Turabi’s strict Muslim Brotherhood rule, whose own status vis-à-vis the military government has quite recently been thrown into limbo.

Sudanese Mahdism fits all the previously delineated characteristics of a “pure” Mahdist movement. Its founder overtly claimed to be not merely a mujaddid or a jihâd leader but the eschatological Mahdi. Sudanese Mahdism was by definition peripheral, beginning as it did on the geographical edge of the Islamic world in Africa; in fact, it can be seen as doubly marginalized, for Sudan was but the colony of an Ottoman province, Egypt. Muhammad Ahmad was a sufi and drew much of his support from the ranks of the mystics. His critique of

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Ottoman Egyptian rule in Sudan stressed not only the leaders’ failure to live up to Islamic law but also their failure to rule justly. And Sudanese Mahdism turned out to be not only an anti-establishment ideology but also one capable of creating a state that lasted for almost two decades in a part of the world that was increasingly being fought over by colonial European powers—which did, in the end, prove its undoing. Sudanese Mahdism, then, is not only the most recent example of a successful Mahdist revolution but arguably the purest representation of Mahdism.

VII. Conclusion

Over the span of Islamic history, then, there have been three very successful Mahdist states whose founders claimed to be the Awaited Mahdi: the two Sunnî states of the Muwahhîds and the Sudanese Mahdists, and the Ismâ’îlî state of the Fâṭimids. The `Abbâsids, as noted, began as a revolutionary Mahdist movement but shed that aspect of their ideology once they had achieved power. Although the Mahdîyah in Sudan was the most successful recent Mahdist venture, there have been other nineteenth- and twentieth-century movements that were at least tangentially Mahdist.

The Iranian Bâbîs and their offshoot the Bahâ’îs, as well as the Indian Aḥmadiyyah, can be seen as Madhist movements that metamorphosed into heretical spin-off sects of Islam. Although these groups are now considered separate religions, some Muslim writers continue to include these two under the
rubric of "mahdist" sects. In 1830s Iran one 'Alî Muhammad claimed to be the Bâb, "gate," who represented the Twelver Shi'î Mahdi, the Hidden Imâm. He was arrested and executed, but soon his follower Bahâ’ullah (1817-92) claimed to be not only the Mahdi/Hidden Imâm but a prophet. He preached a new, more pacifistic dispensation that superseded the Sharî'ah, or Islamic law, and was exiled by the Qajar rulers of Iran, finally settling in Akka (Acre), Palestine. Today Bahâ’îsm is recognized as a separate religion and counts some six million adherents worldwide. Another neo-Mahdist movement was that begun by Ghulâm Ahmad in the Qâdiyan region of India’s Punjab in the 1880s. Members of this movement are known as Aḩmadîs in the West and Qâdiyânîs to most Muslims. This group, too, accepted their founder as Mahdi or prophet and criticized the British colonial establishment as well as the Muslim authorities. This offshoot of Islam is also considered a religion unto itself now, and is especially strong in east Africa.

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57 For example, 'Abd al-Qâdir Aḩmad 'Atâ, Al-mahdi al-muntazar bayna al-ḥaqiqah wa-al-khurâfah (Cairo: Dâr al-'Ulûm lil-Ṭibâ‘ah, 1980) and Muḥammad Ibrâhîm Al-Jamal, Al-i’tidâ‘ wa-al-mahdi al-muntazar (Cairo: Maktabat al-Madînah, 1980). This begs the question of just when any Islamic group that defines itself around a mahdi, prophet or imâm bringing a new dispensation can be differentiated as a new religion. Chrisitanity is encountering this problem today vis-a-vis the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (the Mormons). For a less polemical analysis see Abbas Amanat, Resurrection and Renewal: The Making of the Babi Movement in Iran, 1844-1850 (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1989); and Peter Smith, A Short History of the Bahâ’î Faith (Oxford: OneWorld, 1996).

These movements are not infrequently adduced as cautionary tales by skeptical Muslim scholars and writers when they wish to emphasize the inherent dangers of Mahdism. But neither of these movements—Bâbism/Bahâ‘îsm or Ahmadism—developed in the Sunnî Arab world. Have there been any recent Mahdist claimants in the geographical, religious and intellectual milieu that is the focus of this study?

Indeed there have. On November 20, 1979—the first day of the year 1400 of the Muslim calendar—a large number of armed troops led by a disaffected Sa‘ûdî, Juhaymân al-‘Utaybî, occupied the great mosque of Mecca in the name of the alleged Mahdi, Muhammad b. ‘Abd Allah al-Qahtânî (by some accounts, al-‘Utaybî’s brother-in-law) and called for the overthrow of the Sa‘ûdî state. Government ‘ulamâ’ issued denunciatory fatwas, and then soldiers, advised and assisted by French special forces, were sent against the Mahdists. By December 3 the occupiers had been routed: many were killed while the survivors were captured, tried and executed. A more thorough analysis of this movement, and its relationship to modern theories of Mahdism, is reserved for the conclusion. At this juncture, suffice it to say that we may adduce this incident as evidence that Mahdist ideology is still a force to be reckoned with in

the modern Arab world, despite the lack of a Mahdist state similar to that of the Muwahhids, the Fâtimids or the Sudanese Mahdiyah today.

However, despite the absence of reified and successful Mahdism on the modern historical stage, there is no shortage of theoretical material on both sides of the issue. Since 1967 the Arab world has witnessed a steady growth in the number of polemical works by supporters of the concept of the eschatological Mahdi. In response, the opponents of such an idea have also been hard at work, churning out books aimed at persuading Muslims that belief in Mahdism is, at best, a benign devotional act and, at worst, a noxious superstition unworthy of the modern world. In order to better grasp the arguments adduced both for and against the Mahdi, then, let us turn in the next chapter to a scrutiny of the ḥadîth that mention the Mahdi and an examination of the entire Muslim chiliastic context in which he is set.
"Of course I have studied the Koran, and there is much in it with which I agree, but...Because you realized that you could not live by the book alone, you encouraged the invention of hadîth to help you govern the Empires you had gained. But is it not the case that many of these hadîth contradict one another? Who decides what you believe?" “We have scholars who work on nothing else but the hadîth," replied the Sultan....As a young man I studied the hadîth with great joy and care. I agree with you. They are open to many interpretations. That is why we have the ulema to ascertain the degree of their accuracy. We need them, Bernard of Toulouse, we need them. Without these traditions, our religion could not be a complete code of existence.”¹

I. Introduction

In order to understand and analyze the Mahdist expectations that still exert so much influence in the Sunni Arab world, we must have some familiarity with the bases of these expectations that set the eschatological² stage upon which the events of the End Times are expected by Muslims to be played out. We will thus first look at how Islamic messianism is similar to, yet distinct from, its Jewish and Christian antecedents. Then we will adduce the Islamic traditions, or hadîth, which specifically deal with the Mahdi and glean from them the


² This term along with two others—"millenarian" and "chiliastic"—will be used interchangeably throughout, although lexically there are shades of difference: "eschatological" refers specifically to events relating to the end of the world, while the other two terms technically refer to an eschatological belief that posits a 1,000 year reign of Christ ("millennium" is Latinate and "chiliasm" is from Greek). These two terms have taken on a utopian cast and are sometimes used in non-religious contexts while "eschatological" is exclusively a religious term.
rudiments of Muslim messianic hopes and then set them in the context of the various religious and political agendas of the salient time frame, the first three centuries of Islamic history. Following that, we will examine the other eschatological figures and features of the Islamic tradition—primarily, but not limited to, al-Dajjāl, the “Deceiver” or “Antichrist,” and ’Īsā b. Maryam, “Jesus son of Mary”—because the Mahdi is not expected to appear in a vacuum but in a recognizable, albeit indeterminate, context. Finally, we will take stock of this chiliastic backdrop prepared by some fourteen centuries of Muslim tradition and commentators so as to achieve a competent position from which to explore the arguments both for and against the Mahdi in the post-1967 Arab world.

II. Jewish and Christian Messianic Antecedents

Throughout most of Hebraic and Jewish history, any prophet, priest or ruler could be anointed as a sign of God's favor and thus wear the mantle of messiah. Eventually, however, the term came to be applied specifically to David, ruler of the united kingdom (which later split into Israel and Judah) from about 1000 to 961 BCE, and his descendants, including the posited future messiah. This messiah would be an individual historical figure who would restore not only the good fortune but also the political kingdom of the Jewish people.

Over the centuries, as various factions have developed within Judaism, different views of the messiah have likewise evolved, a process similar to that undergone later by Muslims regarding their nearest analogous eschatological figure, the Mahdi. Orthodox Jews still tend to look to the future for a divinely-inspired deliverer who will lead the Jewish people back to the halcyon days of the past within the terrestrial confines of the historical kingdoms of Israel and Judah, while also bringing the blessings of the one true God to all the peoples of the Earth. This straightforward interpretation of messianism would be paralleled later within the Islamic community by those who took at face value the hadîth foretelling the coming of a messianic individual, the Mahdi. Later differences among Muslim Mahdists as to the timing of the Mahdi's appearance were presaged within Orthodox Judaism, as it developed diverse views regarding the chronology of the Messiah's advent. Some "messianic nationalists" (prominent among Jewish settlers in the West Bank today) think the state of Israel—and
specifically the rebuilding of the Temple in Jerusalem—itself advances the messianic arrival; others believe that only the Messiah himself can usher in a Jewish state and, thus, that the Israeli state is illegitimate because it was founded without the Messiah. Ultimately, however, all Orthodox Jews officially await a historical personage as Messiah.

The American movements known as Conservative and Reform Judaism, on the other hand, tend to downplay the historical manifestation of the Messiah as such either by dispensing with him as a historical figure altogether and substituting instead a "mood of universal ethical regeneration," to utilize Arthur A. Cohen's phrase, or by calling for a "demessianization" of Judaism. This allegorization in Judaism is similar to the tack taken in Islam by Mahdist figurativists who transform the literal historical person of the Mahdi into an imaginary archetype of Islamic belief and behavior. In any event, no matter the degree of devotion to the coming of the messiah in modern Judaism, the fact remains that this idea of a savior or liberator who would come at the end of time entered the two later Abrahamic monotheisms, Christianity and Islam, where it proved of enormous importance not only religiously but also politically.

Christian messianism is, of course, quite distinct from that of the ancient Hebrews. This offshoot sect of Judaism came to be distinguished from the mother religion primarily by the belief that the messiah had indeed come in the

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form of Jesus of Nazareth, who was seen as the fulfillment of the prophecies and promises in the Hebrew scriptures (the Old Testament to Christians) regarding the messiah.\(^5\) His task came to be understood in a different light: rather than the political ruler who would restore the house of David to the throne of a Jewish kingdom, he became the suffering Son of God whose death by crucifixion and subsequent resurrection took away the sins of all humankind.

However, Christians also believe that this same Jesus, surnamed “Christ”—Greek for “Anointed One,” the equivalent of the Hebrew Mešiạ—“will come again in glory to judge the living and the dead, and his kingdom will have no end.”\(^6\) In this respect Christianity still resembles Judaism, at least insofar as both religions await the future coming of the messiah, whether it be for the first or second time. But while all Christian groups agree that Jesus will return, there are differences of interpretation and opinion regarding just when this will happen, the context thereof and the short-term results.

Christian interpretations of Jesus’ return, Judgment and the establishment of the kingdom of God fall into three broad categories, commonly referred to as


\(^6\) Nicene Creed, end of the second section. This creed was formulated in 325 CE in order to put an end to the theological arguments between Arians and Athanasians about the degree of divinity and humanity within Christ’s nature. The latter, with their view of Jesus as God the Son being coequal with the Father, triumphed in no small measure by winning the support of the Eastern Roman, later the Byzantine, Empire. Although the Nicene Creed came to be accepted by the majority of Christians, minority Monophysite sects continue to dispute its theological formulations.
premillennial, postmillennial and amillennial. Premillennialists believe that Christ will come before the start of his 1,000-year reign on earth, after which will occur the release of the bound Satan; his gathering of the masses of Gog and Magog for an assault on God’s people; Gog and Magog’s destruction and the casting of Satan, the False Prophet and the Beast of the Apocalypse into the Lake of Fire; and, finally, the Judgment of all humans. Finally, the new heaven and earth will be created, along with the new Jerusalem, which will descend from heaven (Book of Revelation 20). Postmillennialists believe that human society will get progressively better under the tutelage of the Church, and that after 1,000 years of this utopia Christ will return; otherwise postmillennialists agree with premillennialists regarding the aforementioned struggle with Satan, the Judgment and its aftermath. Amillennialists are for the most part those Christians who do not expect any 1,000-year period of God’s kingdom on earth prior to the Judgment, as do both pre- and post-millennialists; rather the millennium is interpreted more allegorically. There are other differences of opinion, particularly over two issues: when Christ’s return will occur and the world political, social and economic situation that will precede it; and whether there will be a literal “Rapture,” or sudden taking up of all believers to heaven.\footnote{St. Paul’s First Epistle to the Thessalonians, 4:16-5:3.}

\footnote{Broadly speaking, premillennialists are generally found in the evangelical/conservative churches, amillennialists are predominant in mainline churches such as Roman Catholicism and Lutheranism while postmillennialists tend to show up across denominational spectrums.}
But in general it is safe to say that all Christians profess a belief in the return of their messiah, Jesus.

Islamic messianism shares characteristics with both Jewish and Christian messianism, although there are significant differences. Unlike both Jewish and Christian messianism, Islamic messianism per se cannot be found in the religion’s scripture; that is, whereas the Torah and the Prophets predict the coming Jewish Messiah, and Christians use the Old Testament to refer to Christ’s first coming and the New Testament writings to presage his second appearance on earth, the Qur’an says nothing about the Mahdi, the closest analog in Islam to a messianic figure. This is somewhat confusing, because in the Qur’an Jesus the prophet is referred to, on more than one occasion, as al-Masîh, “the Messiah.” However, despite its being a cognate to the Hebrew term moshiah, in the Qur’anic context it seems to be little more than an honorific, devoid of any messianic import in the Jewish or Christian sense. For the Mahdi, the “rightly-guided one,” is actually a more “messianic” figure in the traditional Judaeo-Christian mold.

The Mahdi is in some ways a more important eschatological figure in Islam than is Jesus; that is, he serves as the linchpin of the End Times, as Jesus does for Christians. Jesus’ Second Coming, in which Muslims also believe, is but

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one sign of the Hour and not the climax thereof, as it is for Christians. Islamic messianism is more like that of Judaism in that both the Mahdi and the awaited messiah are traditionally seen as historical figures whose task will be accomplished in the normal run of space and time, unlike Jesus in his divine role as the second person of the Trinity and the “Alpha and Omega” of St. John’s revelation. Islamic and Jewish messianism are also more akin to one another than either is to Christianity in that the goal of the messianic figure of each is collective justice and peace rather than individual salvation. So despite the appearance of Jesus in Muslim eschatology, and his deceptively similar title of al-Masîh, Islamic messianism actually appears to have more in common with Jewish than with Christian thought.

Now that we have supplied a comparative monotheistic context for exploring eschatology, let us turn more specifically to the focus of this study: the Mahdi. As noted in chapter one, this eschatological individual does not appear in the Qur’ân; he does figure prominently, however, in a number of hadîth attributed to the prophet Muhammad. Let us next turn to these writings in order to determine the bases for Islamic belief in this figure.

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III. Islamic Messianic Traditions and Their Zoroastrian Antecedents

Any examination of the actual texts from the hadîth that deal with the Mahdi must be grounded in an understanding of the theory and practice that lay behind the calculus of hadîth formation and propagation within the early Islamic community.

For Muslims, there are two authoritative poles of religious reference: the Qur'ân, of course, on one hand; and on the other, the two-sided coin of Sunnah and hadîth (plural aḥâdîth). The Sunnah is the customary practice of the Muslim community as derived from the actions and words of the Prophet; hadîth refers to narrative accounts of the actions and sayings of Muhammad. Hadîths were initially orally transmitted, but during the reign of the Umayyad dynasty (661-750 CE) many came to be written down. But which were legitimate and which mere fabrications? A whole specialized field, that of hadîth criticism, developed in the first, second and third Islamic centuries (seventh, eighth and ninth centuries CE) in order to distinguish true from false traditions.

Two aspects of individual hadîths became the focus of this criticism: the matn, or text, of the hadîth and the isnâd, or chain of transmission, going back, presumably, to the Prophet Muhammad himself. A matn might be rejected on

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the grounds that it seemed to contradict the Qur'ān. But the focus of ḥadīth criticism was channeled into investigating the isnâds rather than the matn(s). The number, credibility and seamlessness of the transmitters became more important even than what the tradition had to say. On these three bases primarily, then, each ḥadīth was ranked into one of the following broad categories: ṣaḥīḥ, or sound; ḥasan, or good; and ḍaʿīf or saqīm, weak or infirm. This categorization was worked out by the famous ḥadīth critic Muḥammad b. Idrīs al-Shāfī`î (d. 820 CE), who, disturbed by the proliferation of questionable, or downright false, traditions in his time was prompted to develop a rational science for legitimating traditions, heavily influenced by Hellenistic rationalism, which focused on chains of transmission over and above texts of alleged sayings.

By the end of the century in which al-Shāfī`î died, the third/ninth, two major compilations of traditions had been completed, those of Ismā`îl al-Bukhārī (d. 256/875) and of Muslim b. al-Ḥajjāj (d. 261/875). To this day Muslims consider these the two most authoritative collectors of ḥadīth. Within the next four decades of the late ninth/early tenth century CE four more major compilations would be published: those of Sulaymān b. al-Ash`ath Abū Dāʿūd al-Sijistānī (d. 275/888); Abū ʿAbd Allāh Muḥammad b. Yazīd al-Rabāʿī al-Qazwīnī b. Mājah, or Ibn Mâjah (d. 273/887); Abū ʿIsâ Muḥammad b. ʿIsâ
Sawra b. Shaddâd al-Tirmidhî (d. 279/892);\(^{13}\) and Abû `Abd al-Rahmân Aḥmad b. Shu`ayb al-Nasâ’î (d. 303/915). Together with the collections of Muslim and al-Bukhârî these constitute the so-called “six canonical collections.” Of the six, only Abû Dâ`ûd, Ibn Mâjah and al-Tirmidhî contain chapters on the eschatological Mahdi, however.

For their part, the Imâmî or Twelver Shî’a accept these Sunnî collections but also utilize four authoritative anthologies of the sayings of their Twelve Imâms: those of Muḥammad b. Ya`qûb al-Kulaynî (d. 940 CE), Muḥammad b. Bâbûyah al-Qummî (d. 991 CE) and two of Muḥammad al-Ţûsî (d. 1067). These utterances of the Imâms are put on a par with those of the Prophet, since it is believed that each of the twelve is a repository of the same esoteric light which illuminated the mind of the Prophet.\(^{14}\) What the Shî’a ḥadîths add to the Sunnî ones regarding the Mahdi is primarily twofold: that he will not be a freestanding eschatological figure but the twelfth in the chain of Imâms, and therefore that his duty consists of not (merely) taking the political helm of the Islamic ship of

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\(^{13}\) On these three compilers specifically see J. Robson, “Abû Dâ`ûd al-Sidjistânî” \(EI^2\); J.W. Fück, “Ibn Mâdja,” \(EI^2\); and “al-Tirmidhî,” \(SEI\) [no author given].


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state but also of utilizing his esoteric knowledge to foster in others a right relationship with God.\textsuperscript{15}

By the late third/ninth century the Sunnî traditions about the Mahdi, already long circulating throughout the Islamic world from the northwestern African shores of the Atlantic to the Hindu Kush, had come to be included in three major collections of hadîth: those of Abû Dâ’ûd, Ibn Tirmidhî and Ibn Mâjah. The question arises, however: why would such beliefs and traditions develop in Islam when its holy book, the Qur’ân, says nothing of such a millenarian figure? And why would only half of the six official Sunnî anthologies of traditions include accounts and predictions of the Mahdi? We may hazard some brief educated speculation. The context in which Islam arose, developed and conquered must be considered here. As we have seen, both Judaism and Christianity are messianic faiths, and so any new religious movement in the Middle East would have been hard pressed to at least acknowledge some sort of messianic imperative, especially if that new faith were to boldly assert its connection to earlier brands of monotheism, as did Islam. But Judaism and Christianity were not the only religious influences on this new religion.

The first major empire that the Arab Muslims, in the mid-first/seventh century, conquered was that of Sâsânian Persia. The Persians at that time adhered neither to Judaism nor Christianity but to the teachings of Zoroaster, a

Persian prophet who lived sometime in the first or second millennium BCE. Zoroaster conceived of the cosmos as a struggle between the forces of good, led by an ethical god, Ahura Mazda, and the forces of evil, led by Angra Mainyu (in Sasanian Persian, Ahriman). Zoroastrian eschatology posits a cyclical cosmic history, during the last 3,000 years of which a "savior" (saoshyant) will appear every millennium. Usedar is the savior for the first such period; Pisyotan helps to usher in Usedar's millennium.16 Furthermore, with the suppression of Zoroastrianism by the Muslim rulers of Iran, "its followers took refuge in the idea of the occulted leader who will return to take vengeance upon his enemies in a messianic fashion."17

Within the vast expanse of the Sasanian Empire, then, there were two major eschatological ideas which later manifested themselves within Islamic chiliasm: the hidden-yet-returning messiah figure, which predominated in Ismāʿīlī and Imāmī Shiʿism with the occulted Imāms; and the division of labor between the messiah and his helper, a paradigm seemingly repeated within not just Shiʿism but also Sunnism insofar as both assigned, on the basis of ḥadīth,

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certain eschatological tasks to Jesus and to the Mahdi. Of course the mere fact that several aspects of Islamic End Time theorizing resemble those of Zoroastrianism does not prove their provenance in the latter. Nonetheless, the influence of Zoroastrianism on Islam is hard to deny. Shaul Shaked sums up the issue succinctly:

It is good to remember that when we are dealing with the situation of Iran towards the neighboring cultures, that it is often far from easy to establish which one influenced the other. We are faced with a host of similar themes and motifs in Greek, Jewish, Christian, Babylonian and Iranian sources....It is only rarely that we can prove with any conclusiveness that a specific notion did originate in one of these cultures and that if must have spread from there to the others. In most cases we have to use a kind of reasoning that is close to speculation.... Nonetheless] one fairly large topic on which there is quite clear evidence of close affinity between Iranian and Islamic ideas so as to suggest probable dependence is eschatology. Islamic eschatology derived a good deal of material from Jewish and Christian sources, which in their turn were also dependent, it seems, on Iranian antecedents. But there are elements in the Islamic treatment of eschatological events that derive quite clearly from Iran.¹⁹

Even so, Zoroastrian antecedents are not sufficient to explain how and why such ideas found their way into the hadîths of the Muslim communities. For an answer to these questions we must examine the religious and political struggles within the Islamic world, particularly those of the second-century AH/eighth century CE.

¹⁸ Shaked, From Zoroastrian Iran to Islam, p. 154.

¹⁹ Ibid., p. 144.
IV. The Development, Utilization and Exploitation of Ḥadīth in the Early Islamic Community

By the second/eighth century the `Abbāsids were ideologically and politically active, exploiting Shīʿa frustrations and expectations in their rise to power. In addition, the regime then in power (and which the `Abbāsids would eventually supplant), the Damascus-based Umayyads, were fighting Khârijî revolts while trying to fend off first `Abbāsid propaganda and then `Abbāsid swords. These were the major religio-political factions of the first three centuries of Islamic history. It would be surprising, and an exception to human nature, if these factions had not attempted to seize on and wield various and sundry traditions—particularly ones dealing with the Awaited Mahdi—to their own advantage.

Many scholars of Islam think this is exactly what occurred, beginning with Ignaz Goldziher’s view\(^\text{20}\) that Khârijî, Umayyad and proto-Shīʿa groups did not simply exploit extant traditions but went so far as to engage in fabrication of them, a process known as *tadlis* or *wadʿ*. Whereas Goldziher maintained that *matn*, or “texts,” of Ḥadīth were not infrequently simply made up to support a certain religious or political position, Joseph Schacht\(^\text{21}\) argued that it was not so much texts that were fabricated as *isnāds*, or “chains of transmission,” which


were spuriously traced back to the Prophet himself. Alternatively, G.H. Juynboll\textsuperscript{22} in several works over the last twenty years has attempted to uphold the integrity of isnâds, with limited success. Quite recently Daniel Brown\textsuperscript{23} has documented the trend in modernist Islam away from the venerable focus on isnâds and toward the neglected ground of matns, advocated by the likes of Rashîd Rîdâ (d. 1935) in Syria and Sayyid Aḥmad Khan (d. 1898) in India. His observation that “the tradition literature serves as a sort of vast museum of Muslim ideas to which modern Muslim thinkers go for evidence to support their arguments”\textsuperscript{24} could also serve as an apt description of the role ādîth played in the first three Muslim centuries, the difference being that before the late third/ninth century factions had even more latitude to pick and choose the tradition(s) that they found supportive, since they were as yet unconstrained by the official collections. Jacob Lassner\textsuperscript{25} focused this whole debate about traditions on the `Abbâsid movement, arguing that in their propaganda war with the Umayyads the issue was NOT necessarily whether individual traditions were true or not; rather, the


\textsuperscript{23} Rethinking Tradition in Modern Islamic Thought (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996).

\textsuperscript{24} Ibid., pp. 106-07.

\textsuperscript{25} Islamic Revolution and Historical Memory: An Inquiry into the Art of `Abbâsid Apologetics (New Haven, CT: American Oriental Society, 1986).
Muslim world as a whole found the discourse between the `Abbâsids and Umayyads entertaining and even edifying regardless of the literal truth of the respective claims! This may be a heavy application of discourse theory to early Islamic history, but it bears consideration. Finally John Burton\textsuperscript{26} moves away from the whole fabrication thesis, maintaining instead that the traditions should rather be seen as the early Islamic community's first attempts at Qur'ânic exegesis. Burton does not disagree that various factions in the Muslim community utilized traditions to their advantage, however: "the different theological attitudes being framed and given expression in \textit{hadîth} form prompted among the general body of the Muslims the need to confirm their own positions vis-à-vis the welter of \textit{hadîths} with which they were being bombarded from all sides."\textsuperscript{27} Some specific examples of this process can be seen in \textit{hadîth} references to, for example, the claim that the imâmate should be restricted to descendants of `Alî and Fâtimah, an idea which lends support to the Shi`a position; or to "black banners from the east," seized upon—or created by?—the `Abbâsids who, bearing such flags, would conquer the Umayyads. The problem with Burton's thesis in regard to Mahdism is that, as we have seen, the Mahdi is not found in the Qur'ân. Nonetheless, the prominence of millenarian ideas

\textsuperscript{26} \textit{An Introduction to Hadîth} (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1994).

\textsuperscript{27} \textit{Ibid.}, p. 47.
within Judaism, Christianity and Zoroastrianism may have made a messianic figure available to early Muslim exegetes—and thus to anthologizers of ḥadīth.

We can examine the backgrounds of the three compilers who include information about the Awaited Mahdi and seek clues to any religious or political biases, particularly any connections with one or another of these factions, that they may have harbored and that may have led them to include traditions concerning the Mahdi. Abû Dâ’ûd (d. 275/888) is perhaps the most prestigious of the three collectors who mention the Mahdi. As his surname, “al-Sijistânî,” indicates, he was from the Sijistân area of eastern Persia, although he spent much of his life in Baṣrah, located in southern Iraq. His collection numbers some 5000 traditions. Ibn Mâjah (d. 273/887) was from Qazvîn, in northwestern Persia, but gleaned his 4000 ḥadîth from the more westerly Islamic lands, such as Egypt and Syria. And al-Tirmidhî (d. 279/892) was from the region of Bâkh, in today’s Tadjikistan. He gathered his traditions from as far afield as the Ḥijâz and Iraq. One common denominator is that all of these men hailed from the eastern and northeastern sectors of the ninth-century CE Islamic world but went to the heartland to gather material for their collections. Perhaps the eastern peripheries of the Islamic world were more susceptible, and sympathetic, to Mahdism in the same way that the western peripheries were, as we have seen with groups such as the Fâṭîmids and Muwaḥḥîds and individual thinkers such as Ibn al-‘Arabî. And perhaps such a tendency rubbed off on Abu Dâ’ûd, Ibn Mâjah.
and al-Tirmidhî. According to Richard Bulliet, the "dialectic of question and answer" was the mechanism whereby Muslims from the peripheries of the Islamic political world discovered what Islam was. And what better place to go for answers to such questions but to the center: the Ḥijaz, Egypt, Syria, Iraq. In the days of Abû Da'ûd, Ibn Mâjah and al-Tirmidhî the far-flung 'ulamâ' establishment had not yet come into existence, so inquisitive Muslims from the fringes of the empire had recourse to studying and compiling ḥadîth for insights into what it meant to be a Muslim. In fact, as Bulliet so eloquently puts it,

In some measure the hadîth came to fill the function of the absent clerical establishment; and the ulama, or that large proportion of them whose claim to learning rested on hadîth study, came into being to deal with the efflorescence of hadîth. They weeded them, pruned them, and trained them to the trellises of their uninstitutionalized educational networks. Ultimately, they turned the chaotic overgrowth into an orderly garden containing only known species of a proven pedigree. The rest were discarded.²⁸

However, there were those collectors of ḥadîth who considered references to the Mahdi the religious equivalent of weeds, needing not pruning but uprooting—most notably the two most revered compilers, Muslim and al-Bukhârî. These men were not only contemporaries of Abû Da'ûd, Ibn Mâjah and al-Tirmidhî but hailed from the same general region of the Islamic world; yet their collections omit the Mahdi—a difference that would reverberate down through the ages of Islamic history. It may be that some other kinds of

²⁸ Bulliet, Islam: The View from the Edge, pp. 180-181. Other relevant sections of his book to the issue at hand are pp. 1-12, 169-183 and 185-207.
sympathies and/or factional affiliations, religious or political, entered into the
calculus of whether to include material on the Mahdi. Actually gaining any
insight into such positions seems difficult, bordering on the impossible, however,
for no sources have recorded the ideological predispositions and factional
affiliations of the six canonical hadîth compilers. What we do know is that three
collections do include traditions concerning the Mahdi, to which we can now turn.

V. Hadîth Dealing with the Mahdi

Ibn Mâjah, Kîtāb al-Fitan: Chapter 34, “Emergence of the Mahdi”

Hadîth 4082: `Uthmân b. Abî Shaybah reported to us that Mu`âwiyyah b.
Hishâm reported that `Alî b. Sâlih reported from Yazîd b. Abî Ziyâd, from
Ibrâhîm, from `Alqamah, from `Abd Allâh, who said, “While we were with the
messenger of God (the praise and peace of God be upon him), some youths
came out from among the Banû Hâshim. And when they saw the Prophet, his
eyes became drenched with tears and changed color. I said, `Why is your face
so unpleasant?’ And the Prophet said, I am of the Ahl Bayt, for whom God
has chosen the Hereafter over the world. Truly the family of my house

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29 The following are my own translations from the Arabic texts.


31 This honorific, which always follows a reference to the prophet Muḥammad, as well as the
similar one used for `Alî, will henceforth be omitted.

32 The Arabic phrase ahl al-bayt is usually rendered “the prophet’s family” but that seems to
make little sense in this context, for why would the Prophet say “I am of the [Prophet’s] family”?
Incidentally, the phrase is lacking the article al- in the text.
will suffer affliction and banishment and expulsion afterwards, until a people comes from the east bearing black banners. They will demand the good and not receive it, so they will kill and triumph. Then they will demand what they had been asking for. But they will not receive it, until they hand over power to a man from the family of my house who will fill up [the Earth] with justice, just as it had been filled with injustice. Who among you understands this? You should go to them even should it require crawling upon ice.’” [The text is glossed with the remark that this is a weak isnad.]

Hadîth 4083: Naṣr b. `Alî al-Jahdâmî reported to us that Muhammad b. Marwân al-`Uqîî reported that `Umârah b. Abî Ḥafṣah reported from Zayd al-`Ammî, from Abî Šâdiq al-Nâjî, from Abî Sa`îd al-Khudrî that the Prophet said, “In my community the Mahdî will appear. His time will be limited to seven or nine. My community will prosper under him as it never has before. Food will be abundant, and no one will hoard anything. Wealth will be as abundant as grain. Any man will arise and say ‘O Mahdî! Give to me!’ And the Mahdî will reply ‘Take!’”

Hadîth 4084: Muḥammad b. Yaḥyá and Ahmad b. Yûsuf reported to us, saying: “`Abd al-Razzâq reported to us, from Sufyân al-Thawrî, from Khâlid al-

33 The phrase is fâyâthîhim, “let you go to them.” It may mean “to him,” however.

34 This is one of several places in eschatological traditions where the unit of time is not given. Traditionally “years” is understood as intended here.
Hadhdâî, from Abî Ismâ’ al-Raḥabî, from Thawbân, who said: 'The Prophet said, “Three will be killed at a place of your treasure,” all of them sons of a caliph. So none of them will wind up with it [the treasure]. Then the black banners will approach from the east and slaughter you violently, as no people has ever been slaughtered.” Then he [the Prophet] mentioned something that I did not memorize. Then he said, “If you see him, swear loyalty to him, even if you must crawl upon ice—because he is the caliph of God, the Mahdi.”

Hadîth 4085: `Uthmân b. Abî Shaybah reported to us, from Abû Dawûd al-חafaרî, from Yâsîn, from Ibrâhîm b. Muḥammad b. al-Ḥanafîyah, from `Alî, who said: “The Prophet said, ‘The Mahdi is from among us, the ahl al-bayt, blessed by God at night.’”

Hadîth 4086: Abû Bakr b. Abî Shaybah reported to us, from Ahmad b. `Abd al-Mâlik, from Abû al-Mâlîk al-Raqqî, from Ziyâd b. Bayân, from `Alî b. Nufayl, from Sa`îd b. al-Musayyab, who said: “We were with Umm Salamah and we were speaking of the Mahdi. And she said, ‘I heard the apostle of God say, The Mahdi is from the descendants of Fâṭimah.’”

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35 This may refer to the Ka`bah.

36 The noun is plural.

37 A gloss states that this is a sahîh, or “verified,” chain of transmission.

38 This may be a reference to laylat al-qadr, or “Night of Power,” described in the sūra of that name (number 97); herein the blessedness of the night of revelation is described.


Abî Dâ`ûd, Kitâb al-Mahdi

Hadîth 4282: Musaddad Mahân `Umr b. `Abîd reported to us that Muḥammad b. al-`Ulâ reported that Abû Bakr—that is, Ibn `Ayyâsh—reported that Musaddad reported that Yaḥyâ reported, from Suфyân, that Aḥmad b. Ibrâhîm reported that `Abîd Allâh b. Mûsá reported that Zâ`idah recorded that Aḥmad b. Ibrâhîm reported that `Abîd Allah relayed, from Faṭr—he alone of

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39 This tradition would seem to be blatantly Shi`î.

40 A comment on this tradition is that its chain of transmission is weak.

those from Ḥāsim—from Zarr, from ʿAbd Allāh, from the Prophet, who said: "Even if only one day remains"—which Zādah continues in his ḥadīth—"God will lengthen this day until He calls forth a man from me," or "from the family of my house, his name matching mine and his father’s name matching that of my father." Fatr’s ḥadīth adds, "He will fill the earth with equity and justice just as it had previously been filled with injustice and oppression." In the ḥadīth of Sufyān, he [the Prophet] says "He [God?] will not destroy or annihilate the world until the Arabs possess a man from the family of my house, whose name matches my name."

Ḥadīth 4283: ʿUthmān b. Abī Shaybah reported to us that al-Faḍl b. Dakīn reported that Faṭr reported, from al-Qâsim b. Abī Bazzah, from Abī al-Ṭufayl, from ʿAlî, that the Prophet said: "The world would not have continued but for that day wherein God will send a man from the family of my house, filling the world with justice as it had been filled with injustice."

Ḥadīth 4284: Aḥmad b. Ibrāhīm reported to us that ʿAbd Allāh b. Jaʿfar al-Raqqī reported that Abû al-Malîḥ al-Ḥasan b. ʿUmar reported, from Ziyâd al-Bayān, from ʿAlî b. Nufayl, from Saʿîd b. al-Masîb, from Umm Salamah, who

**42** Or "if only one day of this age remained, God would raise up a man."
said: “I heard the messenger of God say, ‘The Mahdi will be from my family, \textsuperscript{43} from the descendants of Fā'timah.’”

Hadîth 4285: Sahl b. Tamâm b. Bazî`a reported to us that `Umrân al-Qattân reported, from Qatâdah, from Abî Na`îrah, from Abî Sa`îd al-Khudrî, who said: “The messenger of God said, ‘The Mahdi, like me, will have a distinct forehead, a hooked nose, and will fill the earth with equity and justice just as it has previously been filled with injustice and tyranny, and he will reign seven years.’”

Hadîth 4286: Mu`âammad b. al-Mathnî reported to us that Ma`âdh b. Hishâm reported that Abî reported, from Qatâdah, from Sâlih Abî al-Khalîl, from a compatriot of his, from Umm Salamah, wife of the Prophet, from the Prophet himself, who said: “There will be disagreement upon the death of a caliph and a man from the people of Madinah will emerge and flee to Makkah. Some of the people of Makkah will come and drag him out against his will and swear loyalty to him between the corner and the building near the Ka`bah.\textsuperscript{44} An army from Syria will move against him but God will cause it to be swallowed up in the desert between Mecca and Medina.

When the people see this, the nobles of Syria and the notables\textsuperscript{45} of Iraq

\textsuperscript{43} The term here is `atrâtî, rather than the usual ahl baytî.

\textsuperscript{44} Bayna al-rukn wa-al-maqâm, “the corner and the small building near the Ka`bah housing a footprint of Abraham.” Maqâm Ibrâhîm was where Abraham himself legendarily stood.

\textsuperscript{45} The literal term is `asâbîb, “turbans.”
will come and swear loyalty to him between the corner and building near the Ka`bah.\textsuperscript{46} Then there will appear a man whose maternal uncles are from Kalb. He will send an army which they will triumph over; this will be the battle of Kalb. Those who do not receive the spoils of Kalb will be disappointed. He will distribute the wealth and implement the Sunnah of the Prophet among the people and establish Islam upon the earth. He will remain seven years, then die and the Muslims will pray for him.\textsuperscript{47} Abû Dâ’ûd adds: “Some of them from Hishâm said ‘nine years,’ while some of them said ‘seven.’

\textit{Hadîth 4287:} Hârûn b. `Abd Allâh reported to us that `Abd al-Samad reported, from Hamâm, from Qatâdah in this hadîth, who said, “Nine years.” Abû Dâ’ûd said: “The likes of Mu`âdh from Hishâm said `nine years.’”

\textit{Hadîth 4289:} Uthmân b. Abû Shaybah reported to us that Jarîr reported, from `Abd al-`Azîz b. Râfî`a, from `Abîd Allah b. al-Qabtîyah, from Umm Salamah, from the Prophet, in the story of the swallowed-up army,\textsuperscript{48} where she

\textsuperscript{46} This hadîth seems to invoke the personalities and events of the second \textit{fitnah}, or “civil war,” within the early Islamic community in the first century AH, when Husayn, the surviving son of `Abî, was killed.

\textsuperscript{47} This tradition invokes the tribal rivalries of the time, between Syrian and Iraqi Arabs and between Qays and Yemen. Patricia Crone in “Were the Qays and Yemen of the Umayyad Period Political Parties?, \textit{Der Islam} 71, 1 (1994), pp. 1-57, argues that the disputes between Qays (northern Arabs) and Yemen (southern Arabs) were not political but surviving tribal “factionalism,” of which we may see a reflection here.

\textsuperscript{48} There are traditions in which, once the Mahdi has appeared on earth, he will be attacked in the \textit{Hijâz} by an opposition army led not by the Dajjâl but by a Syrian leader, al-Sufyânî, from the line of Mu`awiyah b. Abî Sufyân. This attacking force will, at God’s command, be swallowed up by the desert. See below, chapter four.
said, “O messenger of God, what about the one who was reluctant?” And the Prophet said: “They will be swallowed up but he will be raised on the Day of Resurrection according to his intentions.”

Hadîth 4290: Abû Dâ’ûd said: “I heard from Hârûn b. al-Mughayarrah, who said, "`Umar b. Abî Qays reported to us, from Shu`ayb b. Khâlid, from Abî Isĥâq, who said: "`Alî, while looking at his son al-Hasan, said: `This son of mine is a sayyid, as the Prophet named him, and from his loins there will emerge a man named after your prophet, resembling him in conduct but not in appearance.’ Then he recounted the story about the earth being filled with justice."’ And Hârûn said: "`Umar b. Abû Qays reported to us, from Matraf b. Ṭârîf, from Abî al-Hasan, from Halâl b. `Umrû, who said: `I heard `Alî say that the Prophet said: "A man from Warâ’ al-Nahr [Transoxania] will emerge, calling himself al-Ḥârith b. Ḥarrâth. In his vanguard will be a man calling himself Maňṣûr. He will pave the way for the family of Muĥammad, just as the Quraysh had done for the messenger of God. Every believer must support him,” or perhaps he said `follow him.”’”

49 “Lord, master, chief” or “a direct descendant of Muĥammad.”

50 This seems to be a clear example of `Abbâsid propagandistic hadîthology, as Maňṣûr was the second `Abbâsid caliph.
hadith 2331: Ubayd b. Isbath b. Muhammad al-Qurayshî reported to us that Abî recounted that Sufyûn al-Thawrî recounted, from `Âsim b. Bahdalah, from Zîr, from `Abd Allâh, who said: "The messenger of God said: `The world will not pass away until the Arabs possess a man from the family of my house whose name matches mine.'" This is [also] contained in the accounts of `Alî, Abî Sa`îd, Umm Salamah and Abî Hurayrah. This tradition is ḥasan sahîh.

Hadîth 2332: Abd al-Jabbâr b. al-`Alaî al-Attâr reported to us that Sufyân b. `Unayah recounted, from `Âsim, from Zîr, from `Abd Allâh, from the Prophet, who said: "A man from my family will rule, whose name matches my name."`Âsim said that Abû Sâlih recounted from Abî Hurayrah, that he [the Prophet] said: "The world would not continue except that God lengthens the day and postpones its dissolution." This hadîth is ḥasan sahîh.

Hadîth 2333: Muhammad b. Bashshâr reported to us that Muhammad b. Ja`far reported that Shu`bah recounted that he said, "I heard Zayd[an] al-`Amî


52 As noted previously, traditions are ranked, from most reliable to suspect, as sahîh, ḥasan and da`îf. Al-Tirmidhî, in particular, uses ḥasan with other terms but—as Robson points out in "Hadîth," E2, p.25—"he has unfortunately not explained what he means by all the terms he uses."

53 This is a problematic phrase: ...la tawwala Allah dhalika al-yawm hattâ baliya.
say that he heard Abâ al-Ṣadîq al-Nâjî say that in a discussion with Abî Sa`îd al-Khudrî, he said, `We were afraid that after our prophet something new would occur, so we asked the Prophet of God and he said that “in my community the Mahdi will emerge, living five or seven or nine.” Since the time period was in doubt, we asked, “And what is that?” And he said “years.” He continued and said, “Men will come to him and say ‘O Mahdi, give to me! Give to me!’ and he will load down such a one’s cloak unto his capacity to carry.” This is a good (ḥasan) ḥadîth. It has also been transmitted in another form by way of Abû Sa`îd from the Prophet, as well as from Abû al-Ṣadîq al-Nâjî, named Bakr b. `Umr and known as Bakr b. Qays.

These, then, are all the traditions that provide the corpus of data about the Mahdi: his provenance, nature, appearance and mission. Combining redundant statements and summarizing allows us to make the following succinct observations about this eschatological Islamic figure.

The Mahdi must come, and if necessary God will lengthen or extend time prior to the Judgment in order for this to take place. He will be from Muḥammad’s family, and more specifically descended from Fâtimah, the daughter of Muḥammad and wife of `Alî. His name will be the same as Muḥammad’s, and his father’s name will be the same as that of the Prophet’s

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54 The term is ḥadathun, which today means “event” but here is used to mean “novelty.”

55 Again, no time frame is specified.
father. In terms of physical description, the Mahdi will have a distinct forehead (or receding hairline) and a prominent nose.⁵⁶ He will be extremely generous and altruistic, and fill the earth with justice and equity as it had previously been saturated with oppression and partiality, perhaps by redistributing riches from the wealthy to the poor. The Mahdi will reign for five, seven or nine years. At one point before he comes to power he will flee from Medina to Mecca and attempt to adopt an anonymous lifestyle; however, people will compel him to lead them by swearing loyalty to him somewhere within the confines of Mecca between, presumably, one of the columns of the Grand Mosque there and one of the small nearby buildings which encloses a preserved footprint of the prophet Abraham—presumably the structure known today as maqâm Ibrâhîm. Almost immediately an army from Syria will attack the Mahdi and his followers but be swallowed up by the desert.⁵⁷ After his triumph he will redistribute wealth and (re)implement the Sunnah of Islam. The Mahdi will afterwards reign for five, seven or nine years before dying a natural death after which, some unspecified years later—according to other eschatological ḥadîth—the world will come to an end and the Judgment ensue.

⁵⁶ The Mahdist claimant who most took advantage of these specific expectations was the nineteenth-century Sudanese Muḥammad Áljmad “al-Mahdi” who is said to have had these very physical traits. He is the subject of chapter three, below.

⁵⁷ According to later commentators the commander would be a Sufyânî. See Madelung, “al-Mahdi,” ET², as well as the relevant section in chapter four, below. Information on the eschatological figure al-Sufyânî is next to nonexistent.
Having listed the traditions dealing with the Mahdi, we can now examine some examples of factional tendencies that probably inform them. There are two, perhaps three, major predispositions that can be delineated:

1) At least nine traditions have the Prophet mentioning that the Mahdi will descend from his family: these probably manifest a pro-Shī`a, or at least `Alīd, tendency.

2) Also some half a dozen arguably pro-`Abbāsid sayings can be found: “black banners,” anyone conquering “from the east” or from “Warâ’ al-Nahr [Transoxania],” the defeat of an army from Syria. Alternatively, the “army from Syria” may allude to the martyrdom of `Alī’s son Ḥusayn by the army of the Umayyad caliph Yazid in 680/81 CE; its defeat could reflect the `Alid faction’s desire to reverse the historical outcome.

3) Finally, seven traditions in one way or another prophesy the Mahdi’s redistribution of wealth or stress his generosity and devotion to social justice. Given what we have noted about the importance of this aspect of the Mahdi in Shī`ism, one could argue that such sayings are at least marginally pro-Shī`a.

Mahdist traditions were not the only ones that reflected the intense doctrinal and political flux within the Islamic world prior to the `Abbāsid revolution. In the second Islamic century Islam itself, at least on the peripheries, was still being
defined and articulated, and the legitimacy of the community’s leadership at the center was continuously questioned. It is no wonder, then, that Mahdist and other traditions reflected this ideological and rhetorical melee—thus, for example, any hadîth reference to the Râshidûn, or rightly-guided caliphs, neglecting the Umayyads could also be a de facto jab at the latters’ legitimacy, and thus as much political as religious rhetoric.\(^{58}\)

Regardless of the degree of partisanship that may have crept into the creation and codification of hadîth about the Mahdi and despite its absence from the pages of the Qur’ân, the Mahdist concept is seen today by the majority of Muslims as a firm teaching or doctrine of Islam. Most Muslims await the coming of the Mahdi as a sign of the beginning of the End. But it is not a doctrine that can be studied as if in an eschatological vacuum. Although the Mahdi is the crux, there are a number of other important Muslim millenarian beliefs. It is to these that we must now turn.

VI. Other Eschatological Aspects of Islam

In Islamic thought there are four major characters who will be active around the time of the Mahdi: Jesus, as noted above; the Dajjâl, the Antichrist or, more accurately, the “Deceiver;” the Dâbbah, or “Beast;” and Yâjûj wa-Mâjûj,\(^{58}\)

\(^{58}\) The best sources I have found on this topic are Burton, *An Introduction to Hadîth*, esp. chapter three, “The Political Dimensions of the Hadîth,” and Lassner, *Islamic Revolution and Historical Memory*.  

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or “Gog and Magog.” As noted above, the Mahdi does not appear in the Qur’ân but is prominent in a number of traditions. The same is true of the Dajjâl, but Jesus, the Beast and Gog and Magog are described in both the Qur’ân and the traditions. Let us deal with each of these chiliastic characters separately and then turn to the traditions about the other harbingers of the end of history before returning to the focus of this study: the Mahdi.

The role of Jesus in Islam has been touched upon above. He and the Mahdi will lead the forces of God against the forces of evil under the command of the Dajjâl and exemplified by the hordes of Gog and Magog. Although the exact chronology is unclear, the traditions agree that the prophet Jesus will return by “descending” upon a mosque in Damascus. He will be of medium height, “ruddy” in coloration and having hair that flows down his head as if he had just bathed. He will break all the world’s crosses, kill all its swine and call all People of the Book to join the true religion, the one of which he is an adherent—Islam. He and the Mahdi will lead the forces that battle those of the Dajjâl, and Jesus will personally slay the Antichrist. Jesus will then remain on Earth for a

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59 I count these two as one entity, since that is how the Qur’ân and ḥadîth treat them.

60 It should be noted, however, that Jesus’ return is found only in ḥadîth, although he is discussed at length in other contexts in the Qur’ân.

considerable time, probably forty years, possibly marry and have children, and then die and be buried next to the prophet Muhammad in Medina.

The Dajjāl will appear some time before Jesus, at the time when the Mahdi is also living on the Earth. He will be short and corpulent, with frizzy red hair. He will also be blind in one eye. Kāfir, “unbeliever,” will be written on his forehead. Some traditions maintain that he will be a Jew. He will perform miracles which will entice many to follow him and his false doctrines. This Deceiver will reign for either 40 days or 40 years but will be incapable of entering either Mecca or Medina. As mentioned, he will be killed by Jesus.63

The Dābbah, or “Beast,” appears in the Qurʾān (sūrat al-Naml [27]:82) as well as in many of the hadîth. It appears very similar to the Beast of Revelation 13, insofar as it marks both believers and unbelievers on their foreheads. This Beast is enormous and speaks to humans in Arabic. However, the Islamic Beast seems less outright evil than either the Beast of Revelation or the Dajjāl in that its main task seems to be to mock unbelievers and to inspire terror through its sheer size.

62 In the Qurʾān Jesus was not crucified the first time he was on earth; rather, God rescued him from such an ignominious death and had someone who resembled him—possibly Judas Iscariot—die in his place while Jesus was taken up into heaven. See sūrat al-Nisā’ [4]: 157-58 and its explication by Bishop Kenneth Cragg in his “Introduction” to M. Kamel Hussein, City of Wrong: A Friday in Jerusalem, trans. Kenneth Cragg (Oxford: OneWorld, 1994), pp. 11-25.


64 Verse 11, ff: “Then I saw another beast, coming out of the earth. He had two horns like a lamb, but he spoke like a dragon....And he performed great and miraculous signs....”
Yâjûj and Mâjûj, “Gog and Magog,” are familiar eschatological figures in both the Bible (Ezekiel 38 and 39; Revelation 20:7-9) and the Qur’ân (sûrat al-Kahf [18]:92-3; sûrat al-Anbiyâ’ [21]: 21:96). In both they are the enemies of the true followers of God in the Last Days, but whereas in the book of Revelation Gog and Magog are “the nations in the four corners of the earth” who gather to fight God’s people, in Qur’ân and hadîth they are a numerous and violent people who were walled in by Alexander the Great but will break loose to torture and slaughter across the face of the earth for a short period of time. Jesus will pray to God for deliverance and the Almighty will destroy them.® The Shah-Namah or The Epic of the Kings compiled by Firdowsî (d. 1020?),® recounts the story of Alexander the Great imprisoning Gog and Magog.® This demonstrates not so much specific Zoroastrian influence on perceptions of Gog and Magog, but rather the persistence in Iranian folkloric tradition of the influence of Alexander the Great. It is also worth noting that some medieval Muslim cartographers label modern Siberia as “[Yâ]Jûj wa-Mâjûj;” the influence of Firdowsî, and even more importantly the fear of steppe nomads such as the Turks, cannot be discounted here—especially since Firdowsî finished the epic for

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67 Ibid., pp. 246-248.

In addition to the appearance on the world stage of these major eschatological actors, there are a number of other signs of the impending Judgment, the chronology of which is uncertain. A great fire will sweep out of the region of Yemen or possibly Hijáz. Earthquakes will increase and cause three unspecified places to be swallowed up by the earth. Animals will speak to humans. Fornication and drunkenness will increase. False dajjâls—perhaps thirty of them—will appear prior to the real one. Many people will become extremely wealthy. Constantinople\footnote{This can be seen as a prophecy of the conquest of Contantinople by the Ottomans under Mehmet II in 1453 or, plausibly, by a modern proponent of Mahdism as an indictment of the current secular Turkish regime as "un-Islamic." See J.H. Mortdmann, "Al-Kunstantinîyya," \textit{EI}², on Muslim Arab attempts to conquer the city in pre-Ottoman times.} and Rome will fall to the forces of Islam, in all probability led by the Mahdi. The Islamic community will return to a just caliphate, presumably that of the Mahdi. After the death of the returned Jesus, the Ethiopians will invade Arabia and destroy the Ka`bah. The sun will rise in the west. Unbelief will predominate upon the earth and, seemingly as a consequence, the words will be stricken from every single Qur’ân. A smoke or mist will issue from somewhere in Arabia and sweep over the planet, sickening many. Then a cold wind will come and kill all believers, after which the angel
Isrāfīl will blow his trumpet and all remaining humans will die, preparatory to the second trumpet sound, which will resurrect everyone who has ever lived for Judgment. In Islam one can distinguish between eschatology as it relates to 1) what happens before the Judgment and 2) what happens afterwards. This study deals with the former, wherein the Mahdi, Jesus and other historical figures operate within the normal course of space-time, and not the latter, the realm of purely supernatural settings and occurrences.

We have now surveyed the possible roots of Mahdist beliefs, examined the corpus of hadīth on the Mahdi and its place within the religious and political propaganda of the second/eighth- and third/ninth-century Islamic world, and briefly identified and described the other major eschatological figures of Islam. Let us now conclude this chapter with some general observations on all these topics.

VII. Conclusion

A number of observations can be made regarding the realm of Islamic eschatology, in general, and the Mahdi himself, in particular. Concerning the former, the Muslim view of the events and personalities just prior to the

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71 Smith and Haddad, The Islamic Understanding of Death and Resurrection, deals primarily with this aspect of Islamic eschatology.
Judgment is strikingly similar to that of Christians. Regarding the Mahdi himself, the focus of this undertaking, it seems that four major points can be made.

First, the Islamic "messianic" figure of the Mahdi more closely resembles the expected Jewish messiah than he does the Christian one, insofar as he restores the fortunes of a people and operates within historical space and time, unlike the more powerful Jesus of Revelation who is involved in destroying cosmic figures like Satan and judging humanity.

Second, and relatedly, it could be maintained that the roles of Jesus and the Mahdi are redundant in the Islamic tradition, with Jesus occupying the higher position in that he kills the Dajjâl, delivers people from the scourge of Gog and Magog, etc. The complementary messianic roles which Jesus and the Mahdi play could be evidence of Zoroastrian influence, insofar as their eschatological relationship seems to echo that of the Zoroastrian saviors Pisyotan and Usedar.

However, it could also be that some in the early Islamic community were leery of a preeminent role being ascribed to one whom Christians regard—blasphemously, from the Muslim viewpoint—as the Son of God. Islam was still in the process of defining itself in the first few centuries after the Prophet Muhammad and too great a dependence upon the founder of Christianity would have undermined the process of differentiation from Islam’s immediate monotheistic predecessor. Therefore, it is at least conceivable that the Zoroastrian model of dual messiahs was employed in order to provide the early
Islamic community with, on the one hand, a measure of continuity with Christianity in terms of accepting Jesus as a prophet while, on the other hand, reducing his eschatological significance by sharing it with another, the Mahdi. Although there were notable scholars of the early Islamic period, like the pious ascetic al-Ḥasan al-Baṣrî (d. 728 CE), who flatly stated that Jesus himself was the one and only Mahdi,\(^{72}\) the bulk of Islamic thought coalesced around the idea that the Mahdi would be a separate eschatological figure.

Third, as noted earlier, the Mahdi is not mentioned anywhere in the Qur’ān at all. Whereas Jesus, the Dâbbah and Yâjûj and Mâjûj are part of the Qur’ānic revelation, the Mahdi and the Dajjāl are described and predicted only in ḥadîth. As alluded to in the opening chapter, this source disparity will create a de facto hierarchy of eschatological legitimacy and thus will prove to be an important issue for the articulation of eschatological themes on the stage of Islamic history.

Finally, and perhaps more importantly, the ḥadîth dealing with the Mahdi are surprisingly vague and open-ended, a fact which lends itself to two potential results: 1) disparate interpretations of the Mahdi, the time of his appearance, his exact political role, etc., are possible; and 2) any individual Mahdist claimant

\(^{72}\) See Madelung, “al-Mahdi,” and H. Ritter, “Ḥasan al-Baṣrî,” both ET\(^2\). This may be the provenance of the rival theory that “Mahdi” does not derive from hadayā, “to [be] rightly-guide[d],” but from mahd, “cradle,” wherein Jesus spoke as an infant.
theoretically can—within reason—attempt to tailor the somewhat ambiguous statements into a Mahdist cloak of legitimacy for himself.

The powerful, continuing attraction that Mahdism holds for many Muslims in the late twentieth, and undoubtedly will throughout the twenty-first, century in combination with the relative malleability of the relevant traditions across many different political and socio-economic contexts, has made this brand of Islamic messianism a potent ideological force that can be—and often has been—transmuted into a political movement by a sufficiently charismatic personality, most notably in nineteenth-century Sudan as well as late-twentieth century Sa`ûdî Arabia. This is especially true now that so many other ideologies—Arab socialism, Arab nationalism, Marxism and, arguably, even capitalism—have been tried and found wanting. The recurring motif of the Mahdi as the one who will (re)establish justice and proper Islamic practices, succor the oppressed, and return the Islamic community to its golden age, as well as restore Islam to the forefront of world power, may yet again prove attractive, as it has so often in the past. The idea of a divinely-sent leader whose main task is to fill the world with justice and equity is not only optimistically utopian but also pragmatically realistic as an anti-establishment ideology, when wedded to the right charismatic figure. This combination, as it developed and was manifested in the Sudanese Mahdîyah

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movement and state of the late nineteenth century, is the focus of the following chapter.
CHAPTER 3

One cannot predict the advent of millenarianism any more than one can predict tornadoes. All one can do is observe that, when certain conditions overtake certain individuals with certain mythologies or theological expectations, certain outcomes commonly, but not inevitably, ensue.¹

I. Introduction

In the nineteenth and twentieth centuries there has been only one Mahdist-oriented religious and political movement which succeeded in establishing a state: that of Muḥammad ʿAlḥmad b. ʿAbd Allāh “al-Mahdi” in Sudan from 1881-1898. An examination of this important phenomenon in the annals of Mahdism can shed light not just on the Sudan per se but, more relevantly to the topic at hand, on the articulation and deployment of Mahdist ideology in a relatively recent context; this examination can, in turn, serve as a benchmark from which to chart late twentieth-century Mahdist invocations, theories and propaganda. This will require a discussion divided into the following topical areas: 1) the political, socioeconomic and religious aspects of the nineteenth-century Sudanese context in which Muḥammad ʿAlḥmad arose; 2) biographical data on Muḥammad ʿAlḥmad himself and how he came to power; 3) a synopsis of the propaganda war, waged primarily in the arena of ḥadīth,

¹ Allison, Jesus of Nazareth.
between Muhammad Ahmad and establishment religious opposition in Sudan and Egypt; 4) a brief presentation of the structure and function of the Mahdist state founded by Muḥammad Aḥmad in Sudan, 1881-1885, in terms of its reflection of Madhist tradition and ideology, as well as a discussion of its perpetuation and ultimate demise under his successor, ʿAbd Allâhî Muḥammad Tûrshain, in 1898; and 5) a conclusion that summarizes what has been learned about the emergence of a successful, eschatologically-oriented, revolutionary religious leader in what can plausibly be seen as a modern context, and a comparison of him and his movement to predecessors within the Islamic world.

II. The Egyptian Conquest and Administration of Sudan

No examination of the most successful Mahdist movement of the past two centuries is possible without some background on Sudan as part of the Ottoman Egyptian world. In the two decades prior to the birth of Muḥammad Aḥmad ibn ʿAbd Allâh, the future Mahdi, in 1844, the region of northeast Africa that we know today as the nation-state of Sudan was being conquered by an Egyptian

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army under the command of Ismâ`îl, the son of the khedive\(^3\) of Egypt, Muḥammad `Alî. Muḥammad `Alî had been the leader of the Albanian contingent of the Ottoman army sent, in 1801, to expel the French forces that had occupied Egypt after the Napoleonic invasion of 1798. In the ensuing years he had defeated all his rivals and become the sole, undisputed ruler of Egypt. By 1820 Muḥammad `Alî had decided upon a course of conquest in Sudan based upon two considerations. The first was to strengthen Egypt economically and militarily by seizing control of the north-south African trade routes, searching for gold mines and, most importantly, interdicting and redirecting the slave trade through that part of the continent; this would not only enrich Cairo’s coffers but also replenish the ranks of the Egyptian army. The second consideration was twofold: to bring raiding Sudanese, especially members of the Shayqîyah tribe, to heel; and to extirpate the pockets of potential resistance to his regime, which were composed of refugee former leaders of Egypt, the Mamlûks, who had fled to Sudan after Napoleon’s conquest. Muḥammad `Alî, via his son Ismâ`îl and the army he commanded, wanted to do more than merely annex territory and plant the Ottoman—or Egyptian—flag; he fully intended to utilize both the natural and human resources of Sudan as a means of aggrandizing his reign and empowering Egypt to break free of Ottoman control.

\(^3\) _Khidîw_ in Arabic, _khidiv_ in the original Persian whence the Ottomans took it, was the title applied to the Ottoman ruler of Egypt beginning with the reign of Muḥammad Ali, when it replaced _Misir beylerbeyi_, “governor-general of Egypt.” See Hill, p. 116, note 2 in particular.
By 1841 an Ottoman firman, or imperial edict, ratified Egypt’s conquests on her southern flank, giving Muhammad `Alî personally—not simply whoever was reigning in Cairo—rights to the central Sudan. However, the ruler of Egypt wanted more territory on his southern flank, and over the next three decades, more regions of what is now Sudan and Eritrea were conquered by the Egyptians. In the early 1840s Suwâkin and Massawa, on the Red Sea coast, were brought under Egyptian control. Two years after the future Mahdî’s birth in 1844, the Ottoman sultan Abdülmejid (r. 1839-61) formally recognized this fait accompli by detaching Suwâkin and Massawa from the administration of the vâlî of the Hijâz in Arabia and leasing them to Egypt. This arrangement lasted until Muhammad `Alî’s death in 1848. Afterward, the Egyptians for a time abandoned further southern conquests.

Egyptian interest in Sudanese territories resurfaced under Kheïdive Ismâ’îl (1830-1895), one of Muhammad `Alî’s grandsons, with the opening of the Suez Canal in 1869. In 1874 he sent an army to annex Darfûr, in what is now northwestern and western Sudan. Ismâ’îl also sent an army under Sir Samuel Baker, a British officer, south and west towards central Africa, with instructions to annex territory, open the region more fully to commerce and suppress the slave trade. These regions eventually came to constitute the far southwestern and southern parts of modern Sudan, namely, the Bahr al-Ghazal and Equatoria

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4 The vâlî, or governor, of the Hijâz was normally the sharîf of Mecca who administered—on behalf of the Ottomans—the Red Sea littoral region of the Arabian peninsula containing the holy
Figure 7. Egyptian Expansion into Sudan in the Nineteenth Century.

cities of Mecca and Medina.
provinces. By the end of Ismāʿīl's reign in 1879 Egypt's Sudanese dominion was enormous, although few clearly defined borders existed, especially in the south and west, where Cairo's franchise vanished into the wilderness somewhere between Khartoum and the Congo.

The expansion of Ottoman Egyptian rule at Sudan's expense generally followed the pattern established millennia earlier by the pharaohs: a socially, militarily and technologically more advanced Egypt seeking to exploit the natural and human resources—primarily gold, ivory and slaves—of the more disparate, less organized tribal peoples of "Nubia," upstream along the Nile to the south. By the mid-nineteenth century, Muḥammad ʿAlī and his successors in ostensibly Ottoman Egypt had created a "secondary empire"—one spun off from a larger one—in northeastern Africa. Normally such offshoot polities are conceived of as European colonial ventures, on the order of the Afrikaners fleeing British rule in South Africa who established their own states, such as Natal. However, the empire that the Muḥammad ʿAlī dynasty created by annexing Sudan and environs to Egypt certainly qualifies as a secondary empire of the Ottomans, every bit as much as do those carved out by European colonialist refugees. That was certainly how many Sudanese saw it, as the success of Muḥammad Ahmad's Mahdist movement testifies.

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6 Ibid., pp. 389-390, 443-457.
The conquered Sudanese over time came to refer to Ottoman Egyptian rule of their territories by two terms: al-kaynūnah al-sīyāsīyah al-muwahhidah, "the united political entity," and al-turkiyah, "the Turkish regime." By whatever name, exploitation was the order of the day. One centralized administrative system was imposed upon Sudan by the Ottoman Egyptian governors in Khartoum, thus largely bringing to an end the relative independence enjoyed by the various tribal entities, shaykhdoms and sufi orders. In fact, any extant, grass-roots trends toward nascent political or economic unity which had been evolving in Sudanese territory were short-circuited and a new form of unity was imposed from above by the conquering Egyptians, one aimed at channeling profits—primarily from samgh or "gum Arabic," slaves and, eventually, cotton—from the local economy back to Cairo.

What form did this colonial administration take? That of an imperial power controlling and exploiting its unfortunate neighbors. A salaried bureaucracy

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7 "Sudanese" is a term used loosely in this period, as the various conquered tribes and territories had not yet begun to think of themselves in this fashion.

8 After the British conquest of Sudan in 1898 under Kitchener, al-turkiyah came to be divided into al-sābiqah, "the former," referring to the rule of Muhammad 'Ali's dynasty, and al-thānīyah, "the second," referring to the Anglo-Egyptian Condominium (called al-turkiyah because Egypt was still nominally part of the Ottoman Empire). See Holt, The Mahdist State, pp. 32-44; al-Qaddāl, pp. 4-17; and Warburg, Historical Discord, pp. 1-12 and 56-61.

9 Al-Qaddāl, Al-imām al-mahdi, pp. 4ff.

10 In Wallersteinian terms, Egypt can be seen as a semi-peripheral power that was seeking to exploit its resource-rich periphery Sudan and establish a northeastern African empire in order to raise itself to core power status. See Immanuel Wallerstein, The Modern World System I (San Diego: Academic Press, Inc., 1974), esp. chapter six, "The European World-Economy: Periphery versus External Area," pp. 300-344 and chapter seven, "Theoretical Reprise," pp. 346-357.
directly under the Egyptian ruler's supervision was established. Sudan and Egypt were incorporated into one administrative unit, subdivided into seven departments, each headed by a *mudîr* or "director": interior, finance, war, the navy, education and public works, commerce and foreign affairs, industry. This had the ultimate effect of giving the Egyptian-Sudanese state the form, if not the substance, of a modern European state in terms of centralization and professionalization of the bureaucracy.

While he was alive Muhammad `Alî vacillated between the carrot and the stick in his efforts to pry revenues out of Sudan. The onerous taxes which had been imposed in the immediate wake of the conquest of 1820-21 were curtailed by Mahu Bey Urfali, the governor of Sudan from 1822-26. Khurshîd was the first governor to whom the term *hukumdar*—a generic term used in Persian and Ottoman Turkish to denote an official invested with governing authority—was applied, in the sense of distinguishing the office-holder from the departmental *mudîrs*. He managed in the 1830s to organize and regulate the slave trade to Cairo's financial and manpower benefit. During the khedivate of `Abbâs I, who succeeded Muḥammad `Alî as ruler of Egypt and Sudan in 1849 and ruled until 1854, the Egyptian regime utilized Sudan as a combination Botany Bay and St. Helena—that is, as both a prison and a place of banishment for political opponents. The resistance of `Abbâs to the imposition of the Ottoman criminal code upon Egypt and Sudan may have been motivated in part by his wish to continue using Sudan in this fashion. This new criminal code was part and parcel
Figure 8. The Sudan under Egyptian Rule. From Gabriel R. Warburg, *Historical Discord in the Nile Valley* (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1992), p. xvi.
of the Tanzîmât reforms instituted by Sultan Abdülmejid and his successors after 1839 as part of an effort to modernize the Empire in the face of growing military inferiority vis-à-vis the European powers. Reining in Egypt, the Ottoman Empire’s most important province, by recentralizing control over Cairo was also considered part of the Tanzîmât and a key element of this was the appointment of important provincial officials directly from Istanbul, thus tightening the imperial center’s grip on the provinces. This was a development which Cairo always resented and often found ways to subvert.

`Abbâs’ successor Muḥammad Sa`īd (r. 1854-63) visited Khartoum in 1856 and was horrified by the administrative chaos and struck by the complaints of overtaxed and irate Sudanese. He abolished the post of ḥukumdâr and placed much of Sudan under Cairo’s direct control, bypassing Khartoum’s administrative machinery. Sa`īd also tried to quash the slave trade, in line with the 1857 British-induced Ottoman abolition of slaving within the Empire: a firman, or imperial Ottoman edict, of that year criminalized trade in African slaves throughout all parts of the Empire except the Ḥijâz, owing to the precarious state of Ottoman rule there. Interdiction of the slave trade was another aspect of the Tanzîmât reforms and a result of unrelenting British pressure in the international sphere to abolish the slave trade, a campaign which had begun in 1807. In

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1880 interdiction of the slaving trade was elevated to an even higher status under international law with the Anglo-Ottoman Convention for Suppression of the African Slave Trade, and ten years later Istanbul signed on to the Brussels Act against African slaving. The British, probably because of their intense involvement in Egypt, brought more pressure—both diplomatic and military—to bear on wiping out the slave trade there and in the Sudan than anywhere else in the Ottoman Empire. In the Egyptian Sudan interdiction of the slave trade was tantamount to throwing down the gauntlet to the frontier society of independent jallabas, or “petty traders,” as well as many other Sudanese who made a lucrative living from selling the Africans captured further south on the slave market.

Khedive Ismâ`îl (r. 1863-79) kept Suwâkin and Massawa under tight rein because of these two districts’ proximity to the Red Sea and their consequent importance to the Suez Canal traffic. He did allow more Sudanese into the administration of their own territories, presumably because of the shortage of Egyptian Ottomans willing to serve there rather than out of any desire to win the hearts and minds of the Sudanese people. Large-scale production of cotton in

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13 Slavers’ opposition to this interdiction of their livelihood would become part of the Mahdist platform by the early 1880s.
Sudan was made a priority by Ismâ’il in order to take advantage of world market shortages during the American Civil War (1861-65). The wealth created by this enterprise proved too much for several ḥukumdârs, whom Ismâ’il relieved for allegedly engaging in bribery and graft.

The khedivate of Ismâ’il is pivotal for understanding the nineteenth-century history of Egypt and Sudan and the subsequent rise of the Mahdi. In particular Ismâ’il’s attempts to destroy the slave trade, pursuant to the agreements signed by his sovereign the Ottoman sultan—primarily Abdül Mejid (r. 1839-61)—and his attempts to harness Sudanese economic activity for building a “Europeanized Egyptian Empire” in northeast Africa, as well as his attempted imposition of “orthodox” Islam on Sudan, kindled the resentment which propelled the Mahdist revolt. Ismâ’il greatly increased the Egyptian government’s debt by building the Suez Canal (completed in 1869), laying hundreds of miles of railroad tracks and sending numerous expeditions into Sudan and even farther south in order to expand the territory under his sway. A global economic downturn in 1875 hit over-extended Egypt hard and by 1876 the British, French, Italians and Austrians had prevailed upon Egypt to accept the supervision of the Caisse de la Dette Publique in collecting Egypt’s enormous debt—almost £100 million. The British and French governments soon took

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control of the Commission and mandated that 66% of Egypt's revenues should go to pay back its debt! Seemingly as part of this operation Ismâ`îl, in 1879, appointed a British general, Charles George Gordon (1833-85), as ḥukumdâr of Sudan.

Gordon, who had gained fame helping put down the Taiping Rebellion in China, 1863-4, had also served previously in Sudan as governor of Equatoria province, where he supervised a staff of American officers who were both training the Egyptian army and leading surveying missions and, in the late 1870s, had served the Egyptian government in a number of capacities in Sudanese territories: de facto intelligence officer, military strategist, diplomat, financial advisor. Thus his experience alone would have qualified Gordon for the position of ḥukumdâr of Sudan. The other important consideration would have been his unswerving commitment to the abolition of the slave trade.

Despite his wealth of experience Gordon was unable to solve all the problems of Egyptian administration in the Sudan. He therefore submitted his resignation to the new Khedive, Muḥammad Tawfīq Pasha (1852-92), and was replaced with the Egyptian Muḥammad Raʿūf Pasha (d. 1888) in 1880. The latter

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16 For an account of these U.S. Civil War veteran officers—both Union and Confederate—in the hire of Khedive Ismâ`îl see Pierre Crabites, Americans in the Egyptian Army (London: George Routledge & Sons, Ltd., 1938). In fact when the British occupied Egypt in 1882, following the `Urâbî revolt, the American General Charles Stone was chief of staff of the Egyptian Army.
would prove to be the last Egyptian ḥukumdar of Sudan because by 1881-2 the nationalist ‘Urabi Pasha uprising against the Ottomans in Egypt, as well as the Mahdist revolution in Sudan, had changed the political situation drastically. A chain of events that commenced with the revolt of Alhmad ‘Urabi Pasha (d. 1911) in late 1881 led to British occupation of Egypt by late 1882. ‘Urabi Pasha’s rebellion began as one of disgruntled Egyptian Army officers chafing at the “Circassian ceiling” which permitted only Turkish-speaking officers of Caucasian origin to rise above the rank of colonel. In the space of less than a year this officers’ rebellion expanded into a full-scale Egyptian nationalist uprising against Ottoman rule. The British, in order to secure their Suez route to India and the territorial integrity of their main ally against the Russians—the Ottoman Empire—occupied Egypt in 1882. British and Ottoman preoccupation with this movement contributed greatly to the success of Muhammad Ahmad and the Mahdists in the Sudan, as we shall see.

Sudan’s incorporation into Ottoman Egypt’s politico-economic sphere had profound repercussions: on one hand, a centralized government was established and agriculture was modernized; on the other hand, taxation and exploitation by a powerful central government were made permanent features of life for the first time. Many aspects of life were taxed—land, agricultural goods, even water wheels—and the taxes could be paid in kind, mainly in cattle or slaves (at least

17 See Yapp, The Making of the Modern Near East, pp. 221-228; Harrison, Gladstone’s Imperialism.
prior to 1857). Although some profited from the new economic and political order many, if not most, Sudanese resented and resisted taxation—often to the point of armed rebellion. The Egyptian authorities in Khartoum punished opposition with force and with the time-honored "divide and conquer" approach of setting various factions of Sudanese society against one another: tribe v. tribe, slave traders v. jallâbas, one sufi order v. another. The tribes, especially, were often forcibly relocated in an effort to weaken them. Some, whose chiefs collaborated, were made into willing tax-collectors for the state while others, more stubborn but less pragmatic, were socio-economically marginalized and became dependent upon the largesse of the sufi orders for their daily bread. (This may have contributed to the support which Muḥammad Aḥmad the Mahdi, as a former sufi, received.) Eventually, and quite understandably, many Sudanese came to resent Egyptian rule. Some accommodated; some fled; others resisted. Resistance was largely futile, however, and Ottoman Egypt's rapacious administration, established in order to help propel Egypt into the ranks of imperial powers on the continent of Africa, seemed secure—that is, until the Sudanese tinderbox of resentment toward the Ottoman Egyptian government was set aflame by the Mahdi Muḥammad Aḥmad in 1881, unleashing an anti-colonial Mahdist jihâd, or "holy war," aimed not primarily at Europeans, as in French or British West Africa, but against the Egyptians and Ottoman Turks—fellow Muslims.
III. The African Islamic Context of Sudanese Mahdism

Jihâds, as the usage above indicates, are primarily religious phenomena. Understanding Muḥammad Aḥmad’s evolution into Mahdi-hood and jihâd leadership necessitates some understanding of the religious context of nineteenth-century Sudan, and this means examining some other African jihâds, as well as sufism, the most influential form of Islam on the continent in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.

As delineated in chapter one, above, the concept of jihâd has two major connotations. One is the “greater” jihâd, that of fighting against one’s own internal sinful inclination. The “lesser” jihâd is that aspect of the term more familiar to many in the West: “holy war” against non-Muslims. Almost all Mahdist movements manifest themselves as jihâds (in the second sense), but not all jihâds are Mahdist movements. As we have seen, the Abbâsids, Fâṭīmids and Muwâḥḥids, as well as the Sudanese under Muḥammad Aḥmad, clearly—albeit to varying degrees—drew upon and exploited Mahdist expectations and discourse. However, nineteenth-century Africa witnessed several holy wars that were not fully Mahdist. The most famous and influential non-Mahdist jihâd was undoubtedly that of Usman don Fodio (d. 1817), founder of the Sokoto Caliphate in what is now northern Nigeria and southern Niger. An ethnic Fulani,

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pious 'âlim and devoted sufi, don Fodio in 1797 declared a jihâd against the Hausa state, which was nominally Muslim but more lax in its practices than he could tolerate. Such practices included mixing of the sexes in public, taxation lacking Islamic sanction and abduction of women, goods and beasts of burden. Shaykh don Fodio was convinced of the rightness of his cause by mystical visions in which deceased sufi saints and the Prophet himself appeared and girded him with the "sword of truth." Usman don Fodio never conceived of himself as the Mahdi, however. The boldest title which he would accept was mujaddid, or "renewer," hearkening back to a hadîth in which the Prophet predicted that once every century a renewer would come to the Islamic community.

The other significant nineteenth-century non-Mahdist African jihâd was that of al-Ḥâjj 'Umar al-Futî (d. 1864) in what is now Mali and Burkina Fasso. Also a sufi, al-Ḥâjj 'Umar made the pilgrimage in 1826 and, upon his return by way of Sokoto, began preaching reform and jihâd. It took decades, but by 1862 he and his followers had established an Islamic state, usually termed the Tukolor Empire. Al-Ḥâjj 'Umar never claimed to be the Mahdi but he did come closer than don Fodio, styling himself not only mujaddid but also amîr al-mu' mínîn, "commander of the faithful," a title historically taken only by those who claimed

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19 'Alîm is the singular of `ulamâ', "learned, erudite." Knowledge of the Qur'ân, tafsîr or "Qur'ânic exegesis," the hadîth and fiqh, or "[Islamic] jurisprudence," as well as a pious lifestyle, qualify one for such a title. See Iftikhar Zaman, "`Ulamâ'," The Oxford Encyclopedia of the Modern Islamic World [OE].

leadership of the entire Muslim community; *quṭb*, the sufi axis or pole around whom the world figuratively and literally turns; and *wāżir al-Mahdî*, “minister of the Mahdi,” which clearly implied that the Mahdi was in communication with and guiding him but that he himself was not this eschatological figure.

Both of these movements presaged the Mahdist revolution in Sudan on several levels: geographic, religious, mystical, political. All three, it should be noted, arose in a context of sufi dominance of the religious scene. All three, likewise, suffered the same ultimate fate: subjugation at the hands of either the British (Sokoto, Sudan) or French (Tukolor) before the turn of the century. Sokoto and Tukolor exemplify the fact that successful Islamic reform/opposition movements can materialize as jihâds without Mahdism. However, Muḥammad Aḥmâd’s jihâd in Sudan was yoked to Mahdism, and Mahdism of a kind which grew out of a specific sufi context.

In any appraisal of African Islam two sufi orders stand out in importance: the Qâdirîyah and the Tijânîyah. Usman don Fodio was a member of the former, al-Ḥâjj `Umar of the latter. Muḥammad Aḥmâd, the Sudanese Mahdi, was a member of the less famous Sammânîyah, an offshoot of the influential Khalwatîyah order. The Sammânîyah was founded by Muḥammad b. `Abd al-Karîm al-Sammânî (1718-1775), originally a Khalwâti, in Medina and brought to Sudan in 1800 CE. Aside from a renewed emphasis on piety and the mystical
practices, this order was rather mainstream and unremarkable. The great rival to the Sammânîyah in Sudan was the order founded by Muḥammad `Uthmân al-Mirghanî, known as the Mirghanîyah or, alternatively, as the Khatmîyah because of the belief that their shaykh or leader was the khatm or "seal"—thus the ultimate example—of the pious followers of God. Members of this order allied themselves with the ruling Ottoman Egyptian regime in Sudan, unlike the Sammânîyah, who remained aloof from the establishment.

While the Khatmîyah sufis tacitly supported the Khedive's government in Khartoum, they did not join the Khedival administration. The Sudanese `ulamâ’, however, were incorporated into governmental administration. A synergistic relationship between the Ottoman Egyptian regime and Sudanese religious leaders developed in the wake of Muḥammad `Alî's conquest of 1820-21. Over the course of the next half-century this state of affairs exacerbated the already problematic nature of the relationship between rulers and people in Sudan—stemming from taxation and resentment of central authority—as the `ulamâ’ came increasingly to be seen as government lackeys more interested in Ottoman gold than in the ummah, or Muslim community. Before the Khedive’s armies came, sufism was the bond that held religious leaders together in Sudanese

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kingdoms such as Fûnj, Darfur and Taqalî. After the Egyptian takeover the `ulamâ’ and the sufi leadership became estranged—to the government’s eventual chagrin, as the masses in Sudan held the mystical orders and their members in much higher esteem than they did the `ulamâ’, no matter how many degrees from al-Azhar, Cairo’s great Islamic school, any of the latter might possess.\footnote{It must be noted that belonging to the `ulamâ’ and belonging to a sufi order (or even multiple orders) were not mutually exclusive: “orthodox/establishment” and “popular/sufi” Islam were (and are) groupings with permeable boundaries.}

The Ottoman Egyptian regime set up local assemblies of `ulamâ’, all of which were under the Supreme Appeals Court and its qâdi, or “judge,” appointed by the hukumdar and headquartered in Khartoum. His government stipend was 500-1000 qurûsh per month, an enormous sum compared to the wages of the average Sudanese. Any 
muftî who wanted to deliver formal “legal opinions,” or fatwas, could do so only after appointment to one of these assemblies. Thus was the religious leadership co-opted by the government. Muḥammad \’Alî and his successors also influenced the `ulamâ’ by sending many to study at al-Azhar.\footnote{As we shall see in the next section, Muḥammad Ahmad applied to study at al-Azhar but was unable to go. Perhaps Sudanese history would have been much different had the future Mahdī gained a government sinecure.} By Ja`far Pasha’s hukumdârate (1865-71) tests of Qur’ân and `ilm, or “religious knowledge,” were instituted as prerequisites for getting on the government payroll. Of course attendance at al-Azhar greatly increased one’s chances of a good result. Increasingly sufi leaders, especially outside of
Khartoum, found themselves officially disenfranchised but still respected by the people. The Ottoman Egyptian administration also disregarded the traditional Sudanese Mālikī *madhhab*, or interpretive body [of Islamic law]—often called a school—in favor of their own Ḥanafī school. This was understandable, for not only was the Ḥanafī school the official one of the Ottoman Empire; it was used as the foundation of the *Mecelle*, the Ottoman civil code established as part of the Tanzimât reforms. Thus Egypt and Sudan, as part of the Ottoman Empire, would find themselves subject to the Ḥanafī interpretive school of law.

Conquered, overtaxed, subject to foreigners speaking a different language, their revered religious leaders shoved aside—this was the plight of the Sudanese people when Muḥammad Aḥmad emerged to claim the mantle of the Awaited Mahdi.

IV. Muḥammad Aḥmad’s Life and the Beginning of the Mahdist Revolution

What follows is, largely, a narrative summation of Muḥammad Aḥmad’s life. The biographical data summarized here draws heavily upon Muḥammad Sa`īd al-Qaddāl’s *Al-imâm al-mahdî: Muḥammad Aḥmad ibn ‘Abd Allâh, 1844-1885*, the only extant detailed biographical account of Muhammad Ahmad’s life, both pre- and post-Mahdist transformation. It is also supplemented by P.M. Holt, *The Mahdist State in the Sudan*.

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Muḥammad Aḥmad b. `Abd Allāh was born in Dunqâlā, or “Dongola”—modern-day northwestern Sudan—the second week of Rajab, 1260 A.H. /August, 1844 C.E. His siblings consisted of four brothers and one sister. His family was one of boat-builders and thus not surprisingly benefited from the Ottoman Egyptian regime and its aggrandizement of Nile river traffic. Engaging in this industry set them somewhat apart from other Dongolese, the vast majority of whom were farmers. When Muḥammad Aḥmad was a child of about five or six years his family and its business moved to the outskirts of Khartoum, possibly for several reasons: the general exodus from rural areas to Khartoum in the Turco-Egyptian period; an attempt to escape particularly onerous taxes; the need for new wood supplies for boat-building. For whatever reason(s), his family settled north of Khartoum in the village of Karrarā on the west bank of the Nile, where the wood was plentiful and other boat-builders plied their trade.

This decision to settle in central Sudan near the only large city was a turning point in the nascent Mahdi's life. Khartoum was not only a refugee center but a nexus of the caravan trade across Sudanese territories as well as the administrative headquarters of Ottoman Egyptian rule there. Muḥammad Aḥmad's view of the world was undoubtedly greatly influenced by these aspects of Khartoum. His family moved into the “Sulāymat al-Pasha” quarter where many from the Dongolese, Jaʿlîyîn and Shayqiyyah tribes lived. Despite his

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26 Al-Qaddâl, p. 42, cites a Sudanese proverb from that time: “The missing can be found in the markets of Khartoum.”
family's socio-economic status, somewhat above that of farmers, Muḥammad Aḥmad would have noticed the disparity in wealth between those in his quarter and the rulers of Khartoum. His parents died sometime in this period, prior to his eighth birthday and right about the time he entered *khalwah,* or Qur’ānic school. Muḥammad Aḥmad’s brothers and uncles took over his guardianship. Thus the early life of the man who would be Mahdi consisted of moving from a rural area to the outskirts of a large city, becoming an orphan and perhaps learning the rudiments of boat-building. This was during the reign of Khedive ʿAbbās, who sent incompetent political appointees to govern Sudan—the negative effects of which Muḥammad Aḥmad would have witnessed.

In the *khalwah* Muḥammad Aḥmad studied the Qur’ān and probably learned the rudiments of sufi teachings. His brothers forced him to withdraw and return to building boats, however. Consequently he fled from them and began attending another school. This pattern repeated itself several times, whereupon Muḥammad Aḥmad went on a hunger strike. His brothers relented,

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27 *Khalwah* in most Islamic contexts refers to "retreat," "solitude" or sometimes an actual place of meeting for mystical rites. In nineteenth-century Sudan, however, it can mean a religious school; Holt, pp. 18-19, says, "Another significant Sudanese usage is the employment of *khalwa,* normally meaning a sufi retreat, in the sense of a Qur’ānic school." It is unclear whether such a usage is a legacy of the influence of the Khalwatṭ sufi order. See Jean-Louis Triaud, "Khalwa and the Career of Sainthood: An Interpretive Essay," in Donal B. Cruise O'Brien and Christian Coulon, eds., *Charisma and Brotherhood in African Islam* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1988), pp. 53-66; B.G. Martin, *Muslim Brotherhoods in Nineteenth-Century Africa* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1976); H. Landolt, "Khalwāţyah," *EI²*; and Nehemia Levtzion and Gideon Weigert, "Khalwa," *OE.*
and he resumed studying. He eventually reached the level of studying ʿulūm al-dīn, the "religious sciences," under a series of shaykhs in Khartoum—Sharf al-Dīn ʿAbd al-Ṣādiq, al-Fakī Majbūb al-Ḥabashi Maʿtūq Shajir al-Khayrī and al-Fakī Muḥammad al-Mubārak, to name a few. He supported himself by occasionally returning home to help his brothers build boats.

In about 1861, when he would have been 17, Muḥammad Aḥmad travelled to Katrânj, some 50 kilometers south of Khartoum, a center of Islamic learning heavily supported by the government. Katrânj had already produced an influential group of Islamic leaders in Sudan, typified by Shaykh al-Bashîr Wafîd Aḥmad al-Ṭayyib, head of the Sammâniyah order. It was thus only natural that a youth with a penchant for Islamic learning would want to study there. Since many of the instructors there had degrees from al-Azhar, Muḥammad Aḥmad received something of a derivative Azhari education. He left Katrânj sometime in 1863-4, heading north with the intention of studying in Egypt at al-Azhar. However, in one of those twists of fate that prove definitive in human history, a certain Sammâniyah shaykh, Waḍ` Faz`ah, convinced him to abandon his plans to attend al-Azhar and stay in Birbir, north of Khartoum, and study with

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28 Al-Qaddâl editorializes that "such stubbornness, allied with his intelligence and aptitude, would have led him to become an ‘ālim had not his path been redirected" (p. 45).

29 According to Holt, p. 18, fakī is a dialectical Sudanese version of faqīḥ, one skilled in jurisprudence.

30 Biographical data on many of these Sudanese shaykhs is nonexistent. What there is will be provided.
Muḥammad al-Khayyir. Muhammad Ahmad did so for three years and had his appetite for sufi ideas whetted.

Muḥammad Aḥmad matriculated at the Ghabsh Khalwah, which was one that received a regular stipend from the Turco-Egyptian government: in this case, 400 qurūsh per month, as well as a supply of sorghum for food. The future Mahdi refused to eat any of this food—because it was paid for with taxes and because he considered it an un-sufi extravagance, it seems. He preferred fishing in the Nile for sustenance. Muhammad Akhmad changed his mind only after his shaykh, Muhammad al-Khayyir, convinced him that free sorghum neither violated sufi practice nor rose to the level of sanctioning the Ottoman Egyptian regime. After this affair Muhammad Aḥmad became increasingly drawn to sufism, in part because the Ghabsh Khalwah was something of a half-way point between study of the Sunnah and of sufism. Muhammad Aḥmad was profoundly affected and influenced by al-Ghazzâlî's *Iḥyâ‘ Uḥûm al-Dīn* [*Revival of the Religious Sciences*] about this time, which influenced him for the rest of his life.

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31 This was Muhammad al-Khayyir Abī Allāh Khūjafī (d. 1888), whom the Mahdi would later appoint amīr of Birbir and Jaʿīyîn, according to Hill, *A Biographical Dictionary of the Sudan*.

32 Abū Ḥamīd Muḥammad Al-Ghazâlî (1058-1111 CE) was an ʿālîm and head of the major Islamic theological seminary in Baghdad when a personal psychological crisis—the inability to speak—sent him off on a decade-long quest for a more complete Islamic faith. He studied philosophy, esoteric Islam and sufi mysticism and eventually resumed his teaching career convinced that sufism was the highest expression of all the modes of studying God. For this reason al-Ghazzâlî is generally acknowledged as the person who reconciled sufism with orthodox Islam. *Iḥyâ‘ Uḥûm al-Dīn* "[re]interprets the whole Shari‘ah corpus as a vehicle for a sober inward personal regimen," according to Marshall G.S. Hodgson, *The Venture of Islam. Conscience and History in a*
About this time, Muḥammad Aḥmad also married for the first time. With his shaykh’s permission, he returned to Khatoum in 1864-5 and married his cousin Fāṭimah bint Ḥâjj. Afterwards he settled down to religious studies and sufi devotions. His wife tried to hide his books and demanded that he get a more prosaic job, whereupon Muḥammad Aḥmad divorced her.

Now Muḥammad Aḥmad began travelling throughout Sudan, learning from various sufi shaykhhs. He had already joined the Sammānīyah order, probably in 1861. While studying under Shaykh Muḥammad Sharīf Nūr al-Dāʾīm he was sent to other sufi ṭariqāt or ṭuruq (singular ṭariqāh), “orders,” and so was able to acquaint himself with the condition of the Sudanese people under the Turco-Egyptian regime. Sometimes to support himself he sold firewood but later refused to sell to those who fermented wine. This seems to have gained him a reputation for, among other things, piety. He also dabbled in the sorghum business but found the issue of profit problematic from an Islamic point of view. Muḥammad Aḥmad seems to have had difficulty reconciling his ascetic proclivities with the world’s business practices; the issue of ṭirḥ, or interest, repelled him as a strict Muslim. He solved this tension in the short term by devoting himself full-time to sufism and to reading al-Ghazzālī and Ibn `Arabi. He also broke with his family and seems to have largely substituted the Sammānīyah order for that aspect of his personal life.

The future Mahdi settled near Khartoum, built a mosque and *khalwah*, and began teaching. He married again, to Fâtimah bint Ahmad Sharîf, who was from Aba Island in the White Nile. Before long they moved to Aba Island and Muhammad Ahmad began to quarrel with his shaykh, Muhammad Sharîf. Muhammad Sharîf was a graduate of al-Azhar and thus closely tied to the regime. He was also wealthy and lived accordingly.

The growing tension between Muhammad Ahmad and Shaykh Muhammad Sharîf reached the breaking point at a wedding celebration for one of the latter’s daughters in 1878. The future Mahdi took umbrage at his shaykh’s allowing music and dancing at the ceremony and openly expressed displeasure. So Muhammad Ahmad and Shaykh Muhammad Sharîf in a sense mutually excommunicated one another. The latter’s growing resentment at his pupil’s burgeoning popularity may have been a factor in the parting of ways; so too may have been the growing generational rift in Sudanese society.\(^34\)

Afterwards Muhammad Ahmad attached himself to another shaykh during the period 1878-80, al-Qurashî Waqî al-Zayn. He also took a second wife, the shaykh’s daughter, and returned to Aba Island even more disenchanted with mere world-renouncing sufi quietism. Men from the Daghîm and Kinânah tribes

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\(^33\) Al-Qaddâl does not say where he got the capital to do this. Perhaps he had done better in business than his lack of patience would suggest. Also, since he had learned how to built boats, perhaps his carpentry skills were such that he could do much of his own construction work.

took him as their shaykh, and many of these would eventually join his jihâd. In fact, this 1878-80 period can be seen as a transition in the journey from mere sufism to full-blown, overt Mahdism. Perhaps a sign of this is an account that Muḥammad ʻAlīmd collapsed while reading from sūrat al-Qārī`ah that “On the day of Judgment, the people will be as scattered moths” (101:3).

In 1879 Muḥammad ʻAlīmd travelled to al-ʻUbayd in Kūrdūfan, far to the southwest of Khartoum, and spent over a month there. He seems to have made many contacts who would later serve him well after the declaration of his Mahdīyah. Upon Muḥammad ʻAlīmd’s return to Abī, several important events occurred. First, his shaykh, al-Qurashi, died. Second, he met ʻAbd Allâh b. Muḥammad, known as “ʻAbdallâhī,” who would later become his Khalīfah, or “successor.” This individual seems to have been trekking around Sudan looking for someone to acknowledge as Mahdi—and his wishes would soon be fulfilled. In sum, then, this sufi phase not only allowed Muḥammad ʻAlīmd to develop his ideology; it enabled him to make valuable contacts throughout the length and breadth of Sudan.

Those years of struggle and journeying throughout Sudan seem to have convinced Muḥammad ʻAlīmd that he met all the requirements for Mahdi-ship.

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35 Muḥammad ʻAlīmd would not be the first Muslim leader to whom ʻAbdallâhī tried to swear loyalty as Mahdi. In 1873 he had written a letter to al-Zubayr Pasha Raḥmān Manṣūr (d. 1913), a slave trader and strong man who had gained a position in the Egyptian government, hailing him as Mahdi. Al-Zubayr rebuffed him. See Holt, p. 53: “the incident with al-Zubayr had shown that ʻAbdallâhī was seeking a Sudanese Mahdi...,” as well as Hill, *Biographical Dictionary*, pp. 390-91.
Sometime in 1879-80 he began secretly informing his *murids*, or sufi "novices," that he was the Awaited Mahdi of whom the Prophetic traditions speak. Doing this in secret transformed him from mere sufi propagandist on the periphery of the extant system to a harsh critic from the outside. He was reinforced in this decision by disembodied voices addressing him as "O Mahdi of God." Eventually these voices gave way to *hadrahs*, literally "presences," in which the Prophet and deceased sufi shaykhs appeared to Muḥammad Aḥmad and legitimized him as the eschatological Mahdi predicted by the hadīth. Those with whom he shared accounts of these mystical meetings did not think them untenable, as the miracle-working sufi was a staple of nineteenth-century Sudanese society, particularly in the rural areas—which meant virtually all Sudan outside of Khartoum. (It was said that among his first miracles was the appearance of his name in plants and melons.) This clandestine announcement of his Mahdi-hood was phase one in Muḥammad Aḥmad’s transition from (mere) sufi leader to Mahdi.

Phase two was his second trip to al-ʿUbayd, probably in early 1880. Clad in the traditional sufi *jubbah*, a long outer garment open in front and having wide sleeves, he carried only a clay jug, staff and prayer beads. Followers flocked to him as he walked. Once in al-ʿUbayd he secretly issued a *daʿwah*, or "summons." The importance of daʿwah in Islamic history cannot be

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36 This is almost exactly the experience of Usman don Fodio of Sokoto, with the exception, noted above, that Muḥammad Aḥmad claimed that the Prophet and other holy men were investing him...
overestimated: it is “the invitation to adopt the cause of some individual...claiming the right to the imâmate over the Muslims; that is to say civil and spiritual authority, vindicating a politico-religious principle which, in the final analysis, aims at founding or restoring an ideal theocratic state based on monotheism” and which often is “one of the means of founding a new empire....”37 Such a summons on Muḥammad Aḥmad’s part transformed acquaintances from his previous trip into supporters and allies. The Mahdist summons was thus spread beyond the confines of Aba Island. Still, at least for a while longer, his revelation that he was the Mahdi was shared only covertly with selected individuals. It was not until Rajab 1298/October 1880 that Muḥammad Aḥmad openly proclaimed himself the Mahdi.

Almost immediately delegations began to visit him on Aba Island. He began drafting mawâthîq, or contracts, avowing that he was the Mahdi, for these supplicants to sign. The first tribe to accept him was the Daghîm, followed by the Kinânah and others. Some were skeptical that the Mahdi should be only thirty-six years of age. But most signed their acceptance and returned home to await their marching orders.

Some of the Mahdi’s writings fell into government hands about this time, but the Egyptian regime saw him merely as a “deluded dervish” and ignored the warnings of Shaykh Muḥammad Sharîf, the one with whom Muhammad Ahmad not merely as a renewer of society but as the eschatological, Awaited Mahdi.
had had a falling out some years before. Ḥukumdār Raʿūf did write a letter of inquiry to Muḥammad Āḥmad, who replied that he was indeed the Mahdi. The governor then asked for the assistance of the `ulamā’, who decided to send a delegation to Aba Island to interrogate this pretentious “shaykh” and bring him back to Khartoum for re-education. The religious establishment believed that Muḥammad Āḥmad would bow to their pressure. The Ḥukumdār’s assistant, Muḥammad b. Abî al-Saʿūd, headed up this delegation of `ulamā’, relatives and erstwhile students of Muḥammad Āḥmad, accompanied by 25 soldiers. The soldiers were to kidnap the spurious Mahdi, should conditions degenerate to that point. Ibn Abî al-Saʿūd’s entourage reached Aba on 11 Ramadan 1298/7 August 1881. Rebuffed when he requested that Muḥammad Āḥmad come to Khartoum, Ibn Abî al-Saʿūd quoted from sūrat al-Nisā’ [4]: “O believers! Obey God and His Messenger and those entrusted with authority among you” (4:59). Muhammad Āḥmad then riposted with “I am the one entrusted with authority among you and you owe obedience to me, as does the entire community of Muḥammad; so heed what I bring you from God.” Ibn Abî al-Saʿūd warned Muḥammad Āḥmad that this would mean war with the government, whereupon the Mahdi indicated his followers and scoffed, “I will kill you with such as these.” Then he asked his followers, “Are you ready to die for the path of God?” They shouted in unison,

37 M. Canard, “Daʿwa,” EI².
“Yes!” After a last-ditch attempt to bribe and influence the Mahdi’s followers, Ibn Abî al-Sa`ûd returned to Khartoum and recommended armed intervention.

A battalion-sized unit of approximately 800 men returned under Ibn Abî al-Sa`ûd’s leadership later in August 1881. The Mahdists facing them numbered only some 300 and were armed only with swords, lances and staffs—no firearms whatsoever. Somehow the rebel forces forced the Turco-Egyptian troops to withdraw, losing only twelve men themselves in the process and gaining a cache of modern rifles, as well. Thus the first armed clash between the Mahdi and the government ended in the former’s victory and sent shock waves all the way to Cairo. But since Muḥammad Aḥmad was not yet prepared to follow up this victory, he decided upon an alternative method of continuing struggle: hijrah, or “flight.”

The archetypal hijrah was, of course, the flight of the Prophet Muhammad and his companions from hostile forces in Mecca to the city of Yathrib—later Medina—in 622 C.E. (the event which marks the beginning of the Islamic calendar), whence they returned to conquer Mecca in 630. Since that time hijrahs have been called for and embarked upon when oppositional Muslim groups have perceived a need to escape from an insufficiently pious society and/or usher in a new, more observant Islamic one. This paradigm of escape-return (-conquer?) has been invoked throughout Islamic history by numerous reformist or messianically-inclined movements: the Khârijîs, the Murâbiṭs, the Muwaḥḥids, to name three of the more prominent ones. Nineteenth-century
Africa, in particular, was the stage for five such movements that used the hijrah-jihâd paradigm, although not all of them were successful in conquest: 1) Usman don Fodio and 2) al-Ḥâjj ʿUmar Tal; 3) ʿAbd al-Qâdir of Algeria; 4) Maʿ al-Aynayn of Mauritania; and 5) Muḥammad Ḥasan of Somalia. Why was such conscious imitation or re-enactment of the hijrah tradition in particular so resonant in African Islam? Three theories come to mind. For one, as we have seen in chapter one, the legacy of the Khârijîs was powerful and abiding in Africa—and the hijrah was perhaps their most powerful symbol. Also, these areas of Africa were on the far southwestern periphery of the urbanized Islamic world, so it was possible to move beyond the purview of settled polities into virtual wilderness regions in a way that would not have been possible in the more central Islamic lands. Finally, nothing creates a bond among people like facing hardship together, and perhaps a hijrah enabled those followers from the disparate tribal and linguistic groups of Islamic Africa to develop, quickly and intensely, a sense of what Ibn Khaldûn called ʿaṣabīyah, or group solidarity.

When Muḥammad Aḥmad al-Mahdi decided to repeat this paradigm in the wake of his initial defeat of the government forces, most probably he was doing so as a measure not only to buy time and muster his forces but perhaps more importantly in order to fix in people’s minds the legitimacy of his jihâd. As Holt observed, “the Mahdi’s use of [such] prophetic parallels was not a blind

antiquarianism. He and his followers were deliberately re-enacting in their own persons the sufferings and the triumphs of the early days of Islam and the consciousness of playing a part in this great drama was an inspiration to them.... \(^{39}\) While the hijrah was the most powerful recalling of the early ummah which he employed, there were others, such as calling his followers ansâr, the term used for the supporters of the Prophet in Medina, and calling his chief lieutenants khulafâ', in imitation of the successors of the Prophet.

Thus, on August 15, 1881, the Mahdi and his supporters embarked for the mountain of Qadîr in southwestern Sudan. Their ranks swelled along the way, as many Kurdufânis and jallâbas from Bahr al-Ghazal joined. On Dhû al-Ḥijjah 1298/October 24, 1881, they reached their objective, both geographically and symbolically. Now all that remained to fulfill the prophetic hijrah paradigm was to return and conquer the "unbelievers." This final military phase would begin in 1882 and last until 1885.

While still engaged in their hijrah to Jabal Qadîr, the Mahdist forces defeated several armed detachments sent against them: one under Rashîd Bey Ayman, governor of Fashûdah province, who was himself killed; another under Yûsuf Pasha al-Shalâlî, governor of Sinnâr. The former’s forces attempted an ambush, the latter’s an overt frontal assault. But both were mauled by the Mahdists, who were now ensconced in both al-Jazîrah—the region between the

\(^{39}\) Holt, The Mahdist State, p. 54.
Blue and White Niles, resembling a peninsula—and Kurdufân. Following the defeat of al-Shalâlî, the Mahdi began sending more propagandists out across Sudan to take advantage of his burgeoning fame. Mahdist propaganda was more than a match for the unconvincing Turco-Egyptian attempts at refutation, as we shall see in the following section. In each area of Sudan khalâyâ, or revolutionary religious “cells,” were established whose members then enlisted local notables, such as tribal and sufi leaders, in the Mahdist cause. This system worked brilliantly.

In the summer of 1882 the Mahdi went on the offensive. After a frontal assault on al-`Ubayd failed in July, the Mahdist forces undertook a siege of this important town, the capital of Kurdufân province in southwestern Sudan. Finally, in January 1883, the city capitulated. The Mahdi led his forces in and allowed them to plunder the city while he prayed in the main mosque. Muḥammad Aljmad now controlled Kurdufân, which meant that the more westernly and southerly provinces of Darfur and Bahr al-Ghazal were lost to Khartoum’s control as well. Furthermore, Mahdist forces now began to employ the 16,000 rifles, thirteen artillery pieces and seven rockets they had captured. Meanwhile, the Mahdist lieutenant `Uthmân Diqnah was recruiting followers in the mountains of the Red Sea coast, opening yet another front against the Ottoman Egyptian regime.

In September 1882, as mentioned above, the British occupied an economically and politically unstable Egypt, reeling from the twin blows of a
massive foreign debt (incurred mostly in building the Suez Canal) and the aforementioned `Urabî Pasha uprising. Now the world’s foremost imperial power became directly invested, and involved, in attempting to suppress the Mahdist revolt. Several thousand British and Turco-Egyptian troops under General William Hicks Pasha (d. 1883) advanced up the Nile. In the valley of Shaykhân they were routed by a Mahdist force of some 20,000 men. With this stunning defeat of colonial forces the Mahdi’s da`wah gained legitimacy all over the Islamic world: delegations came to him from the Ḥijâz, Tunis, Morocco and India.

The British made one last effort to salvage Sudan by sending General Charles Gordon, the former ḥukumdār, to Khartoum in January 1884. Gordon enlisted the establishment `ulamâ’ to engage once again in propagandistic attacks on the Mahdi, to little avail. Interestingly enough, one new twist in this regard was his request that the `ulamâ’ read the Ṣaḥīḥ of al-Bukhârî in the mosques. Al-Bukhârî, as we noted in chapter two above, was one of the two most venerated compilers of ḥadîth, and his collection did not contain any references whatsoever to the Mahdi.

The time for a successful ideological rebuttal of Muhammad Ahmad as the Mahdi was long past, however, and the issue was now one of purely military dimensions. The Mahdist forces besieged Khartoum in August 1884 with perhaps 200,000 men. The Mahdi offered clemency to those inside if they would surrender, and wrote at least eight letters to Gordon imploring him to surrender. On January 26, 1885, the final assault began, and the Mahdist army soon
thereafter entered the city in triumph and killed Gordon,\textsuperscript{40} supposedly against the Mahdi's express orders. The Mahdi himself waited until Friday to enter the city so that he could go directly to the mosque for Friday prayers. The long road from boat-building youth to sufi novice and master to Mahdi was now complete.

However, within five months of his total victory in Sudan Muḥammad Aḥmad al-Mahdi was bedridden with sickness, most likely typhoid, meningitis or malaria, exacerbated by the exhausting drain of his military campaigns and voluminous writings, which, all told, run to seven volumes.\textsuperscript{41} The modern world's only successful Mahdi (to date) died on June 22, 1885.

The Mahdi possessed a personality charismatic enough to weld together disparate strands of opposition to the Turco-Egyptian regime—disenfranchised sufis, jallaba slave traders, forcibly relocated tribes, nomadic groups—and sufficient political and military acumen to exploit the lack of effective control from Cairo in the late 1870s and early 1880s. Muḥammad Aḥmad's polity would survive him by some thirteen years, when it would fall victim to colonialist rivalries in northeastern Africa.

\textsuperscript{40} The British imperialist side of this struggle has been memorialized in the movie \textit{Khartoum}.

V. The Propaganda War between the Sudanese Mahdi and the Religious Establishment

It should come as no surprise that the 'ulamâ', including muftîs, renderers of fatwas, or Islamic legal decisions; and qâdis, judges of Islamic courts, would oppose the Mahdist revolt, considering their place in the Ottoman Egyptian state apparatus and on that state’s payroll. Ḥukumdar `Abd al-Qâdir Pasha Hîlmî, throughout most of 1882, attacked the Mahdi on two fronts: ideological and military. The Sudanese 'ulamâ' were the front men for Cairo and ultimately for Ottoman Sultan Abdülhamid II (r. 1876-1909) in Istanbul, who desperately wanted to debunk the Sudanese Mahdi and delegitimize his movement before it gained any more momentum and threatened his claim to the caliphate, which had been resurrected to legitimize the Ottoman ruler vis-à-vis European imperialist encroachments.

Therefore `Abd al-Qâdir had leading 'ulamâ' compose letters opposing Muḥammad Aḥmad’s Mahdist da′wah. These were then distributed, under his official seal, throughout Sudan. The three most famous of these were by three leading legal scholars. The first was by Sayyîd Aḥmad al-Azharî b. al-Shaykh Ismâ`îl al-Wâlî al-Kurdufânî, Shaykh al-Islâm in western Sudan, entitled “General Advice to the People of Islam about the Attack on Obedience to the Imâm” (that is, the Ottoman sultan). The second was that of Shaykh al-Amîn al-Darîr,

42 This very topic is the focus of `Abd Allâh Ibrâhîm, Al-ṣirâ` bayna al-mahdi wa-al-‘ulamâ’ (Khartoum: Dâr Nûbâr, 1994 [1966]), upon which this section draws heavily.
Shaykh al-Islām in all of eastern Sudan, known as “Guidance for the Seekers of Truth regarding the Mahdi and the False Mahdi.” The third, written by Mufti Shakīr, head of the Appeals Court of the Sudan, was entitled.

Shakīr, in his missives, cast doubt on Muḥammad Aḥmad’s fulfillment of Mahdist ḥadīth in terms of the place of his emergence, his physical appearance, etc. Al-Azharī did likewise but in addition adduced “the Mahdi’s” departure from Islamic beliefs. For example, al-Azharī pointed out that, according to ḥadīth, the Mahdi would be born in Medina in the Ḥijāz, not in Dongolah as Muḥammad Aḥmad had been. Regarding physical features, he observed that the Mahdi was to be of the family of the Prophet and thus an Arab, while Muḥammad Aḥmad was a “Nubian.” Both al-Azharī and Shakīr noted that the ḥadīth predict the Mahdi’s emergence in Massah or Sūs al-Aqṣā in the mountains of the Maghrib, not in the Qadīr mountains of Sudan. Both also stressed the fact that according to ḥadīth the Mahdi would come not in a vacuum but in a religio-political context that would include the return of Jesus and the emergence of al-Dajjāl and al-

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43 The division of Sudan between two Shaykhs al-Islām seems to have been part of the Ottoman Egyptian arrangement of the country “to use the leading religious shaykhs, like the tribal chiefs, as instruments of the administration...,” Holt, The Mahdist State, pp. 22ff.

44 These fulminating epistles can be found abstracted in Ibrâhīm, Al-sirā‘, pp. 23ff.

45 This discussion centers on skin color: al-Azharī maintains that the Mahdi would be ṣahr, “red,” like the Prophet—not aswad, “black,” as was Muḥammad Ahmad.
Sufyâni,⁴⁶ which led al-Azharî to ask where Jesus and the Dajjâl were and Shakîr to opine that the Mahdi was supposed to kill al-Sufyâni, not fellow Muslims.

To refute Muhammad Ahmad more directly, al-Azharî also adduced the hadîth stating that the Mahdi would appear at a chaotic time immediately following the death of a caliph, for the caliph—in the form of the Ottoman sultan—was very much alive and well, and until the "Mahdi" appeared peace had reigned in the Islamic world. Shakîr further observed that far from filling the earth with equity and justice, as would the Mahdi, Muhammad Ahmad was filling the Sudanese portion of it with destruction and pillaging. Another criticism of the Mahdi was that his followers had not sworn fealty to him "between the rukn and the maqârîf" in Mecca, as the hadîth predicted. Indeed, Shakîr pointed out that not only had the "Mahdi's" followers not voluntarily sworn loyalty to him in Mecca; they had been coerced into their loyalty oaths. Al-Azharî returned to his ethnic critique of Muhammad Ahmad as Mahdi by observing that his followers were not Arabs but "foreigners," al-`Ajâm, who did not speak good Arabic, and Shakîr added that they were mere "rabble," awbâsh, not the pious and stalwart Iraqi or Syrian Arabs whom one would expect to fill the true Mahdi's ranks. Shakîr also emphasized that Muhammad Ahmad was obviously not abiding by the Sunnah, as the real Mahdi undoubtedly would do, insofar as he was sanctioning lies. And when Muhammad Ahmad claimed that doubting his

⁴⁶ See chapter two, above, for information on these eschatological figures.
Mahdi-hood was tantamount to unbelief, al-Azharî replied that since the Mahdi is neither a prophet, *nabiyy*, nor a messenger, *rasûl*, belief in him cannot be made a virtual pillar of the faith. Finally, Muḥammad Ḥmad’s claim of divine sanction via mystical visits and visions was adduced as evidence that he was not the Mahdi but a *mutamahdi*, or “false mahdi.”

Besides critiquing Muḥammad Ḥmad’s Mahdist claims on theological grounds, Shakîr, al-Azharî and others advanced the more utilitarian argument that he was upsetting the God-ordained peace and order established by the Ottoman sultan-caliph. Shakîr in particular imputed to the Ottoman sultan the God-given responsibility to preserve the faith and repeated the Ottoman claim, first unequivocally articulated in the Treaty of Kūçûk Kaynarca of 1774 and recently re-asserted in the Ottoman Constitution of 1876, that the Ottoman ruler was not simply the sultan, or political ruler, but also the caliph, or religious leader of the Islamic world. Thus Muḥammad Ḥmad, pretender that he was, had no right to challenge the Ottoman state.

Muḥammad Ḥmad responded to these ideological fulminations primarily by cleverly evading them. First, he addressed all his letters of reply to *ʿulamâʾ al-sûr* “the *ʿulamâ* of evil” who, he would then go on to explain, rejected him for love of worldly wealth. He in turn rejected them and their corrupt *madhâḥib*, or rites of legal interpretation. The crux of the Sudanese Mahdi’s refutation of the likes of Shakîr and al-Azharî consisted of the theory of *nasîkh* or *naskh*, the “abrogation” of unobliging Mahdist ḥadîth so that they would apply to, or at least
no longer disqualify him. But even when this proved difficult, Muḥammad ʿAlī held the fall-back position that in the end he, as Mahdi, was not bound by the letter of the hadīth texts in terms of accuracy about place of birth, appearance, and so on. Plus, he had been reassured in a vision that the Prophet endorsed him—something no one could disprove. And in the final analysis he saw himself as acting on God's behalf to overthrow the poisonous rule of the oppressive Ottomans and Egyptians in Sudan, a commission which he was not about to allow to be undermined by those he considered at best the religious lackeys of that regime. In the end the trenchant critiques leveled at the Sudanese Mahdi by the religious establishment came to naught. His support was too great, his opponents too discredited and his victories too overwhelming. Let us now turn to the state which was established on the strength of these victories, and its ultimate fate.

VI. The Structure and Administration of the Mahdist State in Sudan, 1885-1898

Before his death the Mahdi had appointed caliphs. Like the aforementioned African jihād movements, he consciously imitated the practice of the early Muslim community, whose first four successors to the Prophet as leaders of the ummah were known as al-khulafāʾ al-rāshidūn, or "the rightly-guided caliphs." Each hailed from a major tribal/geographical region of Sudan.

47 Sources for this section include Holt, The Mahdist State and "al-Mahdiyya," ET; Holt and Daly, A History of the Sudan; and al-Qaddāl, Al-imām al-mahdi.
However the Mahdi took pains to demonstrate that the aforementioned "Abdallâhî, the first person to acknowledge him as Mahdi, was *primus inter pares* and his true successor by giving him control of the army and investing him with the caliphal title *khâlîfât al-siddîq*, thereby equating him with Abû Bakr, the first caliph recognized by Sunnis. 'Alî b. Muḥammad Ḥilû was named *khâlîfât al-farûq*, tantamount to 'Umar, the second caliph, and Muḥammad Sharîf b. Ḥâmid was styled *khâlîfât al-karrâr*, matching him with 'Alî, the fourth caliph. The position of the third caliph, 'Uthmân, was offered to Muḥammad al-Mahdi al-Sanûsî, the son of the founder of the famous Libyan sufi order, but he declined the honor.

Muḥammad Aḥmad also appointed subordinate officials under each caliph: 'umârâ' or “commanders;” 'umâlân or “viceregents;” nuwwâb or “deputies;” and umanâ’ or “proxies.” Commanders were military officials. Viceregents headed areas without military garrisons. Deputies were charged with administering Islamic law, in tandem with qâdīs. The proxies were organized into a *majlis* or “assembly” and given responsibility for temporal affairs.

Muḥammad Aḥmad also repudiated the Ottoman caliphate and sultanate; dissolved all sufi orders so that loyalty to one’s shaykh would not undermine loyalty to the Mahdi; and called for the abolition of the four *madhâhib*—Mâlikî, Ḥanafî, Shâfî‘î and Ḥanbalî—on the basis that they had not existed in the original
Islamic law, as defined by his own esoteric explication and ascetic proclivities, was strictly enforced: drinking wine or smoking was punishable by eighty lashes and prison time; libel and swearing in public were also whippable offenses, as were insults like ibn al-kalb, “son of a dog,” or mu`arras al-khanzîr, “pimp of a pig,” which could result in 80 lashes and a week in jail. Even games like backgammon were outlawed as frivolous. Women were banned from the marketplace and ordered to be veiled whenever they left their homes, under penalty of lashing. Divorce was mandated for anyone married to a Turk or a spouse who doubted that the ruler of Sudan was the Mahdi of Allâh. To supervise the legal system in Sudan he appointed a qâdi al-Islâm who was to base his decisions on only three sources: the Qur’ân, the Sunnah and the Mahdi’s edicts. And in what came to be seen as his most egregious departure from Islamic tradition, acknowledgement of Muḥammad Aḥmad’s Mahdi-hood was made a virtual sixth pillar of the faith.\footnote{In addition to \textit{shahâdah}, profession of faith in God and His messenger Muhammad; \textit{ṣalât}, prayer five times daily; \textit{hajj}, the pilgrimage to Mecca; \textit{ṣawm}, fasting from sunrise to sunset during Ramadan; and \textit{zakât}, alms-giving for the poor.}

On the fiscal and economic front a central public treasury called the bayt al-mâl was established, based on the common storehouse for booty seized during the years of the original Mahdist expansion. Much land belonging to the Ottoman Egyptian regime was put under the aegis of the bayt al-mâl while some

was set aside for agriculture. The Mahdi and later the caliph `Abd Allāh utilized this organ as a means of controlling commercial activity as much as possible. Taxes, especially, were a major source of revenue. Enormous amounts of weapons, ammunition, gold, silver, livestock and slaves were handed over to the treasury and then redistributed as the Mahdist leadership saw fit. Thus Mahdist Sudan had a more centralized economy than had prevailed under Turco-Egyptian rule. As for taxes, the Mahdist leadership imposed them but subsumed them under the category of zakāt, “almsgiving” or “charity” (one of the five pillars of Islam), in an attempt to make them more palatable. Most of the revenues of the Mahdist state went for the military and for salaries and pensions.

On the foreign policy and pan-Islamic front, the Mahdi tried before his death to ally with two Muslim states, the Sokoto Caliphate and the ascendant Sanûsîyah sufi order in what is now Libya, and with the Christian empire of Abyssinia (modern Ethiopia), but to no avail. In a more bellicose move, in 1888-89 `Abd Allāh sent an army to invade Egypt but it was defeated by British and Egyptian troops. By 1896 the British, perceiving Italian and French encroachments in eastern and central Africa, respectively, as potential threats to their control of the Nile and the Suez Canal, sent a large army under General Horatio Herbert Kitchener50 (d. 1916) into Sudan to occupy the Mahdist state. His force of some 25,000 (18,000 Egyptian, 7,000 British) defeated the Mahdists

in several battles, the most telling of which was the Battle of Omdurman on 1 September 1898. The Khalīfah `Abd Allâh was killed not long after. Thus ended the most recent example of Mahdism as not just anti-establishment ideology but also as practical political philosophy.

Now that we have examined both the Mahdi’s life and the political, social and religious context in which he arose, we can hazard an analysis which compares Sudanese Mahdism to analogous movements throughout Islamic history.

VII. Conclusion

The influence of Muḥammad Aḥmad b. ‘Abd Allâh, the world’s last successful Mahdi, upon his homeland of Sudan is hard to overestimate. While some modern Sudanese (and Egyptians) regard his Mahdiyyah as a rather unfortunate historical interlude of “frontier fundamentalism,” many in Sudan see in his movement principled opposition to foreign oppression and thus the first stirrings of Sudanese nationalism. Muḥammad Aḥmad is thus compared to his contemporary, Egypt’s ‘Urabi. Such a view shortchanges the Islamic message of the Mahdi, however. This primarily nationalist message survives today in Sudan within the Ummah Party, which has become an opposition movement to

Hasan al-Turâbî’s Muslim Brotherhood, until recently the *de facto* ruling faction of the country.\(^{52}\)

What is the import of Muḥammad Ahmad, the Mahdist movement he led, and the Mahdist state he created for Islamic history in general and for a study of modern Mahdism, however? To answer that question the Sudanese Mahdîyah must be examined from diachronic and synchronic points of view; that is, it must be compared to both earlier and later movements within the larger Islamic world, on the one hand, and to contemporary movements in other regions, especially in Islamic Africa, on the other. We can do so utilizing the characteristics of Mahdist movements delineated in chapter one and expanding upon the brief analysis presented there.

Like the Fâtimids and the Muwahḥids, but unlike the earlier nineteenth-century West African jihâds of Usman don Fodio and al-Ḥâjj `Umar, Muḥammad Aḥmad’s followers openly claimed that he was the eschatological Mahdi whom the Muslim world had long awaited. Accordingly, Sudanese Mahdism was not merely reformist but chiliastically utopian—a campaign aimed not merely at tightening slack Islamic practices but at ushering in the kingdom of God on earth. And, by definition for a successful movement of this type, the Mahdzists of

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Sudan not only overthrew the extant government but established their own state.

The Sudanese Mahdi, unlike the early 'Abbâsids and the Fâṭîmids, did not rely upon explicitly 'Alid aspirations. But like all its predecessor movements, as well as its nineteenth-century African contemporaries, Sudanese Mahdism did originate on the periphery—in this case, the southern one—of the Islamic world. The Mahdi of Sudan emphasized socioeconomic justice to a greater extent than had any opposition group since the Khârijîs, a millennium earlier. Like no precursor movement in Islamic history, but similarly to those that founded the Sokoto Caliphate and Tukolor Empires of West Africa, Muḥammad Aḥmad’s was very much a sufi movement; in his case, Sammâni, whereas Usman don Fodio’s and al-Ḥâjj Umar’s were, respectively, Qâdirî and Tijânî. Also, the Sudanese Mahdi shared with these jihâd leaders of West Africa two other characteristics: they were all knowledgeable, trained 'ulamâ’, and all three utilized to great effect the paradigm of the Prophet Muhammad’s flight from persecution with his followers, then returning to fight and conquer in order to purify and renew the community. In this respect all three of the nineteenth-century African jihâdists also greatly resembled Ibn Tûmart and the Muwaḥḥids.

Thus, like the inaugural 'Abbâsids, the Fâṭîmids, and the Muwaḥḥids, the Sudanese Mahdists exhibited the three primary characteristics of Mahdism per
se: a candid Mahdist claim, an eschatologically utopian agenda, and the seizing of an opportunity to put their theories into practice by administering a state. As for the other six traits that may manifest themselves in Mahdist movements, Sudanese Mahdism demonstrated all but one, that of overt Shī`a sympathies. The intensely sufi character of this movement’s messianism is, however, no less noteworthy.

This Sudanese Mahdist movement was the last successful such movement in Islamic history. In the century since the demise of the Mahdist state in Sudan, Sunni believers have been relegated to the realm of abstract theorizing about the coming of the Awaited Mahdi. Only once, under the leadership of Juhaymān al-‘Utaybī of Sa`ūdī Arabia in 1400/1979, did these eschatological seeds bear fruit, albeit quite briefly. Such Mahdist speculation, and its most modern manifestation, are the topics of the following chapters.

53 O’Fahey goes so far as to say that “the Mahdist revolt can almost be termed a coniuratio Sammāniyah,” “Sufism in Suspense,” in De Jong and Radtke, eds., Islamic Mysticism Contested, p. 272.
Sects are seldom studied as religious phenomena....The “expressive literature” on sects...includes a wide variety of books written by people about themselves and their own sects. Not much of it has yet found its way into academic circles....[Such] books are not scholarly in the sense of searching for facts and truth....They are meant to proselytize and to advocate peculiar understandings of religion, a sectarian viewpoint, and precisely here lies their value....¹

I. Introduction

What Fuad Khuri says about sects holds true, mutatis mutandis, for modern works by theoreticians and proponents of Mahdism, with the stipulation that at least some of the works on the Mahdi and Mahdism could be classified as scholarly. My contention in this fourth chapter is that modern Sunnî Mahdism has become a de facto sect of Islam and as such its “expressive literature”—books written by adherents of this modern Mahdist sect about their beliefs—can be studied in the same way that the writings and beliefs of other Islamic sects are.

II. Language and Mode of Discourse

The expressive literature source base for the present discussion of pro-Mahdist thought consists of thirteen monographs published over the past twenty years across the Arab world: Amîn Muḥammad Jamâl al-Dîn, Ṭumr ummat al-islâm wa-qurb zuhûr al-mahdi [The Lifespan of the Islamic Community and the

Magog] (Cairo: Dâr al-Amîn, 1995; 249 pp.); Muḥammad Ibrâhîm al-Jamal, Al-
*i`tidâr wa-al-mahdi al-muntażar* [The Aggression and the Awaited Mahdi] (Cairo:
Maktabat al-Madînah al-Munawwarah, 1980; 62 pp.); Ibrâhîm al-Shawkî, Al-
mahdi al-muntażar: *silsilah amarât al-sâ`ah* [The Awaited Mahdi: The Series of
the Signs of the Hour] (`Ammân: Maktabat al-Manâr al-Zarqâ’, 1983; 215 pp.);
and two volumes of `Abd al-`Alîm `Abd al-`Azîm al-Bustawî, *Al-aḥâdîth al-
wâridah fi al-mahdi fi mayzân al-jurîf wa-al-ta`dîl. I. al-mahdi al-muntażar fi
dâ` al-aḥâdîth wa-al-athâr al-ṣaḥîfah wa-aqwâl al-`ulamâ` wa-arâ al-fiqrah al-
mukhtalah* [The Transmitted Hadîth on the Mahdi in the Balance of Hadîth
Criticism. I. The Awaited Mahdi in the Light of the True Hadîth and Writings, the
Sayings of the `Ulamâ’ and the Opinions of the Various Sects] and *Al-mawsû`ah
fi aḥâdîth al-qâ`îrah wa-al-mawqû`ah* [The Encyclopedia Regarding the Weak
Hadîth on the Mahdi] (Beirut: Dâr Ibn Ḥazm, 1999; 847 pp.). Five were
published in Cairo, four in Beirut, three in Amman and one in Dubai.

The language of expression for each of these books is Arabic. The form
of Arabic utilized is *al-fuṣḥâ’*, the literary language which is the primary mode of
discourse among educated Arabs from Marrakesh to Muscat in both its spoken
(radio and television news broadcasts) and written (newspapers, magazines)
forms. The argument about the Mahdi is in large measure an intellectual,
polemical debate being waged primarily within the educated Arab elite. These
works would thus seem to be aimed at persuading, if not directly the masses, at
least as many educated Arabs as possible. Thus, they are written in lucid, straightforward *fushā*, avoiding an ornate, flowery style.

The major term of debate in these works is, of course, the Mahdi. Elaboration of opinions on the eschatological Mahdi, and their ramifications for Islamic history (past, present and future) can be found below. At this juncture the primary noteworthy point is that several alternative terms are used for *al-Mahdi* in the expressive literature, the use of which reflects several different influences. Often, following centuries of Islamic tradition, and so unsurprisingly, the adjective *al-muntazar*, "the awaited," is affixed to the Mahdi. Many authors, both pro- and anti-Mahdist, employ this term. However, a number of other expressions for the Mahdi can be found in these pro-Mahdist writings.

The first is *al-hāshimī al-muntazar*, "the awaited Hashimite."² The Hashimites were the family of the prophet Muhammad. Referring to the Mahdi in this fashion may indicate Shī'a influences; however, it is just as likely that it is simply a reflection of the prevalent Islamic—Sunnī as well as Shī'ī—view that the Mahdi will be of the same lineage as the Prophet Muhammad, not necessarily a descendant of 'Alî directly.

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Another term used is *al-munqidh al-rabbanî,* “the divine deliverer.” This nontraditional, rather rare label for the Mahdi may reflect the influence of Christian eschatological themes since 1967, discussed below.

The third, fourth and fifth alternative descriptions of the Mahdi in all likelihood have been somewhat influenced by Shi‘î thought on the matter: *al-imâm al-mahdi,* “the imâm mahdi,” *al-imâm al-muntazar,* “the awaited imâm”⁴ and *al-imâm al-sadîq,* the “righteous imâm.”⁵ *Imâm* originally meant “prayer leader” but, over the span of Islamic history, came to denote among both Sunnîs and Shi‘îs the religious and political leader of the ummah; as such it became virtually synonymous with khalîfah, or “caliph.” Within Shi‘ism the idea of the imâm acquired an additional aspect, that of a leader possessing not only religiously-sanctioned political power but, more importantly, direct and inerrant guidance from God regarding jurisprudence and interpretation of the Qur’ân and hadîth. According to the Imâmî or Twelver Shi‘a, there have been twelve such imâms, beginning with ‘Alî and ending with the Hidden Imâm, the Mahdi, who is yet to return.⁶ In the realm of Sunnî Arab expressive literature on the Mahdi,

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³ Sâlim, pp. 117ff.

⁴ al-Gharaybî, *passim.*

⁵ al-Hâshimî, *Al-mahdi wa-al-masîh,* p. 94 and *passim.*

however, the term “imâm” or any of its permutations is rarely employed, perhaps because of its strong identification with Shi’ism’s Twelve Imâms.

The final substitute term is *wazîr muqarrab,* “intimate minister.” This atypical description of the Mahdi seems to specifically describe his relationship to Jesus in their navigation of the believers through the turmoil of the End Time events, in which the Mahdi is Jesus’ *wazîr,* that is, the one who advises Jesus.

### III. Sources

Whatever term is used for the key Muslim eschatological figure, the primary source of information—as we have seen in chapter two—is *hađîth,* since the Mahdi is not mentioned in the Qur’ân. All of the pro-Mahdist expressive literature employs copious *hađîth* citations in the attempt to substantiate the truth of the Mahdi, first and foremost, but also to delineate the major and minor signs of the End Times and formulate the anticipated context in which they will occur.

Two potential weak spots in Mahdist *hađîth* must be dealt with by proponents of Mahdism. One is the fact that a not inconsiderable number of *hađîths* dealing with the Mahdi have been classified over the centuries by the *muḥaddithûn,* “hadîthologists,” as *daʿîf,* or “weak,” rather than as belonging to

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7 al-Jamal, p. 54.
one of the two higher categories of legitimacy, şâhîh, or “sound” and ḥasan, or “good.” Normally this is done on the basis not of the ḥadîth’s matn, or “text,” but rather on the grounds of its isnâd, or “chain” of transmitters going back to the prophet Muhammad.\(^7\) An unbroken chain in which every transmitter can be verified is described as mutawâtîr, “unbroken” or “handed down in uninterrupted sequence.” The other possible chink in the Mahdist ḥadîth armor—and clearly the more serious—is the oft-repeated allegation that many such traditions are “forgeries,” interpolated into legitimate ḥadîth collections by Shî‘a and other misguided Mahdist propagandists centuries ago. The most common adjectives applied to such sham ḥadîth are tazwîr, “forged;” wa‘d, “invented;” and tâdlîs, “fraudulent.”\(^8\)

Pro-Mahdist writers deal with such potentially damaging charges in several different ways. One is to claim that the sheer number of Mahdist ḥadîths overwhelms any question of weak or interrupted isnâds\(^9\) or the possibility of their all being Shî‘a fabrications.\(^10\) Another is to acknowledge that the various prophetic traditions about the Mahdi do vary but to claim that all of them are

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\(^7\) See the relevant discussion in chapter two above.

\(^8\) An informed but popular discussion of the Muslim view of criticism of the Qur’an and ḥadîth is that of Toby Lester, “What is the Koran [sic]?,“ *The Atlantic Monthly*, pp. 43-56, January 1999.

\(^9\) Al-Gharaybî, pp. 20ff, 40ff, 53ff, 86ff; al-Bustawî, volume I, pp. 133-229, 231-352. Al-Bustawî calculates that there are eight hadîths that clearly mention the Mahdi and a further twenty-two that at least allude to him.

definitely mutawâtîr.\textsuperscript{12} Yet another approach is to maintain that although most of the ḥadîths dealing with the Mahdi are attested only once, most of these are sound.\textsuperscript{13} And finally, in defense of the Mahdi one can ascribe impure motives—chiefly political opposition, because of Mahdism’s potentially disruptive nature for extant regimes—to anyone who questions Mahdist traditions and attempts to tar them all with the forgery brush.\textsuperscript{14}

As discussed previously,\textsuperscript{15} one particularly damning criticism of Mahdism is the fact that the two most revered collectors of ḥadîth, al-Bukhârî and Muslim in the third century AH/ninth century CE, did not see fit to include any overt traditions about this eschatological figure. The pro-Mahdist expressive literature authors deal with this problem in two primary ways. One method is to readily admit the Mahdi’s absence from the anthologies of \textit{al-shaykhân}, these “two shaykhs” of ḥadîth compilation, but to deem this unconvincing in light of the Mahdist ḥadîths found in other canonical collections: Abû Dâ‘ûd, Ibn Mâjah and al-Tirmidhî.\textsuperscript{16} Alternatively, Mahdist apologists also will contend that al-Bukhârî and Muslim \textbf{do} mention their protagonist, only obliquely, in traditions such as

\begin{enumerate}
\item[12] al-Shawkhî, pp. 18-27; 44; 75ff; 103ff.
\item[15] Above, chapters one and two.
\item[16] All writers who believe in the Mahdi do this, implicitly or explicitly, but the method is perhaps exemplified by al-Faqîr, \textit{Al-hâshimî al-muntażar}, pp. 13-15, al-Bustawî, volume I, pp. 360-363 and \textit{passim}, and al-Gharaybî, pp. 84ff.
\end{enumerate}
“Your imâm is before you,” “A caliph will come from Quraysh to redistribute wealth,” etc.\(^\text{17}\)

In addition to quoting, defending and rationalizing the various ḥadîths that speak of the Mahdi, proponents of the idea often adduce notable Sunnî `ulamâ’ who, it is contended, believed in the Mahdi as evidenced by a perusal of their writings. Somewhat similarly to the chief manner in which ḥadîths are wielded to support the Mahdi, with potential trenches of opposition overrun by sheer numbers, proponents adduce litanies of citations to Mahdi-accepting `ulamâ’ to bolster their position.\(^\text{18}\) The most prominent `ulamâ’ offered in this regard are two very different Muslim thinkers: Ibn Taymîyah (d. 1328 CE),\(^\text{19}\) the anti-sufi Hanbalî who is said to have at least acknowledged that Mahdist traditions are mutawâtir; and Muḥyî al-Dîn Ibn `Arabî (d. 1240 CE),\(^\text{20}\) the famous sufi speculative theologian, who more actively defended the Mahdist idea. The adducing of both Ibn Taymîyah and Ibn `Arabî to support belief in a literal Mahdi is telling in light of their diametrically-opposed metaphysical views: it would seem that the proponents of Mahdism are trying to demonstrate a consistent belief in the Mahdi that transcends glaring theological, juridicial, and even philosophical

\(^{17}\) Al-Gharaybî, pp. 86ff, and al-Shawkî, pp. 29ff.

\(^{18}\) The specific positions and lines of attack of those skeptical of the Mahdi are in chapter five, below.

\(^{19}\) Al-Shawkî, pp. 34ff; al-Faqîr, \textit{Al-hâshimî al-munṭâṣar}, pp. 12-15 and \textit{Thalathah yantażuruhum}, pp. 43-44.

\(^{20}\) Al-Gharaybî, p. 72.
Another famous scholar often cited by proponents as a believer in the Mahdi—or at least an acknowledger of the legitimacy of such traditions—is the prolific Egyptian intellectual Jalâl al-Dîn al-Suyûtî (d. 1505 CE), who mentions the Mahdi in his writings.

In addition to these well-known scholars and writers, Mahdists adduce a number of arguably lesser-known, but nonetheless influential, `ulamâ' and writers from across the centuries, such as Muḥammad b. Aḥmad b. Sâlim al-Saffârînî (d. 1188 AH/1774 CE), a Damascus-based author, originally from Nablus, of a number of works on hadîth and related subjects; Muḥammad b. Aḥmad b. Qaymâz al-Dhahabî (d. 748 AH/1348 CE), a Damascene scholar of history, the imâmate and hadîth; and `Abd al-Wahhâb al-Sha`rânî


24 Adduced in Al-Faqîr, Al-hâshîmî al-`umtazar, pp. 12-15 and Thalathah yantazuruhum, pp. 43-44. Biographical data also is in al-Zirikî, s.v. "al-Dhahabî."
(d. 1565 CE), a sufi `âlim of early Ottoman Egypt. Citation of such a wide array of respected Muslim jurisprudents seems to be part of the effort on behalf of Mahdist proponents to call as many corroborating witnesses as possible, from as many different theological and ideological tendencies as possible, to buttress their pro-Mahdi case.

Besides positively adducing ḥadîth and famous Muslim intellectuals and theologians to corroborate the Mahdi as a legitimate Islamic belief, the pro-Mahdist expressive literature must, negatively, refute opponents’ arguments, whether existing or anticipated. The four major terms employed by Mahdist rejectionists to describe the idea of the Mahdi are 1) ḥurâfah, “superstition;” 2) ʿustūrah “fable;” 3) takhayyul, “fantasy” and 4) wahm, “delusion.” They then attack Mahdist belief on two broad fronts: at its source in ḥadîth, some of which we have already examined, and in terms of its alleged deleterious effect on the ʿummah, as chapter five will demonstrate.

Mahdist apologists respond to these fusillades in a variety of ways. As discussed above, they most commonly refute attacks on Mahdist belief by a general appeal to the abundance of traditions and other writings supporting their conviction. In this vein, perhaps the major response to opponents’ allegations that the Mahdi is only a superstition which engenders apathy and lassitude


26 See al-Faqîr, Al-hâshimi al-muntazar, pp. 8-9, 12-15 and Thalâthah yantazuruhum, pp. 43-44; Sâlim, pp. 90, 113-114; al-Bustawî, pp. 23-59; and al-Gharaybî, pp. 17ff.
among Muslims by encouraging them to wait for supernatural deliverance,\textsuperscript{27} is simply to argue that, on the contrary, Mahdism can just as well serve as a sign of hope and a motivation to bring the ummah more into accord with Islamic orthopraxis.\textsuperscript{28} Among the famous opponents of Mahdism we may note three prominent individuals: Ibn Khaldûn (d. 1406 CE), the North African historian and sociologist;\textsuperscript{29} Muḥammad `Abduh (d. 1905 CE), the reforming Egyptian mufti, publisher and writer; and Rashîd Riḍâ (d. 1935 CE), the Syrian disciple of `Abduh and advocate of pan-Islamism and the restoration of the caliphate.\textsuperscript{30} Mahdist proponents claim that the gravamen of Ibn Khaldûn’s, `Abduh’s and Riḍâ’s anti-Mahdist argument is in adducing the ḥadîth, found in Ibn Mâjah, that “there is no mahdi except Jesus son of Mary.” To this argument Mahdists retort that this tradition is itself weak and that even the famous Ibn Khaldûn is not authoritative in and of himself.\textsuperscript{31}

Anti-Mahdists also, according to Mahdists, claim that the Mahdi concept comes from, alternatively, the ancient Israelites, the Christians or even the

\textsuperscript{27} But not always. Al-Bustawî observes that this superstition or fable is one that can be exploited, as it was by Ibn Tûmart, the Muwaḥḥid Mahdi, and others.

\textsuperscript{28} Al-Faqîr, \textit{Al-hâshimî al-muntazar}, pp. 8-9; Sâlim, p. 90; al-Gharaybî, p. 17ff.

\textsuperscript{29} See the section on Ibn Khaldûn, chapter one, above.


“idolaters” (al-wathaniyyah). Again, in rejoinder, Mahdist writers simply repeat the litany of relevant ḥadith and other texts which speak of the Mahdi, thereby implying that the very existence of such large numbers of Mahdist traditions proves the concept’s legitimate Islamic character.

The motives of the Muslim opponents to the modern sect of the Mahdi can also be questioned in advance, as with the preemptive (and presumptuous) charge that since most `ulamâ’ and intellectuals, as well as many Muslim political leaders, will be devotees of al-Dajjâl in the last days, they are not to be trusted when they oppose the Mahdi. Non-Muslim critics of Mahdism can also come under Mahdist fire, in particular al-Mustashriqûn, the “Orientalists” or Western scholars who specialize in studying the Middle East and the Muslim world. Orientalists such as Dwight M. Donaldson, an early twentieth-century scholar of Islam, are said to have averred that all Mahdist ḥadith are “fabricated.” This is a view which Ignaz Goldziher (d. 1921), the famous Hungarian scholar of Islam, is said by some Mahdist sectarians to have shared, and to which he allegedly added the unflattering theory that the Mahdi concept originated with the mutadhammarûn, those “complaining” about Umayyad rule.

32 Sâlim, pp. 113-114.

33 Author of The Shi’ite Religion. A History of Islam in Persia and Ira k (sic) (London: Luzac & Company, 1933). Biographical information on Donaldson is next to nonexistent.

34 Al-Bustawî, volume I, pp. 23-59. Goldziher’s magisterial work was translated into English as the two volume Muslim Studies (London: George Allen & Unwin, Ltd., 1969). In volume two, pp. 55ff, he maintains that various groups of `Alid loyalists fabricated ḥadith to support their respective causes. See above, chapter two on this topic.
The theorizing of these older Arabists is not the only kind that comes in for criticism in the pro-Mahdist expressive literature. Modern global theorists such as Francis Fukuyama, with his contention that the collapse of the USSR sounded the death knell for any possible world ideological rivals to democratic capitalism, and Samuel Huntington, with his thesis of nine world religio-cultural zones destined for conflict, are sometimes cited by name and receive their share of opprobrium from Mahdists: the former for allegedly openly demonstrating how nefarious Western plots to conquer the Middle East and the world are reaching fruition, the latter for advancing a beguiling secular theory of world conflict that seduces Muslim intellectuals away from the crucial task of combing through the Qur'an and the hadîth for signs of the End. Interestingly, both old-style Orientalists and modern Western global theorists are critiqued by Mahdist writers in much the same way as are the Muslim opponents of Mahdism. In fact, the two groups are sometimes lumped together in a neat rhetorical sleight-of-hand: "those who oppose the idea of the Mahdi are merely slavishly imitating Western

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35 In his The End of History and the Last Man (New York: Free Press, 1992). It is worth noting that in this controversial book Fukuyama does assert that the only real ideological rival to Western-style democratic capitalism is Islam! Perhaps Fukuyama's Mahdist critics need to read more closely.


37 Sâlim, pp. 11-26.
thinkers\textsuperscript{38}—although Muslims have never needed Western influences to oppose Mahdism, an issue which will be explored more fully in the following chapter.

The relationship between Sunnî and Shî`a thought on the topic of the Mahdi is complex and somewhat problematic. It is a major thesis of the current study that, contrary to the contentions of many scholars of Islam and the Middle East, Muslim as well as non-Muslim, Mahdism has been and continues to be a vibrant strain of thought and theology in the Sunnî world, not just the Shî`î one. That is not to say that Shî`î beliefs have not influenced Sunnî eschatological thought; they have. Yet it is also true that one of the major criticisms of Mahdism has been this very Shî`î impact over the centuries. The first prominent adherent of this position, and the most-cited by twentieth-century opponents of Mahdism, was Ibn Khaldûn in the fourteenth century CE;\textsuperscript{39} his view was shared by the early twentieth-century critic of Mahdism Rashîd Riḍâ,\textsuperscript{40} as well as by Ibn Khaldûn’s epigones in more modern times. Modern Sunnî Mahdists, although they will at least give the Shî`a credit for not rejecting the Mahdi out of hand, are often also quite critical of Shî`ism on a number of levels, For example, Sunnîs sometimes see the Shî`a as particularly prone to falling under the sway of false mahdis.\textsuperscript{41} Likewise, the Shî`î emphasis on the Mahdi, or Hidden Imâm,

\textsuperscript{38} Al-Faqîr, Thalathah yantazuruhum, p. 44.
\textsuperscript{39} Ibn Khaldûn, Al-muqaddimah, pp. 142-176.
\textsuperscript{40} Al-Bustawî, volume I, pp. 23-59.
\textsuperscript{41} Al-Jamal, p. 19.
being in a state of ghaybah, "concealment," "absence" or "occultation," for centuries is derided as an erroneous belief predicated on weak ḥadîth and/or having been interpolated into Shīʿī Islam and its traditions by heretics at the expense of the correct (Sunnī) belief that the Mahdi will be a just caliph born at an appropriate time before the End approaches. One theory locates the source of this heterodox belief in a Jewish convert to Islam—really a false convert, a mutamuslim—in the early days of the ummah, one `Abd Allah b. Sabâ, who is said to have been attempting to undermine Islam via such irrational interpolations into ḥadîth.

The polemical expressive literature between Mahdists and their opponents has thus come to contain a disputative subset in which Sunnī and Shīʿī believers in the Mahdi hurl invective at one another, each side attempting to prove that it alone has the correct Islamic understanding of the Mahdi and anathematizing the other for its intransigence in the light of such obvious proofs. As mentioned in chapter one, above, Shīʿī sources are not, by and large, being examined in this study because the more esoteric bent of Shīʿī Islam would require a largely different conceptual framework and extensive research utilizing Persian sources.

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42 Al-Faqîr, Al-hâshimî al-muntazar, p. 11.

However, since there is no small degree of overlap between Sunnis and Shi‘is on many other features of the Mahdi—his provenance in the family of the Prophet, his exoteric guidance by God, his link with Jesus in eschatological thought, his inevitable political leadership of the ummah and perhaps of the entire planet—several atypical works by Arab Shi‘i writers will be included in the present analysis.

One such distinctive Shi‘i work, published in Dubai in the late 1980s, maintains that the Mahdi, *al-Imam al-Muntazah*, the “ Awaited Imam,” is not truly a Shi‘i belief or heresy but is in reality a Sunni one, as attested by numerous Sunni traditions and other writings of Sunni `ulamâ. On this view the Sunnis, in effect—even the co-believer members of the Mahdist sect—damn what they do not understand, in their rejection of the ghaybah concept as ridiculous, on the grounds that it would make the Mahdi now approximately 1200 years old. Yet, the rejoinder goes, this is an incorrect understanding of the ghaybah, on several levels: 1) recent scientific and medical research has demonstrated that, theoretically, there is no limit to human life spans; 2) as the Qur’ân verifies, Noah and other prophets lived to be almost 1,000 years old; and 3) God can suspend natural laws whenever He wills. Once one is aware of these points, the Mahdi’s hiddenness no longer seems so implausible. Likewise, the Sunnis must move beyond their caricature of Shi‘ism in which every so often Shi‘is go to a certain subterranean chamber and bellow, “Come out, O Mahdi!” The reality is that the Mahdi will emerge from Mecca. Sunni Mahdist apologists are correct
when they refute the critics' claim that waiting on the Mahdi produces sloth and indolence among Muslims. But in fact, waiting on a Mahdi who is already on earth and preparing to emerge into the light of history is far more beneficial to the ummah and the hopes of individual Muslims than the erroneous Sunnî belief that he has yet to be born. Sunnî Mahdists are also faithful to tradition when they theorize that Islamic regimes throughout history have feared Mahdism because it represents a *quwwah râfidah*, an "oppositional power," to their deviant leadership. In sum, however, the true Islamic belief on the Mahdi is the Shî`î one and Sunnîs would do well to acknowledge this fact, both to improve the lot of the Islamic community and to prepare for the dislocations of the End Times, which are fast approaching.

There is no way of gauging the degree to which a work such as this is read by, or constitutes an influence upon, Sunnî Mahdists. However, it may be indicative of a nascent confluence of thought on the importance of the Hidden Imâm/Awaited Mahdi between Arabophone Sunnîs and Shî`îs, or at least an attempt at such from the latter's side. If so, this rapprochement will be an uphill struggle, for the overall tenor of the debate between Arabic-speaking Shî`î and Sunnî Mahdist proponents is, at least from the Sunnî side, one of rancor. In fact, some Sunnî Arab Mahdist authors are blatantly anti-Shî`a and anti-Iranian in their eschatological prognostications.

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The sufis do not play a prominent role in the expressive literature about the Mahdi, but they are occasionally mentioned. Taking their cue—again—from Ibn Khaldūn, who largely blamed the sufis for serving as the vessel whereby Shiʿī beliefs about the Hidden Imām were conveyed into orthodox Sunnism, pro-Mahdists are prone to criticize the sufis for multiplying Shiʿī errors by allegedly adding to what was found in the Qurʾān and ḥadīth and for stoking Mahdist fires throughout Islamic history with their fantasies and myths. However, sometimes sufis are spoken of more favorably, as when Sayyid Abū `Aʿlā al-M awdūdī (d. 1979), the Pakistani neo-fundamentalist, is alleged to have said that “the Mahdi will in form resemble a sufi or ancient shaykh.” But by and large, overt sufi views are absent from this debate.

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46 Al-Bustawī, volume I, pp. 87-88. He does not specify just what these additions were, nor does he explain how they could add to Qurʾānic teachings regarding the Mahdi when the Qurʾān does not mention him.

47 *Ibid.*, p. 382; al-Jamal, pp. 19-20. Al-Bustawī hastens to add that while the sufis may have influenced Mahdist thought they most definitely did not invent the idea.

Now that we have seen how the authors of the Mahdist sect's expressive literature utilize their sources and muster their responses to anticipated opposition arguments, let us turn to the gravamen of the Mahdist position: interpretation of the sources concerning the characteristics and role of the Mahdi and the other major Muslim eschatological figures.

IV. Reinterpretation of the Sources: Major and Minor Eschatological Figures

Mahdist writers, once they have reemphasized the legitimacy of the sources of classical Islamic eschatological thought, particularly regarding the Mahdi, then move to the stage of reinterpreting the important events and figures, preparatory to reconfiguring and recontextualizing them in order to make their major point: that the Mahdi is soon to appear.

Muslim writers have, for centuries, divided the eschatological portents, signs and figures into two categories: minor and major. In brief, the difference between the two is that the minor signs prefigure or point to the beginning of the End Times, while the major signs will be proof that the End Times are already occurring.¹⁶⁶ Most works on Islamic eschatology agree that the major

¹⁶⁶ See above, chapter two, as well as A. Hijâzî, *But, Some of Its Signs Have Already Come! Major Signs of the Last Hour* (Arlington, TX: Al-Fustaat Magazine, 1995). Now is perhaps a good time to reiterate that Islamic eschatology has two phases, if you will, of events: that occurring within the normal space-time continuum, in which the forces of God led by the Mahdi and Jesus battle those of evil, led by the Dajjâl; and one that encompasses the end of this cosmos, the Judgment and the final consignment of humans to their eternal destiny in heaven or hell. We are dealing here with the former phase. By way of comparison Christian eschatology really has only one phase, which commences with Jesus' return.
signs include the appearance of Jesus, the Dajjâl, Yajûj and Majûj, and the Dâbbah, as well as the sun rising in the west. The consuming fire that will issue from somewhere in the Arabian peninsula, probably Yemen, is sometimes listed as a minor, other times as a major, sign. The Mahdi is often classified as a major sign but occasionally is categorized as THE link between the minor and major signs.50

The minor signs include, but are not limited to, earthquakes, increased sexual immorality, strife within the Muslim community, great disparities in wealth and the conquest of "Constantinople" and Rome by Muslim armies.51 Some pro-Mahdist authors further break down the most important minor signs into dozens of more specific ones, a process that seems to involve a not inconsiderable degree of speculation and sensationalism.52 Some of these signs may have already transpired; others are yet to happen.53 But all of them are merely a warm-up, as it were, for the main event: the appearance on the world historical stage of the major eschatological signs and actors.

Whether the Mahdi is typified as a minor or major sign, he does come first both in the eschatological chronology and in the expressive literature of the pro-Mahdists. All such writers agree in general with the description of the Mahdi and

50 Al-Dîn, pp. 39ff.
52 For example, Al-Dîn, pp. 15-20.
53 Al-Shawkhî, pp. 6-7, 120-175.
of his role: that he will resemble Muḥammad, the Messenger of God, in appearance and name; that he will be descended from the ahl al-bayt; that he and Jesus will somehow cooperate to combat the forces of evil; and that his primary task during his limited time on earth will be to fill the world with justice and equity as it had formerly been filled with oppression and inequalities (especially socioeconomic). The modern Mahdist sectarians do add some glosses to this broad characterization, however.

In terms of his lineage, the Mahdi’s family origins are said to be traceable to Fāṭimah and to Fāṭimah via ‘Alî and Ḥasan. One might see such statements as the convergence of Sunnî and Shī‘î views, except that some Mahdist loyalists adamantly point out that although he is descended from Fāṭimah, and will be a rightly-guided caliph and imām, the Mahdi is most definitely not Shī‘î. It is also asserted that he must be specifically an Arab leader who then moves on to take the reins of the whole Islamic community and eventually the entire world.

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54 Given as seven, eight or nine years, depending on the ḥadīth cited and the interpretation made.

55 Al-Dīn, pp. 43-46.

56 Al-Faqîr, Al-hâshîmi al-muntazar, pp. 59-63 and Thalathah yantazuruhum, pp. 48-53. Interestingly, in the former (earlier) book, the author adds that “this is according to ‘Alid [Shī‘î] ḥadīth,” a phrase he omits from the latter (later) work.


58 Al-Faqîr, Thalathah yantazuruhum, pp. 48-53 and Al-hâshîmi al-muntazar, pp. 20ff, where he explains that any mujaddid, or “renewer,” of Islam must be al-manzalah al-Sâmiyah, of “Semitic
There are additional refinements made by pro-Mahdists to the Mahdi’s role as delineated in hadîth and other writings, over and above filling the earth with justice and equity. On the psychological level, besides generally serving as the symbol of hope to Muslims, the Mahdi will fill believers’ hearts with magnanimity and liberate them from the grip of evil and anxiety, both individually and collectively. Furthermore, the Mahdi will reify such psychic yearnings in a number of ways. In something of a gender-conflating metaphor, he will function as the “midwife” for the new world order that is even now in its labor pains. He will provide a “beneficial ideology” which, when realized, allows for the establishment of a divine program to elevate the status of Muslims. This ideology and program will not only restore Islam to its rightful place as master of the world but will engender the creation of a world-wide Islamic state, called by some in the pro-Mahdist expressive literature dawlah.

status” and critiques the Ottoman sultan Abdülazîz (r. 1861-1876) for allegedly claiming to be a mujaddid while being Turkish, not Arab.

59 Al-Shawkî, pp. 111-119.

60 Al-Faqîr, Al-hâshimî al-muntażar, p. 9.

61 Al-Faqîr, Thalathah yantazuruhum, p. 6. Cf. Jesus’ words in Matthew 24:6ff, Mark 13:7ff and Luke 21:9ff: “You will hear of wars and rumors of wars....Nation will rise against nation, and kingdom against kingdom. There will be famines and earthquakes in various places. All these are the beginning of birth pains [emphasis added].”

62 Al-Gharaybî, pp. 151ff.

63 Al-Shawkî, pp. 111-119.

64 Al-Jamal, p. 20.

65 Al-Faqîr, Al-hâshimî al-muntażar, p. 9.
Islâmîyah, an “Islamic state,” or dawlat Allâh, a “state of God” in which the operative principle is hukûmat al-Qur’ân, “rule of the Qur’ân.” This will replace the existing dawlat al-bâtîl, the “illegitimate state,” a term which could refer to, alternatively, the extant world political system, the current Middle Eastern regimes or perhaps even the state of Israel.

Some Mahdist apologists, echoing the rallying cry of the Muwâhhidûn, or “Almohads,” in medieval North Africa, envision a similar army of muwâhhidûn, or “proponents of the unity of God”—meaning, in effect, true pious Muslims who adhere to Islamic law—as being the mechanism whereby the Mahdi constructs this divine regime. These al-kawâdir al-mu‘âhhilah, or “able cadres,” will require tawhîd, the “belief in God’s unity” as their motivating ideology because such is the sine qua non of any true (and successful) Islamic movement.

Once the Mahdi’s rule is established, one of his primary goals will be to create a world-wide society in which wealth and power are more equally distributed than under the current (or any past) world system, although there

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66 Al-Faqîr, Thalathah yantaquruhum, p. 6.
67 Al-Hâshimî, Al-mahdi wa-al-masîh, pp. 66ff, p. 103.
68 Al-Gharaybî, p. 51.
69 Sâlim, pp. 75ff.
70 Al-Dîn, pp. 55ff.
71 Al-Gharaybî, p. 31 and passim.
are Mahdist writers who see the Mahdi’s role as almost solely political and military. A number of pro-Mahdists simply reiterate the tradition that the Mahdi will usher in an age of equity and justice, with no elaboration of the methodology he will employ. Others, however, construe this to mean that he will follow a specific policy of wealth redistribution in order to rectify, in particular, the vast disparities in living standards among Muslims. There is one strand of pro-Mahdist thought, however, which says that the Mahdi will not be able to accomplish this lofty goal alone; he will need the help of the other major positive eschatological figure of Islam, Jesus.

As with the Mahdi, there is a basic corpus of beliefs concerning Jesus, predicated on hadîth, upon which all pro-Mahdists agree. He will descend to earth; repudiate Christianity and vindicate Islam by destroying all crosses, killing all swine and reciting the shahâdah, or Muslim profession of faith that “there is no god but God and Muhammad is His messenger;” in some fashion cooperate with the Mahdi to overcome the forces of evil, particularly the Dajjâl; and, finally, die a natural death and be buried next to the Prophet. Again, as in the expressive literature on the Mahdi, some details are added concerning the

73 Al-Sâlim, passim and al-Jamal, passim.
74 Al-Shawkhî, p. 100ff; al-Dîn, p. 43; al-Gharaybî, p. 51, pp. 152ff.
76 Al-Hâshimî, Al-mahdi wa-al-masîḥ, pp. 66ff.
77 Al-Jamal, pp. 21-22, 53-54; al-Faqîr, Thalathah yantazûruhum, pp. 89-96; Sâlim, pp. 41, 75ff.
prophet Jesus. First, the place of his descent is specifically given as a white
minaret east of Damascus,\textsuperscript{78} probably the one recently finished near Damascus
International Airport\textsuperscript{79}—which could conceivably have been built expressly to
fulfill this particular messianic expectation. When will he return? Almost certainly
prior to the Mahdi’s emergence, probably after the Jews have rebuilt their
Temple on the former site of al-Aqṣā mosque, which according to at least one
Mahdist author, will by then have been destroyed in a nuclear “Armageddon.”\textsuperscript{80}
An occasional Mahdist apologist will assert more specificity, as in claiming that
Jesus’ descent will occur in autumn 2001.\textsuperscript{81}

As far as his role vis-à-vis the Mahdi, some say that Jesus will be senior
partner and the Mahdi his loyal lieutenant as “intimate advisor” or wazîr
muqarrab,\textsuperscript{82} and furthermore that Jesus alone will kill the Dajjāl in Lydda,
Palestine\textsuperscript{83}—also known as Lôd, a city in central Israel. Other Mahdists maintain,
on the contrary, that the Mahdi will outrank Jesus because the latter will need
the Mahdi’s help to kill the Deceiver\textsuperscript{84} and when they pray together in the

\textsuperscript{78} Al-Jamal, pp. 53-54.
\textsuperscript{79} Al-Faqîr, \textit{Thalathah yantaẓuruhum}, p.92.
\textsuperscript{80} Sâlim, pp. 41, 59ff, 75ff.
\textsuperscript{81} Al-Dîn, p. 49.
\textsuperscript{82} Al-Jamal, p. 54.
\textsuperscript{83} Al-Faqîr, \textit{Thalathah yantaẓuruhum}, p.93; Sâlim, p. 41; al-Dîn, p. 86.
\textsuperscript{84} Al-Jamal, pp. 21-22.
mosque Jesus will prostrate himself behind the Mahdi.® A particularly distinctive view is that the Mahdi and Jesus will be co-architects and co-rulers of the *dawlat Allah*, tantamount to *malakût Allah*,®® the "kingdom of God," of which Jesus spoke in the Gospels®® and which is, in reality, one and the same as the just Mahdist state that will encompass the globe before the End and in which Muslims and Christians will live together peacefully at long last.®®

This latter strain of thought has been adduced, despite the fact that its primary proponent is, to judge from his extensive discussion of the ghaybah concept, almost certainly Shî`a, because it exemplifies a very recent, seemingly growing trend among Arabic-language Mahdist apologetic writers that crosses the Sunnî/Shî`î divide: the usage of Jewish and Christian scriptures to supplement the Qur'an and the hadîth in examining eschatological matters. The heretofore accepted view regarding the usage of the Bible by Muslims is best summed up by a prominent modern scholar of Islamic theology: "the Bible never becomes of relevance to the legal issues within the Muslim community, nor,

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®®The term is used four times in the Qur’ân, in the following sūras: al-An`âm [6]:75; al-A`râf [7]:185; al-Mu`minûn [23]:88; and Yâ’sîn [36]:83.


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generally, for any theological judgements" [emphasis added]. But this is painting with far too broad a brush, for several modern Mahdist sectarians, all writing during the decade of the 1990s, adduce both the Old and New Testaments to support their interpretations of several key eschatological figures and events—a striking change from the practice throughout the bulk of Islamic history, wherein eschatology had consisted (merely) of transmission of older traditions without attempts to contextualize them in any particular historical period. But in the wake of the Six Days War of 1967, and under the influence of Western ideas, "[b]y the late 1970s, a new, full-blown synthesis had been born of classical Muslim apocalyptic, antisemitic conspiracy theories, and a great deal of Biblical material," along with the interpretations of this Biblical material by American evangelical Christians.\footnote{Andrew Rippin, “Interpreting the Bible through the Qur’an,” G.R. Hawting and Abdul-Kader A. Shareef, eds., \textit{Approaches to the Qur'an} (New York/London: Routledge, 1993), p. 252.}

For example, the many New Testament statements about a “Son of Man” who will come at the eschatological dénouement—traditionally understood by Christians to refer to post-second-coming Christ—are reinterpreted as Jesus’ predictions of the Mahdi.\footnote{David Cook, “Muslim Fears of the Year 2000,” \textit{Middle East Quarterly} Vol. V, No. 2 (June 1998), pp. 52, 59.} Or in a slightly different vein the warnings in the book of Revelation 16:16 about the End Time battle of Armageddon are cited approvingly alongside Qur’ân and hadîth, with \textit{Harmagiddûn} smoothly

\footnote{Al-Hâshimî, \textit{Al-mahdi wa-al-masîh}, p. 75ff.}
incorporated into Islamic eschatology as a minor sign. Some Mahdist writers construe Armageddon as a nuclear war between two alliances. On one side will be “the West,” the Muslims allied with *al-Rûm*, that is, Europe and America; on the other, “the East,” either *al-Shuyû’î*, the “Communists” or *al-Shî’î*, “the Shi`ites.”92 Other Biblical references used to corroborate Mahdist apologists’ analyses include Ezekiel 38 and 39, with its delineation of Gog and Magog; Matthew 20:1-16, the allegory of the workers in the vineyard; I Thessalonians 5, St. Paul’s eschatological description of the day of the Lord;93 Zechariah 14, the account of the besieging of Jerusalem and a great plague (seen as post-nuclear strike “flesh-rotting” radiation poisoning); and Matthew 24, Mark 13 and Luke 21, Jesus’ famous account of the signs of the end of the age.94

Pro-Mahdists not only extensively adduce Christian scriptures to corroborate their eschatology; they also approvingly cite a plethora of American Protestant leaders for their views on Armageddon and Jesus’ return. These include Pat Robertson, the American founder of the Trinity Broadcasting Network and one-time presidential candidate (in 1988), described as the “leader of the Gospel fundamentalists;” Hal Lindsey, the author of a number of books on the second coming of Jesus, beginning with *The Late Great Planet Earth*, a best-seller in 1970; Jerry Falwell, the Baptist minister, president of Liberty University

93 Al-Dîn, pp. 6-7, 21ff, 36.
and founder of the formerly politically influential Moral Majority; Jimmy
Swaggart, the disgraced (but now returned) Pentecostal televangelist; and Billy
Graham, the famous evangelist and counselor to Presidents, derided by some in
the Mahdist sect as the “head of the religious mob.” Cyrus I. Scofield (d. 1921),
publisher of a popular study Bible in which eschatology figures prominently, is
also included in this litany of non-Muslim corroborators. So, too, are former U.S.
Presidents Richard M. Nixon (d. 1994) and Ronald Reagan, both of whom are
said to have expected Armageddon and Jesus’ second coming in the very near
future.\footnote{Al-Dîn, pp. 34-42; Sâlim, pp. 36ff.} One final note on non-Muslim corroborators being adduced: at least
one member of the Mahdist faction quotes Nostradamus (d. 1566), the famous
French Catholic seer, to the effect that great terror from the sky will strike the
Middle East around the year 1999.\footnote{Al-Dîn, pp. 34-42; Sâlim, pp. 36ff.} Perhaps this, too, reflects the great interest
in Nostradamus manifested in recent years in the West.

Classical Muslim eschatological tradition has, of course, been the primary
ground of modern Mahdist sectarian writings. Western thought—primarily
Protestant “fundamentalist” Biblical material—has been added to the Mahdist mix
in recent decades. A new form of antisemitism has also entered the Mahdist
interpretive mix. One example of this is found in the Mahdist sectarian authors’
formulation of a new Muslim approach to the “king of the South” in Daniel 11,
who has been renamed \textit{al-rajul al-Ashûrî}, the “Assyrian man” and termed \textit{al-}
mahdi al-ṣahyûnî, the "Zionist Mahdi." This shadowy pseudo-eschatological figure, seen in the Bible as the evil leader who will "desecrate the [Jewish] temple" and "set up the abomination that causes desolation,"^97 is in reality the Mahdi. He is portrayed as evil because many Jews of the End Times will follow the Dajjâl, whose opponent will be the Mahdi.^98

Earlier, reference was made to Muslim—not just Mahdist—concerns about alleged Jewish attempts to undermine Islam via the Isrâ‘îlyât, the Judaic component of early Islamic tradition. Such trepidation became more pronounced with the influence of Mahmûd Abu Rayya, a disciple of Rashîd Ridâ writing in the 1940s, who extended it to include the issue of Zionism and the Israeli-Palestinian struggle:

A (Jewish) archetype was born here out of the internal Islamic questioning of the Isrâ‘îlyât [sic] and the Palestine problem....Drawn and abstracted from "the past" in order to be applied to contemporary history as an archetypal explanation, this idea was to have a long and variegated history in certain trends of later Islamic (especially "Islamist") thought. In official "establishment" circles, such as al-Azhar, the equation between the misbehaviour of ancient Jews...and the modern misbehaviour of Zionist Jews in Palestine became an intellectual paradigm for some.^99

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^96 Sâlim, p. 34ff.

^97 Daniel 11:31.


^99 Nettler, "Early Islam, Modern Islam and Judaism...," p. 11.
The Mahdist sect has clearly been influenced by this line of thinking. Hadîth are sometimes interpreted to mean that Jews will be among the largest contingent of the Dajjâl’s followers, with his vanguard consisting of 70,000 Jewish folk from Isfahân.\(^{100}\) Alas, theological criticism of Jews for not believing in Jesus’ return, as do both Christians and Muslims,\(^{101}\) can all too easily feed into the anti-Jewish archetype and come perilously close to anti-Semitism. Jews in Iran are seen as a nefarious force, allied with Christians and Communists to undermine Islam, even after the success of the Islamic revolution there.\(^{102}\) Mustafa Kemal Atatürk is portrayed as the main reason for the downfall of the Ottoman caliphate, a cause to which he was dedicated by virtue of his allegedly being a \textit{Dönmê}, a descendant of those Jews who followed the seventeenth-century Jewish messianic figure Sabbatai Sevi in converting to Islam.\(^{103}\) “The Zionists” are said to be helping the Bahâ’ís propagate their heretical ideas in order to undermine Islam,\(^{104}\) since the worldwide headquarters of the Bahâ’î faith is located in Israel. And so on.

\(^{100}\) Sâlim, pp. 67ff; al-Shawkhî, p. 62; al-Faqîr, \textit{Thalathah yantazuruhum}, pp. 73ff.

\(^{101}\) Sâlim, \textit{ibid.}

\(^{102}\) Al-Jamal, pp. 11-14.


\(^{104}\) Al-Bustawî, volume I, p. 111.
The Dajjâl whom many Jews will allegedly admire so greatly is the major malevolent eschatological figure, set over against the benevolent tandem of the Mahdi and Jesus. He may derive from Ibn Sâ'îd or Ibn Siyâd, a Jewish leader in Medina during the Prophet’s time. The Muslim traditions on this are ambiguous at best. His full name is usually given as al-Masîḥ al-Dajjâl, the “deceiving messiah.” The most common explanation of the title masîḥ is that it is merely copied from the messianic designation of Jesus, of whom the Dajjâl is an evil doppelgänger. Alternatively, it is said to come from the Arabic root sayaha, “to wander,” as the Dajjâl will do all over the Middle East, or from masîkh, “disfigured,” since he will have only one eye and an unpleasant visage. Whatever the source of his full name, the Dajjâl will come from “the East”—possibly Turkmenistan, Iran, or the Russian-Iranian or the Syrian-Iraqi border region—although currently he is under angelic incarceration in this same “East” or perhaps in the Arabian peninsula. He will appear at the end of a time of great famine and drought, and after the (re?) conquest of “Constantinople” by the Mahdi’s army, and/or after Armageddon. The Dajjâl will serve as the fountainhead of unbelief, error and strife, performing miracles and eventually claiming divinity. He will number among his followers, in addition to many Jews, scores of devils, Christians, bâṭînâs or “esotericists” (a term that has historically

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105 See Hijâzî, But, Some of Its Signs Have Come Already!, pp. 16ff and Jabr, pp. 35ff.
referred to Ismâ`îlî Shî'ites\textsuperscript{106}) and women, and he will dwell forty days or forty years on Earth. Despite his power the Dajjâl will be prohibited by God from entering four sanctuaries of the faithful: Mecca, Medina, Jerusalem and Mt. Sinai. Jesus, perhaps assisted by the Mahdi, will finally kill him.\textsuperscript{107}

At least one pro-Mahdist writer is convinced that the Dajjâl will be from Iran, that in all probability he is extant already as the current Iranian president Mohammed Khatamî. In this view the Shî`î clerical hierarchy of sayyid, ayatollâh and hujatollâh can easily be adapted to a claim of divinity, which the Dajjâl will make. Khatamî will reveal his dajjâlate at an Islamic conference in Tehran in the not-too-distant future and then will lead the Shî`a in a nuclear attack on Bahrayn and the eastern Gulf, commencing the chain of other End Time events.\textsuperscript{108} So earlier attested examples of Shî`î-Sunnî convergence on Mahdist ideology notwithstanding, we see here a countervailing case of anti-Persian/Iranian eschatological thought.

The other, lesser eschatological figures are given much shorter interpretive treatment in the Mahdist expressive literature. The \textit{Dâbbah}, or "Beast," is acknowledged, following the hadîth, as one of the signs preceding The Hour. It will emerge in the Arabian desert on the very day that the sun rises


\textsuperscript{108} Sâlim, pp. 11-17, 39-43, 113-114.
in the West, travel to Mecca and then roam the earth. Like the Dajjâl, it will have kâfir, "unbeliever," inscribed on its forehead.\textsuperscript{109} Mahdist writers retain conventional eschatological references to Yâjûj wa-Mâjûj, "Gog and Magog," as "factions of Turks" who are descended from Japheth, son of Noah, in keeping with the widespread myth of the descent of different races from Noah's sons.\textsuperscript{110} In more general terms, "Gog and Magog" refers to hegemonic powers falling upon the Middle East from the North; in a modern-day context, Mahdist writers tend to identify them with the Russians, Chinese or even Japanese. These eschatological hordes will escape their imprisonment somewhere in the Carpathian Mountains, at an altitude of 1000-3000 meters, where they have been since Alexander the Great penned them in. After Jesus kills the Dajjâl they will issue forth.\textsuperscript{111}

Finally, several Mahdist authors mention al-Sufyânî, a malicious, albeit only human, leader who will emerge before the Mahdi in al-Shâm, the region of Jordan, southern Syria, Lebanon, and Palestine. The eschatological figure of al-Sufyânî would seem to be the crystallization in Islamic tradition of resentment toward the branch of the Umayyad caliphate descended from Mu`âwiyyah b. Abî

\textsuperscript{109} Al-Jamal, pp. 51, 55, 58; al-Dîn, pp. 101-102. For non-Mahdist background, see A. Abel, "Dâbba," \textit{EI}².


\textsuperscript{111} Al-Dîn, pp. 13-14, 55, 95-100.
Sufyân (d. 680 CE), seen by many Muslims as usurpers of the caliphate from the Prophet’s family, although at least one prominent Western scholar argues that the concept of this eschatological opponent of the Mahdi pre-dated the Umayyads. Along with al-Abqa’, “the speckled/spotted,” and al-Ashâb, the “reddish,” al-Sufyânî will rule the Middle East prior to the Mahdi’s coming. Al-Sufyânî will be a Jordanian leader, al-Abqa’ is Yassir `Arafât and al-Ashâb is an as-yet-unknown Syrian ruler.

This is how the Mahdist sect’s expressive literature interprets the important eschatological signs and personages. Mahdist proponents move beyond reinterpretation of eschatology, however. They also attempt to rehabilitate and reconfigure it in terms of the modern geopolitical, social, religious and military context, that is, to apply the narrative about the Mahdi, Jesus, Dajjâl and other eschatological figures to modern Arab, Middle Eastern, Islamic and world history.

V. Eschatology-as-history: Application of the Interpretation

Before fitting the eschatological Mahdi and his attendant End Time figures into a modern context, many Mahdist writers first render their verdicts on predecessor movements throughout Islamic history. Going all the way back to the early days of the ummah, the plethora of Mahdist and pseudo-Mahdist

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113 Al-Gharaybî, p. 137; Sâlim, pp. 128ff.
movements identified by these writers\footnote{Al-Bustawî, volume I, p. 89, quotes Ibn Taymîyah as having said that even by his time they had become so numerous that “many have been counted only by God.”} can be classified into three broad categories.

The first consists of those whose founders or leaders openly, and presumably sincerely, claimed to be the Mahdi. Included here are the likes of Ibn Tûmart (d. 1130 CE), founder of the Muwahhîds; the Sudanese Mahdi Muḥammad Aḥmad whose mahdîyah perished along with him, “as do all such fables,” in 1885; and Juhaymân al-`Utaybî, who along with his followers occupied Mecca in 1979.\footnote{Al-`Utaybî was actually the spokesman for the man who would be Mahdi, his brother-in-law Muhammad b. `Abd Allah al-Qahrânî. This movement will be examined more closely in chapter six, the conclusion.}

The second grouping of Mahdist movements encompasses those whose founders or leaders used the idea of the Mahdi to delude people,\footnote{These are musha `widhûn, “conjurers, swindlers,” or dajjâlûn, “deceivers,” (the plural of al-dajjâh), whose calculated deception differentiates them from those who honestly consider themselves the Mahdi, however misguidedly. See al-Bustawî, volume I, p. 89ff.} epitomized by the Bahâ‘îs of Bahâ‘ullah (d. 1892) and the Qâdiyânîs of Ghulâm Aḥmad (d. 1908). It is worth noting that both of these self-styled mahdis founded new religions.

The final category is that of individuals who did not claim any mahdîyah or mahdawîyah, “office/state of the Mahdi,” but rather had it claimed for them by others. The prophet Jesus is the prime example of this type, for although it is certain that he was rightly-guided by God this is not the same as being the
eschatological Mahdi. Others who fall under this unpretentious rubric include the Umayyad caliphs Sulaymân b. `Abd al-Malik (r. 715-717 CE) and `Umr b. `Abd al-`Azîz (r. 717-720 CE); `Ubayd Allâh (d. 934 CE), the first Fâtimid caliph; al-Sayyid Aḥmad b. `Irfaq al-Shahîd al-Barelwî (d. 1831) of India, a soldier and sufi presumed killed in a jihâd against Sikhs but who, since his body was never found, was made a posthumous mahdi by his followers;\textsuperscript{117} and the second shaykh of the Sanûsî sufi order in Libya, Muḥammad b. Muḥammad b. `Alî al-Sanûsî (d. 1902).\textsuperscript{118}

Other assessments in the expressive literature of earlier Mahdist movements sometimes refine these categories, albeit often in a less gracious direction. While some of the `Abbâsid caliphs may have been guided by God, this did not make any of them the eschatological Mahdi. Far from being sincere, Ibn Tûmart, the Muwaḥḥîd founder, was a “liar and tyrant” and `Ubayd Allâh was not merely a charlatan but \textit{al-mahdi al-mulḥid}, the “heretical mahdi.”\textsuperscript{119} The Bābîs, Bahâ’îs and Qâdîyânîs were, at best, “error-ridden apostates”\textsuperscript{120} and, at worst, paragons of a time frame best summarized with the phrase the “century


\textsuperscript{118} Al-Bustawî, volume I, pp. 89-118, is the source for this useful categorization and the fable quotation.

\textsuperscript{119} Al-Shawkî, pp. 50-62.

\textsuperscript{120} Al-Jamal, pp. 24-49.
of Satan”—which chronological label can likewise be applied to Musaylimah,\(^{121}\) the “false prophet” rival of Muhammad, as well as the Khârijîs and Shi`îs.\(^{122}\) And the most recent Mahdist uprising, the 1979 disturbance in Sa`ûdî Arabia led by Juhaymân al-`Utbî in the name of the Mahdi `Abd Allah al-Qahtânî, is dismissed as that of one of the false mahdis, as evidenced not only by his lack of the proper physical characteristics and by his group’s heinous act of violating the Ka`bah with force,\(^{123}\) but also by the fact that this movement failed.

Obviously, no author of the pro-Mahdist expressive genre considers any of the self-styled mahdis who have appeared heretofore on the historical stage to actually have been the eschatological, Awaited Mahdi. But neither does the historical superfluity of mahdis disprove the future historicity of this crucial eschatological figure: abusus non tollit usum (“abuse does not take away the use”) might be the phrase that best sums up the modern pro-Mahdist sectarians’ view of previous Mahdist claimants; that is, the stream of false mahdis in no way diminishes their belief that the Awaited Mahdi will eventually come.

In addition, each such claimant can be subsumed under a paradigm for the whole scope of Islamic political history which appears in the Mahdist

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\(^{121}\) See W. Montgomery Watt, “Musaylima,” EI².

\(^{122}\) Al-Faqîr, Thalathah yanta'zuruhum, p. 15\(\text{f} \); al-Jamal, pp. 24-49.

\(^{123}\) Al-Jamal, p. 16; Sâlim, pp. 87-90. The Mahdist writers’ dismissal of al-Qahtânî for lacking the requisite countenance flies in the face of the claims made for him in that respect by al-`Utaybî, according to Ayman al-Yassini, Religion and State in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1985), pp. 124-129.
literature in two slightly different versions. In one version, the following phases of government ensue after the Prophet: 1) khulafâ’ or “caliphs,” 2) umarâ’ or “amirs,” 3) mulûk or “kings,” 4) jabâbîrah or “tyrants” and 5) the Mahdi’s state. The second paradigm has the periods as 1) prophetic rule, 2) prophetic-agenda caliphate, 3) malakân ‘adân, or “substitute sovereigns,” 4) al-mulk al-jabâri, or “tyrannical rule” and 5) the Mahdi’s caliphate, a return to the second phase. The only real difference between these two schemas is that the latter lumps the amirs and kings together as substitute sovereigns. Both look back to the halcyon days of the Prophet and his immediate successors as the political standard against which all subsequent Islamic states are measured and found wanting, until that of the Mahdi comes. Both paradigms can also be used to analyze all intervening states, Mahdist and non-Mahdist, between the first century AH/seventh century CE and today.

Mahdist sectarian writers do not definitely identify any of these political categories with actual historical polities, however, other than to agree that the current age is the penultimate one in history, that of tyrannical rulers. This makes sense, considering that all these writers anticipate the Mahdi’s imminent appearance to usher in the final stage of Islamic (and world) rule, the return to the Prophetic-agenda-based caliphate. All modern Arab states, presumably, would be considered illegitimate tyrannies, since none of them adheres to a

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124 Al-Shawkî, pp. 103ff.
Prophetic-style administration as did the Râshidûn, the four immediate post-Prophet rightly-guided caliphs. It can be safely extrapolated, then, that the Umayyads, `Abbâsids and later ruling dynasties would be subsumed under the rubric of amirs, kings or substitute sovereigns. Based on the positive views of the Ottoman Empire expressed by some Mahdist sectarians—that Istanbul was the seat of a legitimate caliphate and that, for all its faults, under the Ottoman Empire Muslims were at least “awake” and conquering\footnote{126}—it seems that within the modern Mahdist ranks, at least, Ottoman rule is thought to constitute the end of the reign of kings or substitute sovereigns, not the onset of the tyrant phase.

In Mahdist sectarian thought, then, the Ottoman Empire and its caliphate loomed large in history and in the Muslim psyche until, undermined by the Iranians, it was finally toppled by the Western powers and their “agent of colonialism,” the “crypto-Jew” Atatürk, with assistance from the Masonic order.\footnote{127} If Constantinople—the name used in the hadîth and sporadically by the Ottomans themselves—is to return to true Muslim hands in the future, in

\begin{footnotes}
\footnotetext[125]{Al-Faqîr, Al-hâshimi al-muntazar; p. 33 and Thalathah yantazuruhum, pp. 22-30.}
\footnotetext[126]{Al-Dîn, pp. 60-61; Sâlim, pp. 12, 118ff; al-Bustawî, volume I, pp. 107ff.}
\footnotetext[127]{Such ideas may derive, at least in part, from Sayyid Qutb (d. 1966), the Egyptian fundamentalist reformer. See Emmanuel Sivan, \textit{Radical Islam. Medieval Theology and Modern Politics} (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1985), esp. pp. 56ff, and Ahmad S. Moussali, \textit{Radical Islamic Fundamentalism: The Ideological and Political Discourse of Sayyid Qutb} (Beirut: American University of Beirut, 1992). The most relevant primary sources from Sayyid Qutb would seem to be his \textit{Dirâsât Islâmiyah} (Beirut: Dâr Shurûq, 1982), \textit{Fi taʾrikh...fikrah wa-minhâj} (Jeddah: al-Dâr al-Sa`udîyah lil-Nashr, 1967), and \textit{Ma`âlim fî al-tariq} (Cairo: Dâr al-Shurûq, 1977).}
\end{footnotes}
accordance with the several ḥadīths alluding to its capture, it must first be reconquered by al-Rûm, which here refers to the Europeans and Americans. This long process of the West’s return to the old Byzantine capital began its final phase on Cyprus—presumably in 1974, when the Greek-speaking portion of the island tried to merge with Greece, precipitating the Turkish invasion—and continued with the 1995 and 1996 Turkish-Israeli joint security agreements, the Russian extremist Vladimir Zhirinovsky’s demagogic assertions during the early 1990s that all Russia’s problems began when the Ottoman Turks took Constantinople in 1453, and Orthodox Patriarch Bartholomew’s visit to America, also in the 1990s.128

Most Mahdist apologists would agree that the Muslim world has been in a state of angst and torpor for years. This sorry state, the only real solution for which is the coming of the Mahdi, came upon the Muslim world over the past 500 years, largely at the hands of the West. While the Ottoman Empire existed there was at least some secular—and, with its caliphate, no small degree of religious—hope for Muslims. But with the Empire’s downfall things have deteriorated steadily for the past seventy-five years, at least in the pro-Mahdist view. Ostensibly Muslim leaders, really mere kings and tyrants, oppress their own people. In fact the current era is the blackest time in Islamic history, with

128 Sâlim, pp. 125ff. According to the Office of the Greek Orthodox Archbishop of North and South America in New York City, Bartholomew did not visit the United States as Ecumenical Patriarch until 1997, although he did travel here officially as Metropolitan several times in the early 1990s.
the awtân or “homelands” sundered, their resources plundered and Muslims everywhere bereft of their own history, which has been appropriated by others and given an alien tone of `unsurîyah, “racism” or “nationalism,” in which Islam and its heroes are subordinated to national identity. And rather than fighting to change this state of decay the vast majority of Muslims are slumbering through it. When they are awake they live heedless of God, just as in the prophet Noah’s time. Only the Mahdi can and will motivate the people of the ummah to throw off this angst and arise from their lassitude.

But the sleepers will not awaken, and the tyrannical rulers will not surrender their power, until the ummah suffers through a number of fitan, a term normally translated as “strifes,” “civil wars,” or, collectively, “social upheaval,” although it can also refer to “enticements,” “temptations,” “dissensions,” “trials” and the like. As with the other conceptualizations in the Mahdist expressive literature, there are several variations on a common theme. Drawing on hadîth, the model usually includes four fitan and perhaps some additional “major” crises. One paradigm identifies them as 1) fitnah al-aḥlās, the “dissension of pleasure,” 2) fitnah al-sarrā’, the “dissension of prosperity,” 3)

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129 This idea may reflect the influence of Edward Said’s seminal work Orientalism (New York: Random House, 1978), which discusses this very concept at length.

130 This grievance is clearly a pan-Islamic critique of pan-Arabism, pan-Turkism, etc.

131 Al-Jamal, pp. 10, 19; al-Shawkî, pp 120ff; al-Faqîr, Al-hâshimî al-muntazâr, pp. 5-6 and Thalathah yantâzuruhum, pp. 5ff; Sâlim, pp. 5-8; al-Gharaybî, pp. 51, 152ff; al-Hâshimî, Al-mahdi wa-al-masîh, pp. 52ff.
fitnah al-dahîmah, the “dissension of the masses” and 4) an unnamed inter-Arab strife. The first three fitan have also been construed in the following fashion: the first one of blood, the Iran-Iraq War of 1980-88; the second one of blood and wealth, the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait in 1990 and the subsequent Gulf War of 1991; and the third one of blood, wealth and differences, which will occur in the near future when Iran attacks the eastern Gulf states for not accepting their Twelfth Imâm, who by then will have, according to the Shi``a, reappeared on earth. The fourth fitnah is seen not as an inter-Arab conflict but rather as the attack of the West on Muslims—nuclear Armageddon or al-malâhîm, the “massacres” of Muslims by the West.

An elaborate chronology has been worked out for the unfolding of this fourth fitnah. Al-Aqsa will be destroyed, presumably by the Israelis, so that they can rebuild the Temple of Solomon upon that site. The West will send armies into Jordan and Palestine and surround Jerusalem, protecting “the Jews.” Al-Sufyânî will emerge as an Arab leader in Jordan and receive Western assistance. He will be opposed by an Iraqi leader named Ḥasan or Ḥusayn, but al-Sufyânî will defeat him and conquer Iraq. Simultaneously, in Palestine al-Abqa`, or Yâsir` Arafât, and his forces will battle the followers of Ahmad Yâsîn, also called al-mushawwah, the “disfigured”—the paralyzed, blind leader of the Palestinian group Ḥamâs. Al-Sufyânî will defeat whoever wins this internecine battle and

become the de facto ruler of most Muslims in the Middle East. The Mahdi will emerge sometime during this strife and receive assistance from an African ruler, possibly President `Umar al-Bashîr of Sudan. While the Arabs are thus occupied Iran will conquer Bahrain and much of the eastern Gulf region and then will launch nuclear-tipped missiles at the Vatican. In retaliation an American nuclear strike will destroy much of Iran, after which al-Masîḥ al-Dajjâl, Iran’s president Muḥammad Khatamî, will declare himself openly. Jesus will descend soon after and destroy this Dajjâl at approximately the same time that the Mahdi and the army which he has rallied will defeat al-Sufyânî and his forces.¹³⁴

Two contradictory attitudes regarding Iran and its post-1979 Islamic Republic exist side-by-side in the minds of Sunni Mahdist sectarians. Iran’s revolution can be seen as necessary to save a Muslim country from the nefarious influence of “Jews and foreigners” and *in toto* probably a positive for the Islamic world insofar as the West fears it.¹³⁵ But it can also be depicted as evil in two respects: first, tactically, to the extent that this revolution’s influence purportedly led to the 1979 attack of the false mahdi (al-`Utaybi) on the Ka`bah; and second, strategically, insofar as the Iranians have been assailing the Sunni world since at least the early sixteenth century, when the Shi`ite Safavid dynasty took over Iran and began its lengthy rivalry with the Sunni Ottomans. All of these

¹³³ Sâlim, pp. 93-98; al-Dîn, pp. 21-26.

¹³⁴ *Ibid.*, pp. 110-151. This detailed scenario was supposed to have unfolded in 1999 and 2000.

Persian assaults have been the covert handiwork of the Dajjâl, who will finally step out from behind the curtain in Tehran in the near future.\textsuperscript{136}

There is a great deal of eschatological prognostication in the pro-Mahdist sectarian expressive literature, not all of which deals with fitan. This End Time forecasting can be seen as having two aspects: setting times and dates, on the one hand, and foretelling future events concerning the Mahdi and his eschatological ilk, on the other. Not every Mahdist apologist takes on both of these tasks. Furthermore, the writers differ in the degree of specificity with which they attempt to invest their predictions. One can be definite about times and dates and indefinite about events. Or one can be vague about both chronology and circumstances. And one can be uncertain about times but unambiguous about eschatological happenings.

The simplest way for Mahdist sectarian authors to deal with End Time chronology is to aver that God alone knows; this is on good authority, as both the prophets Jesus and Muḥammad said the same.\textsuperscript{137} Another related approach to the timing of events is to claim that these occurrences will commence "soon," and/or that the time in which we live generally fits the prophetic description of the time right before the onset of the eschaton: war and rumor of war, earthquakes, oppression, tyranny, dictatorship, aggression, corruption,

\footnote{\textsuperscript{136} Sâlim, pp. 12-14, 113-114.}

\footnote{\textsuperscript{137} Al-Hâshîmî, \textit{Al-mâhdî wa-al-mâsîḥî}, p. 93.}
immorality, deviance, deceit and inter-Muslim strife between unidentified “petty states”\textsuperscript{138}—the fulfillment of most, if not all, of the minor signs.\textsuperscript{139}

One way to be more specific about chronology, and somewhat more specific about events, is to give the anticipated order in which events will occur without necessarily providing a plethora of exact dates. For example, consider this prognosticatory scenario. At some point in the not-too-distant future al-Rûm and Muslims will do battle. In the first phase the Americans and Europeans will defeat al-Sufyânî in Syria—perhaps after having repudiated an alliance with him—then best al-Abqa` in Egypt, al-Ashâb in Arabia and one al-Kundî, another (unidentified) Muslim leader, in the Maghrib. Then after honoring a truce with the Mahdi’s forces for a short while, the West will attack him with 960,000 men but be defeated by his 70,000. The army of the Mahdi will then move on to conquer “Constantinople” and Rome and will find the Ark of the Covenant sequestered in St. Peter’s Basilica.\textsuperscript{140}

Of course a Mahdist apologist can wax eloquent and meticulous about both dates and events. One chronology has events occurring in this order: 1) Jesus descends in 2001 CE, about the time the Dajjâl emerges; 2) Armageddon erupts no later than 2010 CE, involving the West and the Muslims allied against

\textsuperscript{138} Al-Jamal, p. 17; al-Shawkhî, pp. 120ff, 151; al-Faqîr, Al-hâshîmî al-muntażar, pp. 16-19, 23-59; al-Gharaybî, pp. 101ff.

\textsuperscript{139} As indicated by the title of Hijâzî’s \textit{But, Some of Its Signs Have Already Come!}

\textsuperscript{140} Al-Faqîr, Thalathah yantâzurehum, pp. 36-42, 52-74.
either the Communists or Shi`ites; 3) the Mahdi emerges; 4) al-Sufyânî enters
the historical scene, to be defeated by the Mahdi and 5) world war breaks out
between the Mahdi-led Muslims and the West, fought on horseback with swords
because the earlier nuclear Armageddon will have destroyed more advanced
weaponry.  

Finally, in terms of predicting eschatological events and their dates, one
can differentiate between the Hour of Judgment, which only God knows, and the
penultimate End Times, which will occur in the normal realm of space-time and
which therefore can be calculated. Elaborate webs of computation can be spun
in this regard. Since the world will last 7,000 years total, and Adam came to
earth on a Friday in 4990 BCE, the world must end no later than 2010 CE. There
are 63 years between the re-creation of Israel in 1947 CE (dating from the 1947
United Nations partition rather than the 1948 declaration of statehood) and
Jesus’ return, thus making the end in 2010 CE. The ummah will last 1400 years,
and Jesus ascended at age 33, and Israel was re-founded in 1367 AH. Since
Jesus will die at age 40, that would, alternatively, make the date of the end 2007
CE. Other formulae include the Prophet’s date of birth plus the date the
ummah’s span ends (570 CE + 1430 AH = 2000 CE); the date of the Prophet’s
death plus the date of Jerusalem’s occupation (633 CE + 1367 AH = 2000
CE); the year of Jesus’ ascension plus the year of Jerusalem’s occupation (33 CE

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141 Al-Dîn, pp. 20; 34ff; 95-104.
The Mahdist sectarians who strive for this degree of prognosticatory precision obviously find it convenient to conflate the Christian/Common Era calendar with that employed by Muslims.\textsuperscript{143}

According to one strain of Mahdist sectarian thought, soon the Jews will rebuild their Temple, with the West's acquiescence and assistance since Protestants, quite influential in the United States, hope there to hasten Jesus' return and Jews wish to spur their Messiah to come. Syria will be the center of "Islamic resistance" to Israel and the West and for that reason they are already attempting to surround it via alliances with Turkey, Jordan, Egypt and Israel. After the Temple's rebuilding Jesus was to have descended in 2000 CE upon that white minaret in Damascus. The Mahdi, according to this scenario, was to have revealed himself on 25 Muharram 1420 AH/1999 CE, right after the "Magian fire," a nuclear attack on the Gulf states ordered by the Iranian Dajjâl, which was to have been followed by the same sort of attack on Rome and then a retaliatory American nuclear strike on Iran. World-wide nuclear holocaust would have been averted only by Jesus' killing of the Dajjâl and al-Mæhdi's defeat of al-Sufyânî,\textsuperscript{144} although the "red death" of war, specifically "stairs falling from the

\textsuperscript{142} Traditionally the Prophet's death is said to have been in 632, however.

\textsuperscript{143} Sâlim, pp. 71ff and al-Dîn, pp. 24ff, esp., engage in such detailed prognocostication.

\textsuperscript{144} Sâlim, pp. 44-151.
sky,” or nuclear weapons,\textsuperscript{145} in tandem with the “white death” of plague—perhaps biological warfare—was to have already killed much of the earth’s population. Once this violence abates, with the death of the Dajjâl and al-Sufyânî, the Mahdi and Jesus will commence the establishment of Jesus’ *malakût Allah*, the “kingdom of God,” which is the same as the Mahdi’s *dawlat Allah*, or “godly state.” Only those who are child-like, poor, adherents of the Law, weak and more pious than the modern-day Pharisees, the ‘ulamâ’, may enter it. Criminals, adulterers, and murderers need not seek admission.\textsuperscript{146} This will be a golden age, ruled jointly by the benevolent duarchy of Jesus and the Mahdi until each of them dies a natural death. Then, at some point in the future beyond the demise of Jesus and the Mahdi, the trumpets of death, resurrection and judgment will blow—but that phase of Islamic eschatology is outside the purview of this study.

VI. Conclusion

In terms of their stated goals, modern Mahdist apologetics range from the ambitious (attempting to determine exactly when the Mahdi is coming\textsuperscript{147}) to

\textsuperscript{145} This strongly echoes Revelation 8:10-11, “a great star, blazing like a torch, fell from the sky on a third of the rivers and on the springs of water—the name of the star is Wormwood. A third of the waters turned bitter, and many people died...,” and Revelation 9:1ff, “I saw a star that had fallen from the sky to the earth....” The Qur’ânic equivalents are not so obvious, in that they do not describe “stars falling to earth,” but nonetheless they do speak of the sky being rent asunder. See esp. al-Furqân [25]: 22ff, al-Ma`ârij [70]: 7ff, al-Muzammil [73]:12ff, al-Mursalât [77]:2ff and al-Infiṭâr [82]:1ff.

\textsuperscript{146} Al-Hâshimî, *Al-mahdi wa-al-masîh*, pp. 30-69.

\textsuperscript{147} Al-Dîn.
the prudent (the eschatological Mahdi is true but requires more study and extreme caution in identifying anyone as he should be taken). And of course there are many permutations in-between: to refute lies, rekindle right belief and help reestablish the *shari'ah* to reinforce the importance of the Awaited Mahdi and to buoy Muslim spirits; to awaken apathetic Muslims; to vindicate the Hidden Imām as Mahdi; and to demonstrate the prophecy about the Mahdi and his caliphate in the Gospels.

Most of the examples of Mahdist sectarian expressive literature analyzed in this chapter fall under the category, adumbrated in chapter one, of works of *hadîth literalists*. Al-Bustawî, al-Dîn, al-Faqîr, al-Gharaybî, al-Hâshimî, al-Jamal, Sâlim and al-Shawkhî all acknowledge, to one degree or another, that the promise of the eschatological Mahdi is absent from the pages of the Qur'ān, yet adduce ḥadîths and corroborating Muslim scholars to support their belief in the impending future historicity of this figure. Furthermore, all of these Mahdist sectarians endeavor to determine the approximate, if not the exact, dates and

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148 Al-Shawkhî.

149 Al-Bustawî, both volumes.

150 Al-Jamal.

151 Al-Faqîr, both books.

152 Sâlim.

153 Al-Gharaybî.

154 Al-Hâshimî, both books.
times of the appearance of the Mahdi and related eschatological figures by reading them into the current global socioeconomic, political and religious scene.

Two other Mahdist sectarian authors would seem to fall into the category of **Pro-Mahdist Figurativists**. Jabr\textsuperscript{155} and Kâmîl Sa`fân\textsuperscript{156} accept the reality of the Mahdi, Jesus, the Dajjâl, the Dabbâh, Gog and Magog and the sun rising in the West, yet to a certain extent allegorize them. Both authors use the term *ramzîyah*, “symbolism,” to describe what they consider a valid approach to these major Islamic eschatological signs and personalities. For example, Gog and Magog may (simply) refer to the evils which God will visit upon all humans in the last days, or—more perniciously—they may refer to “the Jews.”\textsuperscript{157} Likewise, in a more elaborate allegorical scheme, the following elucidations are advanced: Gog and Magog signify disease attacking the body, which can be conquered only by Jesus; both the Dajjâl and the sun’s rising in the West correspond to death; the Dabbâh is a symbol of the slamming shut of the door of repentance; the Mahdi stands for the struggle between the bestial nature and the spiritual one; and Jesus embodies simultaneously both the awareness of death and the secret of life.\textsuperscript{158} Thus, these authors do not reject the major End Time figures out of hand as superstition or a means for Muslim elites to control the masses; but

\textsuperscript{155} Ashrât al-sâ`ah wa-`asrarhâ.

\textsuperscript{156} Al-sâ`ah al-khâmisah wa-al-`ishrûn, passim.


\textsuperscript{158} Jabr, pp. 133ff.
neither do they necessarily accept their future historicity, in contrast to the Mahdist Hadîth Literalists.

The overall apologetic approach of the Mahdist sectarian writers surveyed here can be broken down into a six-part paradigm:

1) cite supporting ḥadîths;
2) adduce supporting ʿulamâʿ and scholars;
3) refute opponents’ objections, extant and anticipated;
4) malign the Shiʿî Mahdist position as misguided;
5) dismiss all previous Mahdist claimants as false or deluded; and
6) modernize eschatological figures by attempting to fit them into current socioeconomic and political contexts.\(^{159}\)

This modern Mahdist methodology can, in turn, can be compared and contrasted with the approach employed by the last successful Mahdi in the Sunnî world, nineteenth-century Sudan’s Muḥammad Aḥmad, who took the following steps:\(^{160}\)

1) gather followers and issue a daʿwah, or “summons;”
2) perform a hijrah, or “flight,” in imitation of the Prophet;
3) engage religious opponents in a propaganda war on four fronts:
   a) denigrate them;
   b) employ naskh, or “abrogation,” of unfitting ḥadîths;
   c) adduce revelations as proof of legitimacy;
   d) accentuate need for change of political regime;
4) engage political opponents in armed struggle; and
5) succeed.

The post-1967 sect of the Mahdi has so far taken on only the third step in Muḥammad Aḥmad’s strategic plan: engaging religious opponents in a war of words. And even in this respect they differ greatly from the Sudanese Mahdi on

\(^{159}\) In a Christian context this is sometimes referred to as “newspaper exegesis.”
several points. They are arguing for a future, as-yet-undisclosed Mahdi, not for any positively-identified individual, much less any one of themselves. Today's Mahdist proponents do not, of course, claim direct revelations of/from the Prophet or from any other source. Neither do they formally utilize the abrogation of unsuitable traditions, since there is no extant Mahdi against which to measure them. They obliquely, but not openly, criticize existing Islamic ruling regimes by lumping them under the rubric of tyrants. And Mahdist sectarians do denigrate those opposed to the idea of the Mahdi but, again, in terms of the doctrine, not on the grounds of whether any particular human fits the description of the Mahdi.

In the first chapter of this dissertation, one of the seminal works cited on Mahdism was that of Jan-Olaf Blichfeldt. He delineated an incisive paradigm for analyzing the three stages of Mahdist movements across space and time:

1) revivalist propaganda aimed at undermining a regime;
2) formation of a renegade "military theocracy" and attempts to seize power; and
3) conquest/formation of a territorial state which eventually wanes in ideological fervor.

By the terms of this model, Muḥammad Aḥmad’s Sudanese Mahdīyah discussed in chapter three and the major preceding Mahdist movements discussed in chapter one—the ‘Abbāsids, Fāṭimids and Muwaḥḥīds—all achieved stage three. In contrast, the modern Mahdist sect, at least in the Sunnī Arab world and

See chapter three, above.
insofar as the expressive literature surveyed here indicates, is still at stage one: composing and disseminating pro-Mahdist propaganda from the socio-political, if not the geographical, peripheries.

In the following chapter, an analysis of the anti-Mahdist group at which this rhetoric is directed, as well as of its members' viewpoints, will be undertaken. The concluding chapter will offer an examination of modern Mahdism in overall historical perspective, including a scrutiny of Juhaymân al-`Utaybî's abortive Mahdist movement of 1979 in Sa`ûdî Arabia, the only such Mahdist manifestation within the Sunnî Arab world to reach Blichfeldt's stage two in modern times.
It is characteristic of Islamic society that social, economic, and political questions often take on the guise of religious problems and are fought out using the rhetoric of religion.¹

I. Introduction

What was true for the Ottoman Empire, according to Norman Itzkowitz, is also true for its Arab successor states today, at least insofar as the argument about the Mahdi is concerned. In this chapter the salient points are the discourse, methodology and line(s) of attack directed at the sect of the Mahdi, a minority within Sunnî Arab Islam, by those active Mahdist skeptics and outright rejectionists, an even smaller subsect within the Muslim world.

II. Publication Data and Discourse

Arabic-language works aimed at refuting the future historicity of the Mahdi are not as numerous as those penned by the Mahdist sectarians, but enough exist to corroborate further the seriousness of Mahdism in the modern Sunnî Arab world. If Mahdism were not resonating with at least some Sunnî Arab Muslims, why would certain of the Arab elite take it upon themselves to attempt to refute Mahdist apologetics? The present examination of Mahdist cynicism


As with the Mahdist supporters’ works, all are written in al-fuṣâ` and their audience is thus, presumably, the educated Arabic-speaking/reading individual. Four of the volumes were published in Egypt: three in Cairo—one of the centers of the Arab publishing world—and one in Alexandria. The other two
were published on opposite ends of the Arab world: one in Algeria and one in Qatar. None was printed in an Arab country with a substantial Shi’î minority.

This fact takes on potential significance when we consider that, in contrast, five of the thirteen pro-Mahdist works surveyed here were published in Arab countries with substantial Shi‘ite populations: four in Lebanon (Beirut), one in Dubai. This could possibly suggest that supporters of the Mahdist idea find it easiest to publish their works in Arab countries with substantial Shi‘ite populations. Beirut is one of the major centers of book publishing in the Arab world, in any case.

Dates of publication are similarly skewed. Five of the six anti-Mahdist books analyzed in this chapter were published in the 1980s, only one in the 1990s. In contrast, only three of the Mahdist works were published in the 1980s while ten were published in the 1990s. Perhaps the Iranian revolution of 1979, which inspired some of the Ayatollah Khomeini’s followers to claim that he was the no-longer-Hidden Imâm, and the abortive Mahdist revolution of Juhaymân al-`Utaybî in Saudi Arabia the same year, sent opponents of Mahdism scrambling for their pens and typewriters to avert what they saw as a disturbing trend in

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3 According to The Middle East and North Africa 2000, p. 1178, Dubai, one of the United Arab Emirates, is 16% Shi’î.
Islam. By the same token, Mahdist writings may have been spurred by the Kuwaiti crisis and Gulf War of 1990-91 and the Palestinian-Israeli Accord of 1993, in particular, and the imminence of the new millennium, in general tenor.

The discourse employed by anti-Mahdists is more varied and polemical than that of their antagonists. We have already discussed, in chapter four, four of the usual terms applied to the Mahdi concept by those who reject the idea, at least according to the Mahdist sectarians: khurâfâh, “superstition;” uṣṭûrah, “fable;” takhayyul, “fantasy” and waḥm, “delusion.” In the works at hand the rejectionists deploy such negative terminology against Mahdism on three fronts: 1) the provenance of the idea itself and those who disseminate it; 2) the Mahdist sect’s alleged misuse of hadîth for propaganda purposes; and finally, 3) the negative product of Mahdist movements throughout history.

Besides the aforementioned four terms, a plethora of equally derogatory terms is applied to the very idea of the Mahdi. It is called khurâfâh siyâsîyah irhâbîyah, “terroristic political superstition;” nazarîyah khurâfîyah, “superstitious theory;” qadîyah ghaybîyah, a “transcendental/hidden matter”; wad’ al-qassâs, “the invention of fiction writers;” tadiîl, “misguidance;” shirk, “polytheism;”

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4 Especially insofar as writers of this ilk identify such events as Dajjâl-hatched disasters for the ummah, requiring the Mahdi’s intervention. See Cook, “Muslim Fears of the Year 2000,” MEQ, pp. 55-58.

5 Al-Mahmûd, pp. 16-20, 51ff and passim.

6 Muḥammad, passim.

7 al-Khatib, pp. 133ff.
and 'amaliyah al-islâh al-nihâ', "the ultimate reform movement."\(^8\) The term qaḍiyyah ghaybiyyah may be a double entendre insult aimed at the presumed Shīʿī origins of Mahdism. If the modifier "ghaybiyyah" is taken to mean "transcendental," it might simply refer to the otherworldly aspect of Mahdism; but if it is intended in the alternate sense of "hidden," there is an implication of Shīʿism.

Less tendentiously, Mahdism is also identified as a modern 'aqīdah, "doctrine" or "ideology," which when it triumphs is heralded as thawrah, "revolution," but when it fails is dismissed as fitnah, "rebellion,\(^9\) or a variation thereon: ta'amur, "conspiracy;" inqilāb, "coup d'état;" ʿīṣyān, "rebellion;" shaghab, "riot;" tamarrud, "insurrection;" or thawrat qaṣr, "palace revolution.\(^10\)

The gravamen of the anti-Mahdists' brief is found in their savage criticism of allegedly Mahdist hadîth, which—according to the Mahdist sectarians' preemptive argumentation—are broadly categorized as waḍ, "invented;" tazwîr, "forged;" and/or tâdîs, "fraudulent." In their actual works the Mahdist critics employ several additional disparaging terms for the traditions adduced by Mahdists: sināʾah, "manufactured;"\(^11\) al-ḥâdîth al-mazlûmah, "iniquitous

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\(^8\)ʿAtâ, pp. 70ff.


\(^10\) Hijâb, pp. 7ff, 112ff.

\(^11\) Al-Maṭmûd, *passim.*
hadîth;" *mulaffaq*, "concocted" in terms of their matns, or texts; *majhûl*, "anonymous" and/or *mujarradan*, "denuded," both of which are in reference to their isnâds, or chains of authority.\(^\text{12}\)

Besides utilizing disparaging labels for the very idea of the Mahdi and for the traditions which purportedly substantiate it, rejectionists endeavor to tar past Mahdist claimants and their supporters with much the same derogatory brush. They are branded *ahl al-bad`,* "people of innovation;" *ahl al-da `wah*, "people of propaganda;" and *ahl al-zayg*, "people of deviation."\(^\text{13}\) *Mugâlah*, "extravagance" or "excess," especially among the Shî`a and sufis, is said to be the source of such ridiculous ideas and thus of the *ad `îyâ*, "impostors" or "braggarts" across the span of Islamic history who have deluded themselves—and others—into thinking they are mahdis.\(^\text{14}\) Also, the sects of Islam which propagate such ideas are scorned as *jamâ `at ilhâdiyâh*, "heretical groups."\(^\text{15}\)

Finally, in terms of discourse, the Mahdi's detractors ascribe the use of several other terms for the primary Islamic eschatological figure to his defenders, in addition to the ones already noted: *al-qâ`îm*, "the firm/established/[one] in charge;" *al-qâ`îm al-muntazar*, "the awaited [one] in charge;" *al-ghâ`îb al-muntazar*, "the awaited hidden [one];" *al-imâm al-mukhtarî*, "the concealed

\(^{12}\) Mu`jammad, *passim.*

\(^{13}\) Al-Ma`âmûd, *passim.*

\(^{14}\) Al-Khâtib, *passim.*

\(^{15}\) Atâ, pp. 10ff.
imam;” and *al-insân al-kâmîl*, “the perfect man,” the sufi concept of the Prophet Muhammad as an archetype for humanity. The first four of these terms are primarily Shi‘î ones and the last is almost exclusively sufi. Anti-Mahdists, being more interested in tarring any and all of the cognate terms for the Mahdi with the same extra-Qur’ânic, metaphysical brush, do not hesitate to lump them all together, however.

The attempt by opponents of the Mahdist sect to extirpate Mahdism from Islamic thought is first and foremost dependent upon killing the idea’s roots. This means that any and all sources, either non-Muslim or Muslim, which are employed to corroborate, and ultimately to predict, the Mahdi are subjected to survey, maligning and, thereby, refutation.

**III. Critiquing the Provenance: The Sources of Mahdism**

Before critiquing the alleged Islamic foundations of the Mahdi concept, anti-Mahdists seek to undermine the concept by adducing plausible cognate ideas from the pre-Islamic period in the Middle East.

Some anti-Mahdists trace the provenance of the Mahdi concept to the hoary pre-Jewish and -Christian idea of the dying and reappearing god/deliverer which has always been so prevalent in the ancient Near East: the dying and reborn Sumerian fertility goddess Inanna, more familiar as Ishtar, a female deity

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16 Hijâb, pp. 11-16.

of the Akkadians;\(^{18}\) the sleeping Hittite son of the weather god, Telipinu,\(^{19}\) awakened each spring by bees; the "Babylonian"—actually Akkadian—king Sargon (d. 2316 BCE), said to be slated to return;\(^{20}\) Mani (d. 277 CE), the Persian prophet who synergistically combined Zoroastrianism, Christianity and Buddhism;\(^{21}\) the Persian Sasanian dynasty's (226-634 CE) presumed expectation of the return of their eponymous founder; and various and sundry Zoroastrian cults that survived into Muslim times.\(^{22}\)

Mahdism is also said to derive from Jewish religious thought. Some of the specific messianic references cited by the anti-Mahdists as proof of Jewish provenance for the Mahdi are those of:

*Isaiah 2:4b: "They will beat their swords into plowshares and their spears into pruning hooks. Nation will not take up sword against nation, nor will they train for war anymore."
*Micah 5:2: "But you, Bethlehem Ephrathah, though you are small among the clans of Judah, out of you will come for me one who will be ruler over Israel."
*Zechariah 10:4: "From Judah will come the cornerstone, from him the tent peg, from him the battle bow, from him every ruler."

Taken together, these passages foretell a mukhallis, or "deliverer," who will engender amity, establish just law and improve the masses' economic plight.

\(^{18}\) Merriam-Webster's Encyclopedia of World Religions [MWEWR], "Ishtar," p. 512.

\(^{19}\) Ibid., "Anatolian Religions," pp. 49-53.


\(^{22}\) Hijab, pp. 17-26; al-Khâtib, pp. 33. See the discussion of this point and the relevant sources in chapter two, above, as well as MWEWR, "Zoroaster," pp. 1164-1165 and "Zoroastrianism," pp. 1165-1166.
But, in the anti-Mahdist mindset, the Jews failed to recognize and acknowledge as messiah Jesus, who could have fulfilled these aspirations but did not meet their political expectations, as well as the Prophet Muḥammad, whose transnational “psychological brotherhood” undercut the Jewish “Chosen People” concept.  

Other Mahdist skeptics attribute the origins of Mahdism to the Christians’ expectation of the return of Jesus, whom they wrongly regard as a crucified and resurrected messiah. The aforementioned ḥadīth that “there is no mahdi except Jesus son of Mary” is usually the starting point for this line of attack. However, corroborating Christian scriptural references are also cited in this context, such as the gospels of Matthew and Luke, presumably Matthew 24, 25 and Luke 12, which contain Jesus’ warnings to his disciples about the signs of the End; and several Pauline epistles unspecified by the anti-Mahdists, seemingly I and II Thessalonians, Paul’s only explicit eschatological letters. Both Mahdist sectarians and their opponents surveyed here exhibit a degree of imprecision in their citations of Jewish and Christian scriptures. Often the exact verse references given for a particular Biblical book are inaccurate, and it becomes

\[\text{\textsuperscript{23}}\text{Atâ, pp. 19-21.}\]

\[\text{\textsuperscript{24}}\text{For a discussion of the differences between “messiah” in Christianity and “masîḥ” in Islam, see above, chapter two.}\]

\[\text{\textsuperscript{25}}\text{Atâ, pp. 21-22; Hijâb, p. 22.}\]
necessary to hunt within a particular chapter for what appear to be the relevant verses.

In any event, Mahdist adversaries also maintain that the importance of Jesus' second coming waxes and wanes in Christian history but that it is currently of overwhelming interest among Western Protestants, presumably because of the influence of the coming of the new millennium. It is worthy of note that Mahdist antagonists do not cite the Mahdist sectarians' reliance upon such Christian sources as yet more evidence of how far these Muslims have gone astray. Yet a reference to the publication dates of the sources on both sides of the Mahdist debate will help explain why: many Mahdist sectarian writings which do adduce Biblical citations were published in the 1990s, after those opposed to Mahdism had already authored and disseminated their opinions.

A number of other non-Muslim sources are adduced as possible sources of Mahdism, in a general sense, such as the Hindu belief in the return of Vishnu at the end of every age to participate in the destruction and resumption of the universe, part of the Hindu cyclical view of history, or the alleged expectation among some in Mongolia that Genghis Khan will rise again. But in general skeptics of Mahdism trace the roots of this pernicious doctrine to Near Eastern antecedents. However, two other sources for Mahdism are also adduced: the

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27 On Genghis Khan as not just a messianic figure but a deity, see Klaus Sagaster, "Chinggis Khan," and Walter Heissig, "Mongol Religions," both in *The Encyclopedia of Religion.*
Platonic idea of the philosopher king, incorporated into Islam by the great faylasūf, or “philosopher,” Abū Naṣr al-Fārābī (d. 950 CE); and that of the prince, amīr in Arabic, which was expounded by the Italian political philosopher Niccolò Machiavelli (d. 1527 CE). According to this explanatory schema, these two concepts were fused with that of the ancient Near Eastern deliverer to create the idea of the Mahdi familiar to many adherents of modern Sunnī Islam. And some Mahdist foes even argue that current works positing nihāyat al-ta’rîkh, “the end of history,” contribute to Mahdism by enticing a number of misguided ‘ulamâ’ to look for the imminent end of the world.

Of course, most denouncers of the Mahdi idea find pre-Muslim sources necessary but not sufficient to explain (away) Mahdism. Its true origins rather are said to lie in the internecine Islamic rivalries among Khârijîs, Shî’îs and Sunnîs, to which sufis later contributed. The most dispassionate anti-Mahdist view is that Mahdism arose in the late seventh/early eighth century CE-context that found critics of the Umayyads, and eventually even of their successors the ‘Abbâsids, lacking any real alternative means for expressing displeasure with their rulers. According to opponents of Mahdism, the ‘Abbâsids exploited the


29 Hijâb, pp. 23ff.


31 Al-Khâtib, pp. 15ff; Atâ, pp. 19-27.
yearning for the Mahdi, and of the Persians in the empire for more recognition and power, in order to topple the Umayyads. This is of course a one-dimensional, largely discredited view of the 'Abbâsids, whose movement in reality reflected several complex ethnic, religious, socioeconomic and political tensions within the second/eighth-century Islamic world.

Once they had been supplanted the Umayyads and their supporters themselves began to take solace in a mahdist figure from the Umayyad lineage, al-Sufyânî. But in general it is argued by Mahdism’s skeptics that the idea of the Mahdi first manifested itself among those who had “suffered political defeat”—the 'Alid loyalist groups that would eventually coalesce into the Shî‘a. Thus Mahdism took, according to the modern anti-Mahdists surveyed herein, the following route into mainstream Sunnism: after becoming institutionalized among the Shî‘a, the pernicious innovation was then picked up by many of the mystical sufi orders as they spread throughout the Islamic world; from the sufi orders, in turn, belief in the Mahdi eventually diffused into Sunnî Islam.

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32 Hijâb, p. 107.


34 Hijâb, pp. 47-52.

35 Al-Khâtib, *passim;* Atâ, pp. 64ff; Muhammad, pp. 79ff; Al-Mahmûd, pp. 3-5, 6ff.
Mahdist antagonists therefore see Mahdism as having traveled in this direction: Shî'ism > sufism > Sunnism. While the relationship between sufism and Shî'ism in the first few centuries of Islam is still a matter of debate, it does seem clear that after the Mongol invasions of the Islamic world in the thirteenth century CE, sufis and Shî'îs, particularly in Persia, began to incorporate one another’s ideas and practices, with the latter particularly finding Ibn `Arabi’s ideas attractive.36

Whether the concept of the Mahdi spread from the Shî’a, with their twelve imâms, into sufism or from the latter, with their quṭb and al-insân al-kâmîl, into Shî’ism, is a question that may very well never be answered. Nonetheless appellations like these, as well as a number of others primarily deployed by sufis—wâtâd, “tent stake” or “pillar;” badal, or “substitute;” and naqîb, or “leader”37—indicate that, as far as Mahdist opponents are concerned, the mystics of Islam are just as prone to al-mughâlâh, “excess” or “extravagance” regarding their veneration of mystical figures, as are the Shî’a. For example, the five awtâd, plural of wâtad, are sufi “saints” ranking below the quṭb in the mystical hierarchy but outranking both the seven, forty, 112, 269 or 300 abdâl, singular badal, as well as the 300 nuqabâ’, singular naqîb. Such


figures are tantamount to intercessory saints who can be called upon for supernatural assistance.\(^{38}\)

More overtly pretentious terms, such as \textit{qā’im al-zamān al-bāb}, or "the ariser/establisher of time's gate," and \textit{sāḥib al-zamān}, or "the lord of time," are sometimes used by the sufis but are more frequently alternative titles employed by the Shī’a for their imāms, in general, and for the ultimate imām, the Mahdi, in particular.\(^{39}\) In the final analysis, however, the terminology employed by Shī’is and sufis really does not matter, according to those who mock the idea of the Mahdi, because it all amounts to the same thing: fairy tales at best and satanic fantasies at worst.\(^{40}\)

Specific Shī’a sects are sometime singled out for censure in the matter of Mahdism.\(^{41}\) Despite Ibn Taymīyah’s aforementioned admonition that only God knows the exact number of Mahdist claimants and sects, the attempt is sometimes made to enumerate them and their errors. For example, by one mode of reckoning there are twenty-four Shī’a Mahdist groups,\(^{42}\) the most


\(^{39}\) On the various permutations of al-qā’im see Momen, \textit{An Introduction to Shi’i Islam}, pp. 45, 165ff.

\(^{40}\) Hijāb, \textit{passim}; al-Khāṭib, \textit{passim}.

\(^{41}\) Atâ, pp. 27-36.

\(^{42}\) Hijāb, pp. 71-86.
influential of which are said to have been the Fâtimids, Ithnâ’asharîs or Twelvers, the Zaydîs, the Ismâ’îlîs and their offshoot the Druze. This anti-Mahdist typology erroneously treats the Fâtimids and Ismâ’îlîs as completely separate sects, however, when in fact the Fâtimids represented a branch (during their empire the dominant one) of Ismâ’îlism. The Zaydîs trace their descent from a brother of the fourth imam, Zayd b. ‘Alî (d. 740 CE), who eschewed quiescent waiting on the Mahdi in favor of armed rebellion against unjust rulers. They survive now primarily in Yemen. The Druze, named after the Fâtimid missionary Muhammad b. Ismâ’îl al-Darazî (d. 410 AH), consider the Fâtimid caliph al-Ḥâkim (d. 1021 CE) not merely the Imâm or Mahdi but divine. They are a substantial minority today in Lebanon and Israel.

The Fâtimids, in particular, come in for a great deal of anti-Mahdist scorn. They seem to be resented in particular because of their two centuries-long rule of Egypt and subsequent pernicious doctrinal influence upon the larger world of Islam. Tarîkh al-Khulafâ’ [History of the Caliphs] by the Egyptian scholar Jalâl al-Dîn al-Suyûtî (d. 1505 CE) is adduced as a proof of the fallacy of belief in the

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Shi`î Hidden Imam/Mahdi—presumably because of al-Suyûtî's great renown. According to Mahdist dissenters, the Fâtimids—and by extension any groups which claim a mahdi in their midst—are *ipsa facta* illegitimate. Furthermore, goes the criticism, the Fâtimids were not Qurayshî; their founder `Ubayd Allâh (d. 934 CE) was in truth a "Magian," or Zoroastrian, and his kinship line was uncorroborated; and in any event most Fâtimids were *zanâdiqah*, dangerous and heretical "freethinkers"—tantamount to atheists in the modern Arab world. However, in previous centuries *zandaqah* referred to any perceived heresy that threatened a Muslim state and was deployed by different interpretive schools of Islam on a number of fronts against, variously, any impugning of the Prophet, the sufi emphasis on divine love, and the Shi`a schools of thought (by some in the Ottoman Empire).

In fact, according to anti-Mahdists it can be said that the Fâtimids were not even Muslim insofar as they created a new religion via deification of their caliph al-Hâkim and allegedly disparaged Jesus by denying his title of *al-masîh*. The first of these charges is an erroneous conflation of Ismâ`îlî Fâtimid doctrine with that of their offshoot Druze subsect, for actually only the latter regarded al-Hâkim as divine. The second charge seems to be a somewhat garbled anti-

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45 See *History of the Caliphs*, pp. 5, 238ff.
46 Al-Khâtib, pp. 24ff.
47 Al-Mahmûd, p. 19.
48 See Louis Massignon, "Zindik," *Shorter Encyclopedia of Islam* [SEI].
Mahdist interpretation of the Ismāʿīlī doctrine of naṭīq, Arabic plural nuṭaqāʾ, literally "speaker(s)," but meaning "speaker-prophets" in this branch of Shīʿī Islam—one of whom is Jesus.⁴⁹ Since the naṭīqs are subordinate to the qāʿīm, or Mahdi, modern anti-Mahdist writers can plausibly maintain that the Ismāʿīlī Fāṭimids thereby debased Jesus' role and authority and thus, arguably, his title of al-masīḥ, or "the messiah."

Furthermore, the Fāṭimids' heterodox, indeed heretical, tendencies are shown in their conflation of nominally-accepted metaphysical concepts—such as the "perfect man," al-insān al-kāmil—with their own heterodox, or indeed heretical, ones, such as qāʿīm al-zamān al-bāb, "establisher of the gate of time," and qāʿīm al-imām al-muntazar,⁵⁰ "ariser/establisher of the awaited imām"—and the application thereof to their allegedly "divine" caliphs.⁵¹

The primary Shīʿī idea disparaged by the Mahdist scoffers—besides the concept of the Mahdi himself, clearly in their view drawn from that of the Hidden Imām⁵²—is that of ghaybah, or "hiddenness" of the Imām/Mahdi. Like the very idea of the Mahdi itself, ghaybah is not discussed in the Qurʾān and is equally false whether one believes this eschatological figure is hidden in a subterranean vault or in an adjoining dimension. Likewise, the idea that the imām is maʿṣūm,
or “infallible,” an alleged supernatural characteristic which Shī`īs of all stripes attribute to the Hidden Imām/Mahdi, is quite fictitious. Besides its absence from the Qurʾān, argue anti-Mahdists, there are rational, utilitarian objections to such doctrines. Just how could the ummah test a claimant to the Imāmate/Mahdīyah to determine if he is indeed infallible? And how would be it possible for this imām/mahdi to have lived for over a millennium? The Shī`a also are said to err in their glorification of the ahl al-bayt; their denigration of the immediate post-prophet caliphs, particularly Abû Bakr and `Umar; and their reliance on allegorical, rather than literal, readings of the Qurʾān and the ḥadīth.

Thus, in the worldview of those who consider Mahdism an affront to Islam, the Shī`a were the progenitors of Mahdism while the sufis have been its purveyors. Within the sufi mystical houses occurred a great deal of al-mujāfahāt, “social intercourse,” and al-muʿānasah, “conviviality,” which the opponents of Mahdism believe naturally led to the dissemination of heretical ideas about the Mahdi, taken ultimately from the Shī`īs, to any Sunnīs present. Mahdism is thus seen as an infection or disease, as it were, incubated among the

53 Al-Khāṭib, pp. 18-19; Al-Maḥmūd, pp. 29-31.
54 One possible pro-Mahdist answer has been provided: see al-Gharaybī, Aḥādīth wa-kalimāt, in chapter four above.
55 Atā, pp. 53ff, 64ff.
56 Al-Maḥmūd, p. 4.
Shî`is, transmitted to the sufis through intentional physical and mystical vectors and thence to the larger Sunnî world through casual contact.

Two main tendencies among the sufis predisposed them toward Mahdism, anti-Mahdists allege. One was *al-mughâlah*, “excess” or “extravagance” of obeisance toward their leaders the shaykhs, the ultimate expression of which was the belief among some sufi orders—like the West African Tijânîyâh and Qâdirîyâh—that the order’s founder was not merely superior to those of all others, but that each particular leader was indeed the supernatural qutb, or “pole,” who literally and figuratively keeps the cosmos spinning.57 Perhaps, according to anti-Mahdists adducing Ibn Khaldûn,58 such ideas entered sufism via the Shî`a Râfiqâh. In the most narrow sense, this term refers to an early Shî`a group that began in Kûfa (Iraq) and transferred to Qom (Iran) by the end of the second/eighth century. They were politically quietist but critical of the majority Sunnîs, who they claimed had changed the Qur’ân to hide the fact of `Alî’s appointment as successor by the Prophet. Over time the name came to be used by Sunnîs to refer to Shî`îs in general, but as employed here the term refers specifically to the proto-Shî`î group. Furthermore—and most saliently in this context—the Râfiqâh regarded their imâm(s) as not merely divinely-inspired, but


58 Al-Khâtib, pp. 34, 54ff, 60, 63-107.
actually infallible. Today's anti-Mahdist writers critique the idea of such a flawless imâm, qutb or mahdi with the question: if such a being maintains the universe, what is left for God to do?

The other concept of the sufis which inclines them toward Mahdism, according to Mahdism's detractors, is that of wilâyah/walâyah, "friendship [with God]," perhaps best defined as "the ever-living spiritual presence in Islam which enables men to practise the spiritual life and to reach a state of sanctity." In fact, whether this idea developed separately in Shī`ism and sufism, or came into the latter from the former, is still a topic of debate. But, again, for modern anti-Mahdist writers, both of these concepts are nothing more than "satanic innovations" or "satanic fantasies," phrases borrowed from Ibn Taymîyah. Sometimes, however, in what may amount to damning with faint praise, the same writers will point out that in sufism the Mahdi began as primarily a mystical religious figure, not a rajal dawlah, "statesman"—that is, a political figure—as in Shī`ism. And in fact only in the last century or so has "sufi Mahdism" erupted onto the political stage, with Muḥammad Aḥmad in Sudan (d. 1885), Muḥammad

60 Al-Khâtib, p. 103.
62 Al-Khâtib, pp. 54ff, 124ff.
63 Hijâb, pp. 87ff.
b. 'Alî al-Sanûsî (d. 1859) of Cyrenaica, in what is now Libya and Muhammad b. ‘Abd Allah Ḥassân in Somalia (d. 1920). However, in their zeal to discredit sufi Mahdism for entering the political fray, anti-Mahdists forget historical accuracy. Of these three so-called “Mahdist” leaders, only Muḥammad Aḥmad actually claimed the eschatological title. The other two most definitely did not do so.

One sufi who was not a political leader is singled out for anti-Mahdist opprobrium: Muḥyî al-Dîn Ibn ‘Arabî (d. 1240 CE), the famous Andalusian mystical scholar. He is posited as the *primus inter pares* of a brand of sufis known as *al-malâḥidah al-falâsifah*, “philosophical apostates,” who were the primary advocates of incorporating the aforementioned satanic innovations into Sunnî Islam. Interestingly, however, Ibn ‘Arabî is pilloried not so much for his views on Mahdism *per se*—although sometimes it is said that he fancied himself a potential Mahdî—as for his advocacy of *waḥdat al-wujûd*, “the unity of existence,” a virtual monism. To the anti-Mahdists surveyed here this is virtual pantheism, a doctrine that is opposed to one of the key precepts of Islamic orthodoxy: *tawhîd*, or divine unity. If this doctrine were true, how could the traditional heaven and hell—that is, as ontological opposites—exist? And for that

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65 Khâtib, pp. 11ff.

matter, how could God cast himself into the fires of hell, post-judgment? Would he not be torturing himself? Furthermore, if existence is unitive how can individual human beings be judged?67

Thus, the provenance of Mahdism is, for those who scoff at the idea, anticipated in the ancient Near Eastern deliverer concept but fully developed as a Shī`a innovation or heresy, which was gradually disseminated across the ummah by sufis. Besides the populist method of sufi insertion, however, the Mahdists' primary mode of propaganda was the manipulation and outright fabrication of hadîth, at least according to Mahdist rejectionists.

IV. Critiquing the Propaganda

The opening salvo of the foes of the Mahdist sect usually consists of attacking Mahdist traditions by appealing to the Qur`ân. First they make the general observation that God's revelation to Muḥammad contains no reference to the Mahdi, a returning messiah or even a mujaddid, "renewer." In this it is unlike the Hebrew Bible—often simply the "Torah" to Mahdist and anti-Mahdist writers—which contains prophecies of a messiah that were fulfilled by Jesus. Next anti-Mahdists point out that the Qur`ân, far from corroborating the myth of the Mahdi, contains specific passages that make a case against it, such as sûrat al-Ra`d [13]:12, "God does not change what He has ordained until people change themselves;" sûrat al-Mâ`idah [5]:3, "Today I have perfected your

67 Al-Khâṭib, pp. 63-69; 98-103; 110ff.
religion for you;” sûrat al-An`âm [6]:115, “the words of your Lord are perfected;” and sûrat al-Kahf [18]:90ff, the account of Dhû al-Qarnayn or Alexander the Great imprisoning Yajûj and Majûj, an act that some anti-Mahdists inexplicably take to mean that the Qur'ân is dismissing these eschatological figures as fantasies. They also point out that the Qur'ân does mention Jesus and the Dajjâl, to name two of the other major End Time characters—but again, not the Mahdi.68 As far as eschatological political prognostication, the anti-Mahdist allegation is that the Arabic scriptures say little about political events after the time of the Prophet, except arguably for conflicts between the “Israelites” and two other peoples: first, “the people who destroyed the Temple of Solomon,” and, now, the Palestinians.69 Thus, under this rationale, Mahdist sectarian attempts to determine the time of the Mahdi’s appearance are as misguided as their belief in him in the first place.

After adducing the Qur’ân, Mahdist skeptics then turn to the hadîths themselves. This critical assessment is sometimes prefaced by highlighting the canonical collections of al-Bukhârî and Muslim and the absence of the Mahdi from either, including the 100,000+ traditions said to have been collected by the

68 Hijâb, pp. 28-40; al-Khâtib, pp. 18, 37; Muḥammad, pp. 73ff; Al-Maḥmûd, pp. 6ff.

69 The particular anti-Mahdist polemicist who makes this charge—`Atâ, pp. 22ff—does not provide a specific Qur’ânic citation, but sûrat al-Isrâ’ [17]:3-8, an account of two armies sent against the Israelis, would seem to be a likely candidate. N.J. Dawood, in his translation, remarks that the two hostile camps are the Assyrians and Romans: The Koran (London: Penguin Books, 1990 [1956]), p. 197.
former scholar. Curiously, the anti-Mahdists seem to adduce the Mahdi’s absence from *al-shaykhayn* to a lesser extent than do pro-Mahdists. They appear more comfortable opposing Mahdism for its lack of Qur’anic corroboration and in terms of its deleterious results, instead.

Even some of the eschatological ḥadîths that are corroborated by the Qur’ân, such as those about Yajûj and Majûj, are viewed with a jaundiced eye by the opponents of Mahdism, as in the accusation that compilers who included traditions about Gog and Magog were about as discriminating as those who gather firewood at night—presumably meaning that some anthologizers of hadîth were less than critical in their scrutiny of isnâds and perhaps even of matns. How much easier, then, it becomes for a Mahdist doubter to deride an eschatological tradition that is not supported by the Qur’ân. Thus the already-dubious Mahdist traditions found in the collections of Abû Dâ’ûd, Ibn Mâjah and al-Tîrmidîhî are disparaged on two levels: categorically and specifically.

Categorically, a number of negative expressions are used for Mahdist ḥadîth *in toto*, over and above the labels discussed earlier. Mahdist traditions are said, following Ibn Khaldûn, to be simply Shî`a interpolations which are weak, defective or irrelevant at best and outright forgeries at worst, blindly and uncritically accepted by ʿulamâ’, historians and elites throughout Islamic

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70 Al-Khâtib, pp. 130-132; Al-Mahmûd, pp. 6ff.
history. In this regard 'Abd Allâh b. Sabâ, the alleged Jewish double agent, is blamed for smuggling Mahdist beliefs into Shi'ism and, ultimately, into Sunnism, thus further discrediting such beliefs. This is almost exactly the opposite manner in which alleged Jewish influences on Islamic tradition about the Mahdi are employed by adherents of Mahdism. There, 'Abd Allâh b. Sabâ's attempt to sabotage Islam from within by "converting" and interpolating false and irrational ideas into the new religion is conflated with similar nefarious behavior by Zionists and Israelis (two terms used interchangeably by some Muslim writers) and consequently held up as proof of Jewish plots against the Islamic world that can only be countered by the Mahdi.

Furthermore, in fact, the allegedly ḥasan, or "sound," ḥadîths are not really ṣaḥîh, or "clear," and the purported clear ones are not sound. In reality Mahdist ḥadîths represent not so much true words of the Prophet as factionalism among the `ulamâ’, evidenced by the fact that they are often mutually contradictory. And, anti-Mahdists maintain, apart from these false ḥadîths, there is truly no good reason to believe in the Mahdi. Thus, if the credibility of specific Mahdist traditions is destroyed, this un-Muslim belief will—so the current coterie of writers hopes—fade away.

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71 Al-Khâtib, pp. 48ff; Muḥammad, passim; Atâ, p. 55.
72 Hijâb, pp. 79ff and al-Khâtib, pp. 32ff.
73 Al-Maḥmûd, pp. 39ff.
74 Al-Maḥmûd, pp. 6ff.
More specifically, certain ḥadīths are singled out and critiqued on an individual basis\(^7\) as the following examples will attest. How could the Mahdi fill the entire earth with justice\(^6\) when even the Prophet Muḥammad could not do so? As far as the Mahdi resembling the Prophet physically, with a hooked nose and a receding hairline\(^7\)—even if this is not \(\text{\textit{wad` al-qassās}}, \) "the invention of fiction writers," it is certainly suspect insofar as many descendants of the Prophet share such characteristics, making it relatively easy for someone fitting this general description to exploit it. Regarding God lengthening until the Mahdi comes,\(^8\) even one of the compilers who includes this tradition seems confused about its legitimacy—so why should Muslims trust it?\(^9\) The Mahdi’s descent from Fāṭimah is certainly not proved by ḥadīths,\(^10\) since the relevant ones are considered by some muḥaddithūn as weak at best and outright frauds at worst. No one can believe that the Prophet really said “Myself and `Aṣūl and Ḥasan and Ḥusayn and the Mahdi are descended from `Abd al-Muṭṭalib,”\(^1\) because this tradition is not just weak but indeed \textit{muqīl}, “poor,” or even \textit{munkar}, “atrocious.”

\(^7\) All of the Sunnī traditions from the three canonical collectors that mention the Mahdi are cited in chapter two, above, and references to them will be employed below.

\(^6\) Ibn Mājah, #4082; Abū Dāʾūd, #4282, 4283, 4285.

\(^7\) Abū Dāʾūd, #4285.

\(^8\) Al-Tirmidhī, #2331, 2332; Abū Dāʾūd, #4282, 4283.

\(^9\) This is a reference to al-Tirmidhī’s description of that particular hadīth as ḥasan ṣaḥīḥ, thus using two normally exclusive categories for one tradition. See chapter two, above.

\(^10\) Ibn Mājah, #4086; Abu Dāʾūd, #4284.
Similarly, the traditional account of the Mahdi and al-Sufyânî leading opposing armies is obviously, according to anti-Mahdists, *mulaffaq*, or “contrived.” The isnâd, or chain of transmission, for the ḥadîth about loyalty being sworn to a leader between the rukn and the maqâm, after he had fled from Medina to Mecca, is good but there is nothing here about the Mahdi. Finally, the traditions about a people storming in from the East to prepare the way for the Mahdi are obviously invented at best and propagandistic at worst.

Taken as a whole, the anti-Mahdist position on such traditions is that they are *mutakhallifah*, “detritus,” more stories *about* hadîths than hadîths themselves. Many of them are not only weak or defective but the result of utter *makdhûbah*, “fabrication,” or *šinâ ‘ah*, “manufacturing,” accomplished long ago by the *ahl al-bad‘*, *al-da‘wah* and/or *al-zayg*, “the people of innovation, propaganda and/or deviation”: possibly the Khârijîs or, much more likely, the Shî’a. The latter, presumably, interpolated this pernicious Mahdist idea into hadîth collections in order to advance their claims regarding the correctness of their doctrines of the imâms, in general, and the ultimate Imâm, the Mahdi, in

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81 Ibn Mâjah, #4087. ‘Abd al-Mutâlib was the Prophet’s grandfather.

82 Abû Dâ‘ûd, #4286.

83 Ibn Mâjah, #4084, 4088.

84 Muḥammad, pp. 21-72; Al-Maḥmûd, pp. 39-55; Hijâb, pp. 42ff.

85 Al-Maḥmûd, pp. 16-18, 27.
particular. The final verdict, then, on these traditions is that they are *al-ahādīth al-mazīmūmah*, “evil hadiths,” and so not only unworthy of authority but requiring refutation.

To refute these traditions opponents of Mahdism employ one of the same basic strategies as the Mahdist sectarians: adducing famous Muslim `ulamā’ and other scholars, but here to support their side of the argument about the illegitimacy of Mahdist traditions and of Mahdism *in toto*. Generally, they assert that “most” `ulamā’ throughout history have rejected the legitimacy of the eschatological Mahdi concept, while conceding that some have accepted the mahdi-as-reformer. Specifically, the anti-Mahdists appeal to four renowned Islamic scholars from across the centuries for confirmation: Ibn Taymīyah (d. 1328 CE), Ibn Khaldūn (d. 1406 CE), al-Suyūṭī (d. 1505 CE) and Rashīd Riḍā (d. 1935 CE). All four were highly-respected Sunnī traditionists knowledgable about, if not actually immersed in, sufism; therefore, their criticism of the alleged metaphysical excesses of Mahdist proponents carries much weight, at least as far as these anti-Mahdist writers are concerned. However, it is worth noting that such writers might have an idealized, perhaps simplistic, view of these scholars whom they adduce.

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87 Muḥammad, pp. 21 and passim.


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Ibn Taymîyah labelled sufis' obeisance to their shaykhs a “satanic innovation” which contributed mightily to Mahdism, condemned Ibn 'Arabî and his ilk for promoting Mahdism and, being a “true 'alîm of the sunnah” knew better than to accept such an idea. Ibn Khaldûn realized centuries ago that the Mahdi idea originated with the ghulât, 'Alid “extremists,” was transferred to their successors the Shî'a and was ultimately transmitted into mainstream Islamic thought by the sufis—although he has been legitimately criticized by some Mahdists as an historian, not an expert on ḥadîth. Al-Suyûṭî, drawing on the example of the Fâṭimids, maintained that any such group claiming a mahdi as its leader has an illegitimate imâm, and thus is ipso facto an illegitimate state. And in the twentieth century Rashîd Riḍâ held the position that the contradictions in Mahdist ḥadîth are so strong and obvious that the idea is simply unbelievable.

Besides criticizing Mahdism for its provenance and propaganda, the third prong of the Mahdist skeptics' attack consists of taking issue with its product: the results of belief in the Mahdi, and of his alleged appearance, throughout 1400 years of Islamic history.

89 Al-Khâtib, pp. 57-58, 64; Al-Maḥmûd, p. 56.
90 Atâ, pp. 59-61; al-Khâtib, pp. 34, 41-47, 109; Al-Maḥmûd, pp. 34-36, 63-64.
92 Al-Maḥmûd, p. 62.
V. Critiquing the Product (Mahdist Personalities)

In the anti-Mahdist weltanschauung all Mahdist claimants have been ad‘iyâţ, “impostors,” donning athwâban zâïfah, “forged cloaks” of Mahdism and falsely invoking for themselves a prophetic lineage in order to hoodwink the people and aver that they are ushering in the eschatological End Times. According to disbelievers in the Mahdi, Islamic history includes a litany of such false mahdis or Mahdist spokesmen. In the Muslim community’s early history, there was Mukhtar b. Abû `Ubayd Allah, who made the claim on behalf of `Alî’s son Ibn al-Ḥanîfiyyah; the aforementioned `Abd Allah b. Sabâ, a “convert” from Judaism who claimed `Alî would return as Mahdi; the Ismâ`îlî movement known as the Qarmatians and the leader of their Bahraini branch Abû Ṭâhir Sulaymân (d. 944 CE), who was trying to summon the Mahdi in addition to fighting the ‘Abbâsids;³⁳ and any Umayyad or `Abbâsid caliph who used the regnal title “al-Mahdi.” In the middle phase of Islamic history mock mahdism was exemplified by all of the Fâṭimid caliphs, those “tools of Satan,” and Ibn Tûmart (d. 1130 CE), founder of the Muwaḥḥids. In the modern period, false mahdis have included various unspecified claimants in the wake of Napoleon’s conquest of Egypt in 1798; the Muslim opponents of Russian imperialism in the Caucasus, most notably Shaykh Shâmil (d. 1871), considered a “mahdi” here by

anti-Mahdists but in reality a warrior sufi who never claimed that title; the Bâb and Bahâ’ullah, founders of the Bahâ’îs; Ghulâm Aḥmad, founder of the Aḥmadiyyah in Qâdîyân, India; Muḥammad Aḥmad, the Sudanese Mahdi; Muḥammad b. ʿAlî al-Sanûṣî (d. 1859) of Cyrenaica (Libya) and Muḥammad b. ʿAbd Allâh (d. 1920) of Somaliland, neither of whom actually declared himself the Mahdi; and Juhaymân al-ʿUtaybî, leader of the 1979 attack on the Ka`bah in Mecca.  

Al-ʿUtaybî’s movement, and in particular the occupation—however brief—of Islam’s holiest site, evokes for anti-Mahdist the unpleasant memory of the previous two times the Ka`bah had been “rapecd” by ʿAbd Allâh ibn al-Zubayr in his battles with Marwân for the caliphate in the first century AH/seventh century CE, when he used catapults to hurl missiles at the site; and by the Qarmatians under the aforementioned Abû ʿTâhir Sulaymân who, in 930 CE, not only attacked and plundered Mecca but actually stole the black stone from the Ka`bah. For those opposed to Mahdism, then, al-ʿUtaybî’s Qarmatian-style assault not only shows the susceptibility of the simple-minded to Mahdist blandishments and the


95 Al-Khâtîb, pp. 28-33; ʿAtâ, pp. 11ff, 27-36, 45-52; Al-Mâhmûd, pp. 21, 58-61; Hijâb, pp. 53-56, 87-102.


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lengths to which Mahdists will go, but also demonstrates the suitability of Mahdism as a *dhari‘ah*, “pretext,” for such a political movement.\(^97\)

Mahdism, its critics conclude, thus engenders a number of results, the vast majority of which are negative. First, everyone who ever claimed to be the Mahdi has died or been killed. Second, the belief inevitably produces nothing but strife and bloodshed within the Islamic community. Third, and relatedly, all *fitan*, “strifes” or “civil wars,” can be traced back to some form of Mahdism. Fourth, the idea is almost always used to exploit the masses, especially by leaders who are Shī‘ī, greedy and/or ambitious. Fifth, it creates factions where none exist and exacerbates them where they are already extant. Sixth, it prevents the ummah from advancing on the path of true reform. Seventh, it weakens Muslims by distracting them from prayer, fasting and eleemosynary activities.\(^98\)

On the other side of the ledger from this catalog of woes attributable to Mahdism are only two nominally positive aspects of the belief. One is the acknowledgement that the sword of rebellion is truly a two-edged blade: belief in a mahdi can be utilized not just by the power-hungry but by those searching for an oppositional ideology to overthrow an oppressive regime and attempting to establish justice and equality. In this context, if such a movement fails it is dismissed as a fitnah, while if it succeeds it is lionized as a thawrah,

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\(^97\) `Atâ, pp. 10ff; Hijâb, pp. 7-8.

\(^98\) Al-Mâ‘mûd, pp. 3-72; al-Khâtib, p. 133; `Atâ, p. 10; Hijâb, pp. 103-123.
The other nominal benefit of Mahdism lies in its narcotic effect: the belief inures the people to their pain and suffering in this life insofar as they defer their hope of justice and equality until the Mahdi comes. However, even the combined effect of these two at best ambiguously positive contributions of Mahdism is insufficient to outweigh the harm done to Islam and Muslims by the belief, and its exploiters, over the centuries.

A subset of critical thinking toward Mahdism and Mahdist claimants focuses on its proponents' inveterate attempts to predict the timing of the Mahdi's appearance. A *sine qua non* for analyzing such eschatological prognostication is the differentiation between events that have already occurred and those yet to transpire. Ḥadîth contains references to both types: predictions about al-Sufyânî, for example, fall into the former class, since according to anti-Mahdists they were obviously fulfilled by the Umayyad caliph Mu`âwiya b. Abî Sufyân; prophecies about the Mahdi fall under the latter heading. Mahdists, say their opponents, often make the mistake of confusing the two categories—perhaps intentionally, to serve their own purposes.

Members of the Mahdist sect fall into this and other errors when they try to calculate the eschatological signs, despite the warning in Daniel adduced by anti-Mahdists: "The words are closed and sealed up until the time of the..."
end....None of the wicked will understand, but those who are wise will understand” (Daniel 12:9, 10b).\textsuperscript{102} This appears to be an exception to the general observation made earlier that it is pro-Mahdist sectarians who cite the Bible as an authority.\textsuperscript{103}

Both the Shî'a and the sufis are said to have consulted \textit{munajjimûn}, “astrologers,” in their attempts to determine the date of the Mahdi’s appearance.\textsuperscript{104} Ibn al-`Arabî, in particular, in addition to his other transgressions, allegedly misused the ancient practice of \textit{hisâb al-`Hurûf}, the “science of letters,” or the assigning of numerical values to letters of the alphabet.\textsuperscript{105} Others Mahdist defenders have erroneously utilized similar methodologies in their attempted prognostications.\textsuperscript{106} From the anti-Mahdist point of view, even if one accepts for the sake of argument the Mahdi’s future historicity, no one knows when this will be manifested—except that it will certainly not be soon, since even by Mahdist logic none of the necessary predecessor major signs, particularly Jesus and the Dajjâl, has yet materialized.\textsuperscript{107}

\textsuperscript{102} \textit{Ibid.}, p. 43.

\textsuperscript{103} See above, chapter four.

\textsuperscript{104} Al-Khâtib, p. 39.

\textsuperscript{105} \textit{Ibid.}, pp. 110ff.

\textsuperscript{106} Hijâb, p. 69.

\textsuperscript{107} Harbî, pp. 69ff.
According to the present sample of Mahdism’s skeptics, the idea is a fantasy, akin to something from The Thousand and One Nights.\textsuperscript{108} Belief in the Mahdi is thus not something required of Muslims on the order of faith in God, angels, jinn, life after death and the Fire of judgment. Muhammad and the messiah Jesus are the true and final imâms, not the Mahdi. Furthermore, Muḥammad was the last messenger to be guided by God.\textsuperscript{109} So why does Mahdism survive in the modern Islamic world, despite all the proofs arrayed against the idea itself, its proponents, the traditions that allegedly corroborate it and the obvious negative repercussions the idea and its adherents have had on Islamic history?

Those opposed to the sect of the Mahdi assert that there are three major reasons for the persistence of such a pernicious principle down through the ages and into modern times. \textbf{First,} the youth of the Muslim world, primarily as a result of their failure to study the Qurʾān, have no defense against such currents of thought. Moreover, the Mahdist tenets of equality and justice can be construed as a plan for wealth redistribution which meshed well with Arab socialism and Communism\textsuperscript{110} (at least until the collapse of the Soviet Union and the discrediting of global Marxism). \textbf{Second,} the “enemies of Islam” promote Mahdism as a means to weaken the ummah. In pre-modern times this would

\textsuperscript{108} Al-Mahmûd, p. 31.

\textsuperscript{109} \textit{Ibid.}, pp. 30ff.

\textsuperscript{110} ‘Atâ, pp. 16-17.
have meant primarily some of the Shi'a sects. In this century the Communists were one of Islam's major foes, but the ummah's chief antagonist—and thus the current unsurpassed manipulator of Mahdism—is Zionism, or "worldwide Jewish goals." The Jews/Israelis have also exploited Bahâ'ism as a means to weaken the Muslim world. The fact that the Bâb is buried in Haifa while Bahâ'ullah died, and is now enshrined in Akko, Israel, causes anti-Mahdists to suspect an alliance between the Bahâ'ís and the Zionists. Third, Mahdism endures because it has become a modern political ideology, a permanent potential opposition movement with immediate legitimacy among many Muslims, especially in terms of its call for justice and equality. This should come as no surprise, since Mahdism has always been more political and social than religious. Faith in the Mahdi is thus not a fixed belief but more of an empty vessel, into which challengers to a ruling regime can pour their frustrations and produce a heady brew of rebellion or revolution.

To the anti-Mahdist mind, the cure for this ailment depends upon one's position on the spectrum of Islamic ideology. For a modernist, Mahdism will continue as long as it embodies a valid oppositional political paradigm. For the

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111 Al-Mahmûd, pp. 24-25; 'Atâ, pp. 13ff, 46ff, 58f, 69ff.
112 Hijâb, pp. 103-123.
113 Al-Mahmûd, pp. 30ff.
114 'Atâ, pp. 64ff.
115 Al-Khâtib, passim.
more traditionally religious-minded, the remedy for this flight of the imagination is knowledge of true Islam gained by study of the Qurʾān and reinforced by the ʿulamāʾ turning their attention away from Mahdist fantasies and back to al-daʿ āʾ waḥ, the proselytizing “call” of Islam.

VI. Conclusion

In terms of the literalist/figurativist paradigm, the authors of all but one of the works surveyed for this chapter are Qurʾānic/Hadīth Anti-Mahdist Literalists, in light of the fact that all of them appear to be rather conservative Muslims whose objections to the Mahdi are primarily grounded in religion. The sole exception is Hijāb, who classifies Mahdism not as an opiate of the masses, or even a superstition, but rather as primarily a political ideology of potential opposition to extant regimes, tinted by a yearning for socioeconomic justice—making him an Anti-Mahdist Figurativist.

Beyond this, examining modern anti-Mahdist thought against the approaches taken by earlier counter-Mahdist groups is enlightening. In particular, the attempts both of the Murâbiṭṣ or Muwâḥḥîds in the twelfth century CE to parry the Muwâḥḥîd threat, and of the leaders of the Turco-Egyptian-Sudanese regime to counteract the menace of Muḥammad Aḥmad and his followers in nineteenth-century Sudan, are pertinent. The ultimately unsuccessful anti-ʿAbbâsid exertions of the Umayyads in the eighth century CE, as well as the more effective efforts of the ʿAbbâsids to check the Fâṭimids in the tenth through the twelfth centuries CE, are not as instructive to the issue at
hand because both of these counterrevolutionary endeavors were aimed at countering Shî' a opposition, whether titular (the `Abbâsids) or blatant (the Fâtimids). The modern Mahdist sect, despite its opponents' best efforts to portray it otherwise, is essentially a Sunnî movement, and thus the reactions of adversaries to similar Sunnî Mahdist manifestations are more germane.

The Murâbîts basically pursued a four-point strategy in their attempts to stave off Muwahhid attacks. First they declared Ibn Tûmart and his followers rebels. Next they accused them of undermining Islamic law. Then they called on all Muslims in their domains to resist the new movement. Finally, they took up arms against the newcomers, ultimately unsuccessfully.\(^ {116} \)

The political and religious establishment of Ottoman Egypt and its province Sudan responded somewhat similarly to Muhammad Ahmad's claim to be the Mahdi in the early 1880s. Initially the rulers and `ulamâ' opted to ignore him as merely a "deluded dervish." When his movement continued to grow, religious leaders were sent to interrogate him. Finding that Muhammad Ahmad was indeed convinced that he was the eschatological Mahdi, a religious propaganda war was launched against him and his followers. Finally, the Türkîyah regime resorted to military intervention—to no avail.

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The propaganda war aimed at Muḥammad ʻAlmād consisted of nine parts, critiquing: 117

1) his birthplace and manifestation location—the Mahdi is supposed to be born in Medina and proclaim himself in Mecca, not anywhere in Sudan;
2) his ethnic heritage—the Mahdi will be an Arab with a hooked nose, not a “black” African;
3) the absence of the other eschatological figures—the Mahdi should be accompanied by Jesus and concurrent with the Dajjāl, al-Sufyānī, et al., but these were nowhere to be seen;
4) his method of coercing loyalty—the Mahdi is supposed to receive the loyalty oath spontaneously from followers “between the rukn and the maqâm” in Mecca, not as a result of contracts he had drawn up beforehand and certainly not in rural Sudan;
5) his uprising against the Ottoman sultan and caliph—the Mahdi should appear upon the death of a caliph and the onset of chaos in Dār al-Islām, not in a time of peace with an extant caliph;
6) his enfeeblement of the Sunnah—one of the Mahdi’s major tasks is to uphold it;
7) the issue of social justice—the Mahdi should fill the world with equity and justice, not death, destruction and despoilment;
8) his followers—the Mahdi’s supporters are expected to be “Allāh’s beloved” from Syria and Iraq, not “foreigners” and “rabble” from Sudan;
9) his “revelations”—aspersions were cast upon Muhammad Ahmad’s visions and mystical visitations.

Most of these condemnations of the Sudanese Mahdi, because they were directed at an individual openly claiming the Mahdīyah, have no connection to modern anti-Mahdist writers’ statements, which are primarily the refutation of an abstract idea. However, it is noteworthy that there are four points of intersection, even so. Just as the Sudanese Mahdi failed to fill the earth with justice and equity, so modern-day anti-Mahdists express doubt that anyone could succeed where the Prophet Muḥammad himself failed. On the other hand,

117 All of these are taken from Ibrāhîm, Al-ṣirā, pp. 33ff.
whereas Muḥammad Aḥmad could be pilloried for not meeting the general physical description of the Mahdi outlined in ḥadîth, modern and future “mahdis” could, alternatively, all too easily claim to fit this same vague physical profile as a proof of their claim. Whereas Muḥammad Aḥmad virtually extorted loyalty oaths, appropriating and adapting the relevant ḥadîth (Abû Dawûd #4286), the harsh reality for any modern attempt to do so is that this particular ḥadîth does not mention the Mahdi at all. Finally, and probably most significantly, the Sudanese Mahdi’s lack of corroborating fellow eschatological figures is sure likewise to bedevil any Mahdist candidate in the future.

However, lacking any concrete claimants in the late twentieth century, the adversaries found themselves denigrating Mahdism almost as an historical archetype. Thus, Mahdist foes undertake to undermine the Mahdist sect’s provenance, propaganda, product and personalities; that is, the disciples of anti-Mahdism fault this eschatological belief for its allegedly Shī`ī origins, the preposterous and untenable nature of the traditions said to corroborate it, the men who exploited this belief over the centuries and the woes they have thereby brought upon the ummah. The last man actually to subject any part of the Islamic world to Mahdist-inspired bloodshed was Juhaymān al-‘Utaybī. His movement will be included in the analysis of chapter six, the conclusion.
[S]o accustomed are we to a “movement” having a leader or prophet or hero that we tend to forget that some millenarian activities may take place without one.¹

I. Introduction

In the preceding five chapters some of the most influential and successful Mahdist movements in Islamic history have been examined in terms of their origins, contexts, developments and ultimate fates. Such a process necessarily entailed, as well, an historical investigation into several of the individuals transformed by such conditions into successful Mahdis, however temporarily. This study focused on the Sunnî Mahdists Muḥammad Aḥmad of Sudan² and, to a lesser extent, Ibn Tûmart of northwestern Africa, while not neglecting the (at first) nominally Shī`î Abbāsids or the militantly Shī`î Fâtimids.³ This conclusion will examine the most recent example of a Sunnî Arab Muslim overtaken by similar conditions, Muḥammad b. `Abd al-Qaḥtânî of Sa`ūdî Arabia in 1400/1979; compare this movement with earlier Mahdist movements and with


² See above, chapter three.

³ See above, chapter one.
modern Mahdist apologetics, and contrast its Sa`dî opposition with analogous earlier anti-Mahdist agendas. We shall also consider the possible influence of post-revolutionary Iranian Shi`ism upon modern Sunnî Mahdism, particularly in terms of the necessity of the physical existence of the Twelfth Imâm or Mahdi for the articulation of Mahdism as an ideology. Finally, we shall historically reexamine the current version of this ancient doctrine and attempt to categorize it in modern terms.

II. Juhaymân al-`Utaybî and Muḥammad b. `Abd Allâh al-Qaḥṭânî

For three weeks in 1400/1979, beginning on 1 Muharram/20 November of that year, Mahdism left the history books, and the theoretical constructs of apologists, to achieve realization in the Sunnî Arab world.4 A large group of armed activists,5 led by one Juhaymân al-`Utaybî (d. 1980) and Muḥammad b. `Abd Allâh al-Qaḥṭânî (d. 1979), members of established Sa`dî tribes, occupied the Sacred Mosque in Mecca and called on the citizens of Sa`dî Arabia to rise up and overthrow the corrupt Sa`dî state in the name of the Mahdi. This

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4 Sources on this movement include Rif`at Sayyid Aḥmad, Rasā`îl Juhaymān al-`Utaybî, qâ'id al-muqtaṭaḥmīn il-masjid al-ḥarâm bi-Makkah (wathā'iq lam tansharu ba' d) [The Letters of Juhaymān al-`Utaybî, Leader of the Invaders of the Sacred Mosque in Mecca (Documents Never Before Published)] (Cairo: Matbâ`ah Atlas, 1988); Joseph A. Kechichian, "Islamic Revivalism and Change in Sa`dî Arabia: Juhaymān al-`Utaybî's 'Letters to the Sa`dî People,'" The Muslim World Vol. LXXX, No. 1 (January 1990), pp. 1-17; Nazih N. Ayubi, Political Islam. Religions and Politics in the Arab World (London- ...
movement's leaders also were motivated by, and probably hoped to draw upon the resonance of the ancient expectation of a mujaddid, or "renewer," of Islam who is supposed to come at the dawn of every new century. They were ensconced in the Sacred Mosque from 20 November until 5 December, when regular Saudí Army troops, assisted by French special forces, stormed their positions and removed them. Many were killed and the rest were imprisoned and later executed.

In a propaganda mode reminiscent of the early 'Abbásids, al-'Utaybî did not himself claim to be the Mahdi, but rather asserted that his brother-in-law, Muhammad b. 'Abd Allah al-Qahtânî (d. 1979), was the Awaited Mahdi. In this regard al-'Utaybî resembles the 'Abbásid propagandist Abū Muslim vis-à-vis members of the 'Abbásid dynasty, notably Ibrāhîm and, later, the first reigning 'Abbásid caliph, al-Saffâh (d. 754 CE). However, these Saudí Mahdists broke with this pattern insofar as the principal, al-Qahtânî, was right beside his spokesman—not waiting behind the scenes to appear. To this day, the nature of the exact relationship between al-'Utaybî and al-Qahtânî in regard to the latter's

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5 Numerical estimates run from "several hundred" (Kechichian, Kostiner) to 450 (Ahmad) and even 2000 (Ayubi).


7 According to Kechichian, p. 7, it was the French Groupe d'Intervention de la Gendarmerie. I was told several years ago by Prof. R.S. O'Fahey of the University of Bergen, Norway, that, according to his contacts in the British government, it was the British Special Air Service (SAS) which actually expelled the Mahdists from the mosque.
Mahdiyah is not known in detail. It is not even certain whether al-`Utaybi obtained his brother-in-law’s permission before claiming the Mahdiyah for him—although, presumably, he had done so since al-Qahtani did join the uprising. Accurate information on this relationship is hard to obtain, not only because al-Qahtani was killed in the Sa`udi counterattack and al-`Utaybi captured and executed the following month, but also because the Sa`udis seem to have intentionally tried to misrepresent the affair as one attributable to “Shi`a” plots, when not actually covering it up as much as possible.

There were two related reasons the Sa`udi government would have tried to tar the `Utaybi/Qahtani movement with the “Shi`i” brush. One is that the Islamic revolution in Iran had just toppled the Shah and brought the Ayatollah Khomeini to power, and so extant regimes in the area were fearful of losing control. Second, the oil-rich regions of Sa`udi Arabia closest to this new Islamic Republic of Iran—such as al-Qatif and al-Hasa` on the Persian Gulf coast between Qatif and Kuwait—contained large Shi`a population concentrations that have not always respected Wahhabi rule. In fact, the Sa`udis did have reason to worry, for several weeks after the Mahdist uprising in Mecca these Shi`a of the eastern Kingdom did begin rioting, although seemingly more inspired by Khomeini’s success than by al-`Utaybi’s da`wah. But despite the government’s

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8 Although the total Shi`a population of Sa`udi Arabia is probably less than 5%, some of these regions of eastern Arabia are majority Shi`a. See Graham E. Fuller and Rend Rahim Francke, *The Arab Shi`a. The Forgotten Muslims* (London: MacMillan Press, Ltd., 1999), pp. 180ff.
attempts to link the two episodes, they seem to have been entirely unrelated, except insofar as each may have drawn psychological inspiration from the success of Iran's revolution.

Thus, the Mahdist movement that erupted in Sunni Sa`udi Arabia in 1979, aimed at overthrowing the government, was neither Shi`ite nor directly motivated by Iran. In fact, Sa`udi Arabia officially adheres to Wahhabism, a particularly conservative strain of Sunnism, which began with the teachings of Shaykh Muhammad b. `Abd al-Wahhab (d. 1792). `Abd al-Wahhab updated the teachings of Ibn Taymiyah (d. 1328 CE), which produced strict views regarding Islamic faith and practice. Chief among these views were a call for literal interpretation of the Qur`an, defense of tawhid, and criticism of the

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veneration of sufi saints and shrines, as well as of the allegedly lax Islamic praxis of the Ottoman rulers of the Hijâz. This interpretation of Islam was adopted by the founders of the Sa`ûdî state and made its official ideology.

This brand of Sunni Islam does not reject Mahdism, in theory. In fact, `Abd al-Wahhâb seems to have accepted the idea, if an entire chapter in his writings elaborating upon the topic is any indication. But the Sa`ûdî religious and political authorities argued that while there would be a Mahdi someday, he would appear, in conjunction with the other eschatological signs foretold in the hadîths, in order to overthrow corrupt, un-Islamic rule—which category did not, in their view, include the government of Sa`ûdî Arabia. Nonetheless, al-`Utaybî was on solid, if unwelcome, Wahhâbî ground in appealing to the Mahdi to right societal injustice. Far from being a crypto-Shi`î, he might rather be said to have been “out-Wahhâbî-ing” the Sa`ûdî establishment itself in this regard.

Earlier in his life al-`Utaybî (b. 1936) had belonged to the Sa`ûdî National Guard and also attended the Islamic University in Medina. Then at some point he began writing and disseminating letters criticizing the Sa`ûdî regime and reiterating the belief in the Mahdi. He seems to have gained sympathizers in both the National Guard and the Islamic University in this way, many of whom assisted him in the abortive revolution of 1979.


Once the Sacred Mosque had been occupied, the Sa`ûdî Mahdists began broadcasting a five-point agenda over the mosque’s loudspeakers:

1) sever relations with the West in order to protect Islamic values;
2) overthrow the Sa`ûdî state and redistribute its wealth;
3) emphasize that the Sa`ûdî king and `ulamâ’ are illegitimate;
4) stop oil exports to the United States;
5) expel all foreigners from Sa`ûdî Arabia.\(^\text{14}\)

Interestingly, the claim that al-Qahtânî was the Mahdi was not a prominent point of this agenda. In fact, the posthumously-published epistle of al-`Utaybî which deals specifically with the Mahdi\(^\text{15}\) is notable only as a restatement of mainline Sunnî beliefs in the Mahdi which “makes no theological breakthroughs—\(^\text{16}\) such as identifying the Mahdi. Perhaps it was intended primarily to appeal to Sa`ûdî Muslims living outside the Kingdom,\(^\text{17}\) where such eschatological doctrines might be more deeply held. It does allege that the Muslim world is in the midst of the fitnat al-dahîmah, “the dissension of the masses,”\(^\text{18}\) the third major predicted episode of inter-Muslim strife, but makes little attempt beyond that at fitting Mahdist traditions into a modern context.

The Sa`ûdîs responded on three fronts. First, the government pressured some prominent `ulamâ’ into issuing a fatwâ denouncing the uprising. Only

\(^{14}\) Kechichian, p. 12.


\(^{16}\) Kechichian, p. 15.

\(^{17}\) Ibid.

\(^{18}\) See Ahmād, p. 216.
about thirty did so, perhaps because a number of religious leaders, while certain
that the Mahdi was not sequestered in the Sacred Mosque with an automatic
weapon, were not unsympathetic to some of the rebels’ demands. In an effort
to influence domestic public opinion, this decision was printed in the Sa`ūdî
newspapers. It derided al-Qahtânî’s Mahdist claim as laughable and al-´Utaybî’s
qualifications to interpret Islamic law as nonexistent. Next, of course, the
government began military assaults on the Mahdists’ positions, which over the
course of the next three weeks resulted in the death of perhaps 2800 Sa`ūdî
troops before they finally succeeded with Western help. Finally, once the
“modern Qarmatians” had been thwarted, the Sa`ūdî government’s post mortem
of the abortive Mahdist coup included the demonization of al-´Utaybî, al-Qahtânî
and their followers not just as “Shi`a” but also as “Khârijîs”—a group whose
name has become synonymous in Sunnî Islam with obstinate, puritanical and
egalitarian resistance to ruling regimes: “rebels,” in effect.

What were the elements of al-´Utaybî’s movement? There seem to have
been two primary ones. On one hand, there was an aspect of populist religious
frustration with the “corruption” and “self-indulgence” of the ruling Sa`ūdî
elites; on the other there was a desire among the members of some tribes—the

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19 See Al`mad, pp. 30ff; Ayubi, pp. 102 ff; Kechichian, pp. 15-16.
20 Kechichian, p. 15.
21 Al`mad, pp. 11ff.
`Utaybah and Qahtân, along with the Harb, Anîzah and several others—\(\textsuperscript{23}\) to restore the political power that had originally been theirs when the House of Sa`ûd and the Wahhâbî `ulamâ' created the modern Kingdom in the 1920s.\(\textsuperscript{24}\) Thus 1979's Sa`ûdî Mahdist movement may have been largely a socio-political movement wearing eschatological religious clothing.\(\textsuperscript{25}\)

How does the Qahtânî Mahdiyah declared by its spokesman al-`Utaybî fit into the nine-point paradigm of Mahdist movements posited earlier? Of the three primary criteria that define Mahdism, this particular movement clearly possessed the most important one: an overt Mahdist claim. Just as clearly, it failed in actually taking power or creating a new government or state, the second criterion. And the degree to which it manifested the third, an eschatological or utopian streak, is debatable. Neither in al-`Utaybî's writings, nor in any portion of its proclaimed program, did the 1400 AH Mahdist movement clearly display an eschatological or utopian streak; rather, one almost gets the sense that Mahdism was merely the Trojan horse within which this disgruntled bloc hoped to conceal its blatantly political, anti-establishment agenda. Nonetheless, a Mahdiyah was declared, so the analysis must take this claim at face value.

As for some of the other characteristics of the `Utaybî/Qahtânî movement, it was decidedly not led by formally-trained `ulamâ'; it was neither

\(\textsuperscript{23}\) Ibid., p. 103.

\(\textsuperscript{24}\) Kechichian, pp. 8-9.

\(\textsuperscript{25}\) Ayubi, p. 100.
sufi nor Shî`î in any way, despite government propaganda regarding a connection to the Shî`ites; and it did not survive long enough for the leaders to attempt any recapitulation of Prophetic paradigms, such as the hijrah, even had they wished to do so.

The final two aspects of reified Mahdism—origins on a periphery and an emphasis on socioeconomic justice—definitely are reflected in this Arabian movement. Al-`Utaybî, al-Qahtânî and their many supporters and co-militants were from tribes that perceived themselves as marginalized vis-à-vis the government. The `Utaybah tribe hailed from central Arabia, the Qahtân from the south central peninsula, the Anîzah from the extreme northern border near Iraq and Jordan and the Harb from a territory running across north central Arabia all the way to Jeddah. Only the Anîzah can really be considered to have inhabited the geographical peripheries of Arabia; thus, it would seem that the calls of al-`Utaybî and al-Qahtânî for Mahdist revolution were more sociopolitical than geographic. And their open calls for the overthrow of the regime and the redistribution of its wealth among all the inhabitants of Sa`ûdî Arabia shows that this ephemeral episode of Mahdism valued social justice quite highly.

There are both similarities and differences between this Mahdism of al-`Utaybî and al-Qahtânî and previous such Sunnî movements. Like Ibn Tûmart, the Arabian Mahdists criticized an extant regime for allegedly un-Islamic practices, contravening social justice and general illegitimacy; likewise, they drew adherents from members of the aforementioned politically marginalized tribes, as
well as from those individuals who felt themselves estranged from a no-longer Islamic establishment. Unlike the Muwaḥḥids and their founder, however, al-`Uṭaybī and his cohort did not condemn any of the rulers’ doctrines, nor did they ever undertake the hijrah in order to return and conquer—although they might have hoped to do so.

Similar parallels and disparities are seen when Arabian Mahdism is compared to its nearest chronological and geographical predecessor, the movement of Muḥammad Aḥmad in late-nineteenth-century Sudan. Like the Sudanese Mahdi, both al-`Uṭaybī and al-Qaḥṭānī reproached the powers that be as un-Islamic, gathered followers and issued a da`wah to reemphasize tawḥīd and to believe that the Mahdi was personally present, and engaged establishment opponents in a propaganda war that included denigrating them and emphasizing the need for a change of regime. Like the Sudanese movement, they also took up arms; unlike it, they failed. Also unlike Muḥammad Aḥmad, the leaders of the Sa`ūdī Mahdist uprising never made their hijrah, never felt the need to abrogate embarrassingly unapplicable ḥadīths and never claimed visions or revelations as proof of the rightness of their cause.

Thus, the two-decades-old Arabian attempt to utilize Mahdism as an oppositional ideology resembles its two most analogous predecessors, the Muwaḥḥids of Ibn Tūmart and the Sudanese Mahdist of Muḥammad Aḥmad, in many aspects. However, by perhaps the most accurate Mahdist barometer, the stages-of-Mahdism paradigm delineated by Blichfeldt, al-`Uṭaybī’s movement
achieved only stages one and two—revivalist propaganda aimed at undermining a regime and the formation of a military theocracy which attempts to seize power—whereas, obviously, Ibn Tûmart and Muḥammad Aḥmad also reached stage three: conquest of a territorial state.

The Sa`ūdī establishment opposition to al-`Utaybî’s declaration of his brother-in-law’s Mahdîyah also hearkens back to the attempts of the Murâbitûn (Almoravids) to foil Ibn Tûmart, and of the Ottoman Egyptian regime in Sudan to demolish Muḥammad Aḥmad’s pretensions, as well as his movement. The Sa`ūdīs opened with a propaganda riposte, moved quickly to military action and, finally, demonized their Mahdist antagonists as “Khârijîs” and “Shî`îs.” This approach did not differ greatly from that of the Murâbitûn or the Türkîyah administration. The former declared the Muwaḥḥîds rebels, attributed to them the breaking of Islamic law, summoned all Muslims to fight them and sent an army to put down the usurper. The latter, once they found that ignoring Muḥammad Aḥmad would not get rid of him, next tried to bring him back into the fold and, when that failed, tried to undermine his message but, ultimately, were also forced to call out troops. Neither the Murâbitûn nor the Ottoman rulers of Sudan succeeded in crushing their respective Mahdist rebellions, however. The Sa`ūdīs did.

Why? Why did Ibn Tûmart and Muḥammad Aḥmad prevail as Mahdis, while al-Qaḥṭânî and his spokesman al-`Utaybî did not? It is tempting to take refuge in the truism that “the conditions were not right.” But beyond that it
seems the primary reason for the failure of the Arabian Mahdism of 1979 is that its leader(s) neglected, or were unable, to muster support for the movement across any significant segments of Sa`ûdî society, or among groups that might have been sympathetic to its anti-regime message. Ibn Tûmart won the crucial support of a particular Berber tribe, the Masmûda, and Muḥammad Aḥmad united several disparate groups—nomads, slave traders and sufis—in order to challenge, and ultimately defeat, their respective target regimes. On the other hand al-`Utaybî’s anti-government Mahdism was too Sunnî to attract Sa`ûdî Shî`a supporters and yet too religious-oriented to galvanize the Western-educated Sa`ûdî elites.\footnote{Ayubi, p. 104.} Simply put, al-`Utaybî did not have enough support. Perhaps he calculated that opponents of the Sa`ûdî regime would flock to his brother-in-law’s Mahdist banner, if for no other reason than to liberate the heartland of Islam from tyranny. If so, he and his followers’ violent occupation of Islam’s holiest site dissuaded any potential supporters among the ranks of believers in the eschatological Mahdi.

**III. Modern Pro- and Anti-Mahdist Writings in Light of al-`Utaybî**

As delineated in chapter four, above, a six-part apologetic approach toward Mahdism can be distilled from modern Mahdist sectarian writings, whose steps are as follows. First, cite ḥadîths supporting the future historicity of the Mahdi. Next, adduce eminent `ulamâ’ and scholars who share this belief. Then

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\footnote{Ayubi, p. 104.}
refute any and all objections to the doctrine, articulated or not. Be sure to point out the problematic nature of Shi‘î belief in their Hidden Imam as Mahdi. Do not neglect the disparaging of all previous Mahdîyahs as products of pretenders, but emphasize that such shams do not vitiate the true future historicity of the Mahdi. Finally, reconfigure the Mahdi and the other eschatological figures and signs for a modern, global socioeconomic and political context, in order to assess when the Mahdi’s appearance might truly take place.

It is noteworthy that the approach of al-`Utaybî has little in common with this paradigm. In fact, the only shared feature seems to consist in al-`Utaybî’s citing of traditions supporting the prophecies of the Mahdi.27 But this should perhaps come as no surprise. Juhaymân al-`Utaybî had moved beyond the ground of abstract theorizing about Mahdism and into the realm of actually deploying it as an oppositional ideology, something that had not been attempted in the Sunnî Arab world for, at that juncture, over a century. Once he (and his brother-in-law?) had decided upon a Mahdist-grounded rebellion, how to infiltrate men and arms into the Sacred Mosque no doubt became a bigger concern than academically refuting Mahdism’s opponents. In this respect al-`Utaybî seems to have had more in common with Ibn Tûmart and Muḥammad Aḥmad, Mahdist activists, than with the Mahdist abstracters who followed him. Indeed, all of the Mahdist sectarian writings examined in this dissertation were

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published after the abortive Arabian Mahdist coup, between 1980 and 1999. The failed al-`Utaybî/al-Qahtânî uprising, far from making the Islamic world safe for Mahdism, ensured that subsequent Sunnî advocates would be relegated to their world of books and ideas for the next twenty years.

Holding up modern anti-Mahdist writings against the Sa`ûdî establishment’s agenda of attack on the Mahdist revolution manqué is instructive. The Sa`ûdîs’ approach differed from that of the later anti-Mahdist theoreticians (all such works studied herein were written post-1980) in two major ways. First, neither the Sa`ûdî government leaders nor the `ulamâ’ made any attempt vis-à-vis al-`Utaybî and al-Qahtânî to undermine ḥadîths about the Mahdi; in fact, they stressed that Mahdism is a valid Islamic belief. Second, as befits an anti-Mahdist regime forced to deal with a Mahdi and his followers equipped with automatic weapons, not merely pens, typewriters or word processors, they responded not just academically but with force. In terms of similarities, modern anti-Mahdists and the 1979 Sa`ûdî establishment share a tendency to denigrate any Mahdist claimant(s) as mere pretenders, at best. Both factions of Mahdist skepticism also disparage Mahdism’s supporters, if not its very source, as “Shî‘î.”

IV. Encounters with the Shî`a on the Road to Mahdism

This dissertation demonstrates, in opposition to much conventional scholarship on the subject, that Mahdism has been, and remains, a potent ideology for Sunnîs as well as the Shî`a. And while its origins and manifestations
may not lie in “Shî`î” plots and fantasies, as Mahdism’s opponents allege, it is true that there are several points of intersection between modern Shî`îsm and at least some aspects of Sunnism, in particular not only Mahdism but also Islamic “fundamentalist” activism.^[28]

In two major realms, those of **doctrine** and **agenda**, the Shî`îsm of the Islamic Republic of Iran—particularly that articulated by the Ayatollah Khomeini—seems to have converged to some extent with the Mahdism of the Sunnî Arab world. Regarding doctrine, both post-revolutionary Iranian Shî`îsm and Sunnî Mahdism, as outlined by its sectarian apologists, evoke “a new type of eschatological movement without a specific person as the leader [emphasis added].”^[29] In Iran, Khomeini’s establishment of the Islamic Republic is said to have created the prophesied Mahdist world-wide state in microcosm, prior even to the Mahdi’s appearance.^[30] Among modern Sunnî Mahdist sectarian writings, eschatological Mahdist yearnings are, as we have seen, necessarily conceptual and depersonalized. So modern Iranian Shî`ism and Sunnî Mahdism have

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arrived, via very different routes, at an eschatological ideology devoid of an individual embodiment or leader.

In terms of agenda, certain elements of the “Islamic populism” promulgated by post-revolutionary Iranian leaders, especially Khomeini, parallel similar programs advocated by Sunnî Mahdists, as well as by Islamic activists of the Sayyid Qutb persuasion: pan-Islamic tawhîd as the lodestar of Islamic society, over and above nationalism; the ummah as demoralized captive of Westernization; and the need of the masses for social justice. This cross-sectarian meeting of the minds proceeds even after Khomeini’s death:

Almost as if receiving inspiration from the historical vision of the Shiʿa, Sunnî Islamist movements today are moving to distance themselves from the oppressive state and denouncing “suborned clergy” who serve the interests of the state and not of Islam.... [C]ontemporary Sunnî Islamist movements have actually now moved toward a more “Shiʿite” view of the unjust state: acceptance of the principle that unjust governance in Islam not only should not be tolerated...but in fact requires the believer to resist it. The theology of these Sunnî Islamist groups is often accused of being “Shiʿite” by authoritarian regimes who feel their legitimacy thus threatened.


32 Zonis and Brumberg, Khomeini, pp. 17ff.

33 Fuller and Francke, The Arab Shiʿa, p. 31.

34 Ibid., p. 45.
“Shi'ism” thus may justifiably be in the eye of the beholder—especially when he is a member of one of these threatened authoritarian regimes, like the Sa`ûdî one in 1979.

But the influence and appeal of the Islamic Republic do not derive primarily from specific doctrines or agendas. They are found, rather, in the psychological and emotional impact radiating out from the very existence of this revolutionary-founded Islamic state in one of the three most powerful and populous countries, with Egypt and Turkey, in the Middle East—a “theocratic beacon” which, although perhaps waning in ideological fervor, can still inspire Sunni reformers and revolutionaries, Mahdist and non-Mahdist, to strive for a Muslim utopia.\(^{35}\)

**V. Reappraising, and Categorizing, Modern Sunni Mahdism**

Before trying to define Mahdism in modern terms, it is useful to review what has been learned about it in the preceding chapters.

First, there is no doubt that Mahdism, in one form or another, has been a motivating factor in four of the most successful revolutionary movements in Islamic history: those of the `Abbâsids, Fâtimids, Muwaḥḥîds and Sudanese Mahdists. It has also been instrumental in the creation of two successful new religious offshoots of Islam: Bahâ'îsm and Aḥmadîsm.\(^{36}\)

\(^{35}\) See Zonis and Brumberg, *Khomeini*, pp. 20, 78.

\(^{36}\) See above, chapter one.
Second, whatever its ultimate origin—ancient Near Eastern pre-monotheistic motifs, Zoroastrian eschatology, Jewish or Christian messianism, recorded utterances of the Prophet Muhammad—Mahdism reached the status of an accepted Islamic doctrine, incorporated into hadîth collections by the third/ninth century. As such, it must now be treated, and examined, as quintessentially Islamic, both Sunnî and Shî‘î.\(^{37}\)

Third, the only overtly Mahdist movement to succeed in the Sunnî Arab world since 1800 has been that of Muḥammad Aḥmad in the Sudan. No study of Mahdism would be complete without examining this Mahdîyah, which survived for seventeen years.\(^{38}\) Although several particular aspects of this movement are no longer characteristic of modern Mahdist contexts, concrete or abstract—most notably its anti-colonial tenor and its heavy sufi involvement—Muḥammad Aḥmad’s successful translation of an eschatological religious doctrine into political fervor and conquest sheds valuable light on both preceding and subsequent Mahdist manifestations.

Fourth, a survey of a considerable number of modern pro-Mahdist writings proves that their belief in the continuing relevance of the Mahdi is keen and well-defended. Although they probably represent a minority sect in Sunnî Islam, they are influential insofar as they maintain and articulate this doctrine, should any Arab Muslim leader ever wish to draw upon it; furthermore, they keep the belief

\(^{37}\) See above, chapter two.
in the Mahdi circulating among the literate Arab public. The Mahdist sectarian theorists may be consigned to the first stage of Mahdist ideology, producing and disseminating revivalist propaganda aimed at undermining ruling regimes, but it is unlikely that any of the following stages could ever be attained without building on this crucial foundational one.\(^\text{39}\)

Fifth, the attempts in the anti-Mahdist works to undermine Mahdism are a mixed bag.\(^\text{40}\) These writers' attacks on Mahdist ūdîths seem almost ahistorical in their wish to undo over eleven centuries of inclusion of such traditions in Sunnî collections. Mahdism’s critics appear to be on stronger ground when they point out the bloodshed engendered by Mahdist claimants throughout history and when they link the concept to Shī‘ism, especially in light of modern convergences between Sunnî Mahdism and post-revolutionary Iranian Shī‘ism. Nonetheless, they seem to be fighting an uphill battle in their attempt to extirpate Mahdism from the religious lexicon of Sunnî Islam.

Thus, Mahdism has been examined, typologized, cross-referenced and analyzed both synchronically and diachronically. Now is the time to hazard an answer to the question: just what is Mahdism in the Sunnî Arab world today, as it has appeared in its sole venue for over two decades: the pages of Mahdist

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38 See above, chapter three.

39 See above, chapter four.

40 See above, chapter five.
sectarian writers? Several typologies, not necessarily mutually exclusive, can be delineated.

First, modern Mahdism might be seen most prosaically as a brand of conservative, indeed fundamentalist, Islam in the Sayyid Qutb mold that leavens its critique of extant Arab Muslim regimes with a strong element of eschatology.41 While agreeing with their non-Mahdist brethren on the diseases attacking the ummah—lack of piety and tawhîd, angst, exploitation, addiction to non-Islamic ideologies such as nationalism, to name some of the most prominent—Mahdists are seen here as disagreeing on the remedy. Rather than attempting to Islamize the system from within, as moderate fundamentalists advocate, or overturning it from without, as radical fundamentalists promote, the strong medicine for what ails the Islamic world can only be applied by the Awaited Mahdi (perhaps assisted by the prophet Jesus). Human efforts in the absence of this crucial eschatological figure will prove fruitless.

Second, Mahdist writings today exhibit so many of the characteristics of conspiracy theorizing42—a dualistic worldview; societal weakness, whether real or perceived; alleged nefarious Jewish, Zionist and/or Masonic plots to undermine the ummah; shoddy documentation of claims; acceptance of outlandish

41 See Sivan, Radical Islam; Ahmad S. Moussalli, Moderate and Radical Islamic Fundamentalism: The Quest for Modernity, Legitimacy and the Islamic State (Gainesville, FL: University Press of Florida, 1999).

42 On this topic see Daniel Pipes, The Hidden Hand: Middle East Fears of Conspiracy (New York: St. Martin’s Griffin, 1998); Ahmad Ashraf, “Conspiracy Theories,” Encyclopedia Iranica.
conjecture, etc.\textsuperscript{43}—that one is tempted to see Mahdism itself as an eschatological meta-conspiracy theory. Like Mahdism, conspiracy theories "tend to flourish especially among those buffeted by circumstances, including those inhabiting the fringes of political life....[T]hey help a people unhappy with current circumstances to explain their predicament while avoiding responsibility for it."\textsuperscript{44} Middle Eastern conspiracy theories proliferated in the wake of Napoleon's occupation of Egypt, which began in 1798; Mahdism became a major topic of study and debate with the Sunnî Arab world after the Six Days War of 1967, and its popularity increased after 1979, the year of both Islamic revolution in Iran and al-`Utaybi's abortive insurrection in Sa`udî Arabia.

Perhaps Mahdism, insofar as it currently exists in its abstract form, captures the yearnings of the denizens of the Islamic peripheries, characterized by:

popular piety once represented by wonder-workers, wandering dervishes, and local pilgrimage rites. Unorganized, unorganizable, the masses of Muslims who...look expectantly for signs of the world coming to an end...represent a volatile, occasionally politicizable, element that responds more to emotion and charisma than to specific doctrines and policies....\textsuperscript{45}

Whereas in the time of Ibn Tûmart or Muḥammad Aḥmad these fringes were indeed physical and geographical—the far western Maghrib, the southern

\textsuperscript{43} See above, chapter four, for examples.

\textsuperscript{44} Pipes, pp. 303, 305.

Sudan—today they are just as likely to be intangible, yet perhaps taking the form of the credibility gap of a Mahdist literalist vis-à-vis his modernist peers or, more concretely, the political marginalization of a Juhaymân al-`Utaybî and his followers.

Alternatively, Mahdism can plausibly be characterized as dissatisfaction with the lack of social justice in the Islamic world and its deferral to the next world. Taking a cue from the several traditions which describe the Mahdi as filling the earth with equity and justice, proponents see his main role as, to put it bluntly, wealth redistribution; this even seems to take precedence over implementation of Islamic law, at least in some Mahdist formulations. Al-`Utaybî, too, made it one of his brother-in-law the putative Mahdi’s demands that the assets of the Sa`ûdîs be divided among the people.

More negatively, Mahdist beliefs in our present age might be judged not merely a series of unfortunate, if benign, superstitions or fantasies but al-hawas al-dînî, “religious fantasies” or even perhaps signs of amrâd al-nafsiyyah al-jasîmah, “psycho-somatic illnesses.” Such was the case with the alleged

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46 Ibid., p. 9, where Bulliet notes that even in the early days of Islam the periphery could be social.


48 See chapter two, above, the following hadîths: Ibn Mâjah #4083; Abû Dâ`ûd #4282, 4283, 4285, 4286; al-Tirmidhî #2333.
appearances of the Virgin Mary which took place in the Arab world following
defeat in the Six-Days War, beginning with the al-Zaytûn Coptic Church in Cairo in early 1968. "Even in less troubled times it would have been difficult to find another religious figure who would be a better symbol of the national unity between Egypt's Muslims and Copts." The yearnings for the Mahdi may be part of the same dysfunctional, if understandable, mindset.

All of these characterizations of Mahdism capture part of its essence, but may lead into the trap of mistaking a part for the whole, like the proverb about the blind man who, upon encountering an elephant, assumed that each smaller part he touched—the tail, trunk, ears, legs—amounted to the entire animal. Mahdism may be equal parts neo-fundamentalism, conspiracy theory, revenge of peripheralized populations, and thirst for social justice. It has not manifested itself as mass psychosis or hysteria yet, however. In fact, since al-'Utaybî and al-Qahtânî some twenty-one years ago, Mahdism has not appeared at all in the Sunnî Arab world; it remains merely an abstraction, albeit a popular one.

It is necessary, but not sufficient, to add the definition of Mahdism as a modern ideology for opposing extant regimes. This has obviously been the case

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throughout Islamic history, from the `Abbâsids, Fâṭimids and Muwâḥîḥids in pre-modern times to the Mahdîsts of nineteenth-century Sudan and the ultimately futile insurgency in Sa`ûdî Arabia at the dawn of the Muslim fifteenth century. This last failed movement encouraged—if not forced—Mahdism to go not underground but, as it were, into the ether: the Mahdist sectarians have ever since treated the idea as virtually a pure abstraction, always approaching but never quite here. They are loath to identify any particular Muslim leader as even a potential Mahdi, a constraint they do not feel regarding al-Sufyânî or al-Dajjâl. Whether Sunnî Arab Mahdîsm will ever descend from this archetypal realm into the mundane world of history and politics again is a question for another day—and another dissertation.

Modern Sunnî Arab Mahdîsm, insofar as it is reflected in the writings of its proponents, has three major features that distinguish it from the belief as it was articulated and manifested prior to the twentieth century.

First is the fact of its abstraction. Whether because of the opprobrium directed at Mahdîsm in the wake of al-`Utaybî’s scandalous occupation of Islam’s holiest site, or simply because no Arab leader has been credible and brazen enough to grab the Mahdîst ring, Mahdist apologists write about the idea in, if you will, mostly Platonic, not Aristotelian, terms. They create a “virtual Mahdi” and seem to hope someone will reify the concept.

The second distinguishing characteristic of modern Mahdîsm is its heavy utilization of, indeed dependence upon, Biblical eschatology, particularly as

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espoused by prominent American Protestant writers. This is a new development in Islamic eschatological thinking. It seemingly reflects the worldwide influence of Western millennial anxieties about the advent of the year 2000, in general, and the omnipresence of American culture, in particular. Whatever its source, citing the Bible and Billy Graham certainly does little to gain the pro-Mahdists a hearing among their more literalist brethren.

The third modern accretion to Mahdism is the prominence accorded anti-Zionist conspiracy theorizing.\(^{52}\) This appears to be a new (post-World War II) twist on Muslim criticism of the Isrā'īliyāt, the Judaic component of early Islamic tradition. The allegedly nefarious Jewish plans to undermine Islam by interpolating fantastic stories into hadīth collections are conflated with modern Jewish and Israeli strategems to “keep Islam down,” beginning with overthrowing the Ottoman caliphate and continuing until today.

Mahdism in the Sunnī Arab world today is a doctrine undoubtedly held by many Muslims, but actively expounded and defended by only a minority of them. Like Islamic fundamentalism, Mahdism

...has a dual nature. When it is analysed as if it were a movement that has a political nature only, mistakes are made because [it] is fully religion at the same time. When it is analysed as if it were a movement that has a religious nature only, mistakes are made, too, because [it] is fully politics at the same time.\(^{53}\)

\(^{52}\) I owe this succinct delineation of modern Muslim eschatology as consisting of classical Islamic thought, antisemitic conspiracy theories and Biblical material to David Cook, “Muslim Fears of the Year 2000,” *Middle East Quarterly* Vol. V, No. 2 (June 1998), pp. 51-62.

\(^{53}\) Jansen, *The Dual Nature of Islamic Fundamentalism*, p. xi.
The examples of the twentieth century’s Wahhābī Mahdists, the nineteenth century’s Sudanese Mahdists and the twelfth century’s Muwahhīds demonstrate that Sunnî eschatological messianism can shift from a purely religious to a powerfully political movement in a relatively short period of time—and, almost as quickly, change back again. Two decades ago the disparate elements of frustration within the Arab world that had been accumulating since the 1967 debacle coalesced into actual Mahdist opposition to at least one regime, that of Sa`ûdî Arabia. Following its ignominious defeat, Mahdism resumed its purely abstract, religious form. If, as we have seen, Islamic history is any indication, it will not remain abstract indefinitely.


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