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Jean-Pierre Filiu

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The Return of Political Mahdism

By Jean-Pierre Filiu

The Mahdi, or "well-oriented" imam, is a central figure within Shiism and its various branches. Today, the overwhelming majority of Shiites follow what outsiders describe as "Twelver Shiism," which is a reference to the dynasty of twelve imams initiated at the very dawn of Islam by Ali ibn Abi Talib, the cousin and son-in-law of the Prophet Mohammed. Within Twelver Shiite belief, the twelfth imam, whose first name is Mohammed, is still alive, although he is said to have gone into occultation after disappearing from human sight in 941 CE. It is further believed that this Mahdi or "Hidden Imam" will reappear at the end of time in order to restore justice and peace on earth before the Day of Judgment.

Echoes of the Mahdi's powers have sounded throughout Islamic history. From time to time, movements have arisen under the banner of the Hidden Imam, claiming his support and authority to contest the rule of established religious and political rulers. Some of these mahdist movements have even succeeded in establishing their own polities.

Yet for the most part, mahdist belief has traditionally expressed itself in politically neutral, even passive, ways within Shiism. This quietist practice derives from many sources, including the fact that mahdism projects the ultimate showdown between justice and injustice into a supra-human, other-worldly dimension, thereby diminishing the relative importance of worldly political action. Moreover, by stressing that knowledge of the Mahdi and his return is beyond the reach of mere human comprehension, Twelver Shiite authorities have generally managed throughout history to rein in apocalyptic superstitions and to neutralize messianism before it becomes politically subversive.

In the contemporary era, however, a new wave of political mahdism has taken root in the Shiite world. For instance, the 2005 election in Iran of the overtly mahdist President Ahmadinejad lent unprecedented support to different, and sometimes competing, messianic tendencies both in Iran and beyond. Later in 2006, many eventually came to celebrate the 2006 war between Israel and Hezbollah as a "divine victory" that was achieved with the Madhi's help. And perhaps most importantly, in Iraq, following the U.S.-led invasion in 2003, a variety of new mahdist movements—from Moqtada al-Sadr's Mahdi's Army, to Ahmad al-Hassan's apocalyptic group the Supporters of the Imam Mahdi—have emerged, challenging the authority of more traditional clerics like Ayatollah Sistani and contesting their leadership of the Shia community. In light of Shiism's traditional quietism, these recent expressions of political mahdism require careful scrutiny.

The Roots of Mahdism

There is no mention of the Mahdi in the Quran. It is through the Hadith, or sayings attributed to the Prophet Mohammed and collected during the first two centuries of Islam, that the Mahdi gained prominence in the Muslim faith. According to this tradition, the Mahdi's followers, gathered under black banners, will supposedly appear to confront *al-Masih al-Dajjal* (the false messiah) and his armies of evil at the end of time. However, according to an alternative Sunni tradition, it is Jesus (*Issa*), the eleventh envoy of Allah—rather than the Madhi—who will then come back to fight (in Syria) and ultimately kill (in Palestine) the *Dajjal* or Antichrist. In this view, the Mahdi will always defer to Jesus and let him lead the worldwide community of Muslims in collective prayer.

While Sunni traditionalists constructed this eschatological narrative, Shia scholars developed a rather different version. Devastated by their early failure to advance the cause of Imam Ali and his heirs during Islam's early civil wars over the rightful successors to the Prophet Mohammed, Shia scholars began referring to an omnipotent Mahdi,[1] hidden at the heart of inaccessible mountains and protected by wild beasts, who would one day return to smash the enemies of Islam—including both infidels as well as deviant Muslims. With the passing of generations, and Shiism's enduring exclusion from political power, quarrels deepened among the supporters of competing imams. As one consequence of this, Shiism itself became separated into different branches—including, for instance, Sevener Shiism, which is also known as Ismaïlism. But a major Shia faction retained its allegiance to Ali's descendants until the death of the eleventh imam, Hassan al-Askari, in the Iraqi city of Samarra in 873.

Imam Hassan, as well as his father Ali al-Hadi, had been kept under house arrest

by the Sunni Abbasid Caliphs, and there were strong suspicions that the imam was murdered. After Hassan's death, Shia networks smuggled his four-year-old son Mohammed underground for his protection, and in following years the twelfth imam addressed his followers only through his *sufara* (ambassadors). It was during this period, which is known as *al-ghayba al-sughra* (the small occultation), that Imam Mohammed acquired the aura of a full-fledged Mahdi. In 941 the imam's fourth and last ambassador announced that the Mahdi had decided to disappear. This was, according to Twelver tradition, the beginning of *al-ghayba al-kubra* (the great occultation), and this remains the state in which many devout Shia believe the twelfth imam is still living today.

In the century that followed the start of the great occultation, the doctrine on mahdism within Twelver Shiism was consolidated. This monumental task was accomplished by the Baghdadi Shaykh al-Mufid, who selected and organized assorted traditional pronouncements on the mahdi attributed to the Prophet Mohammed as well as to the twelve imams in his *Kitab al-Irshad* (*Book of Guidance*). After completing this work, Shaykh Mufid even claimed to have received a letter from the Hidden Imam himself praising his work.

Shaykh Mufid describes how the Mahdi's return will be preceded by a period of natural catastrophes and human strife. The cities of Baghdad and Kufa in what is today Iraq will be struck by rains of red fire, while the Euphrates River will flow out of its bed. The shaykh didn't presume to know exactly when the imam's occultation will end, but he gives credence to the traditional idea that the Mahdi will reappear during the Ashura of an even Islamic year. (Imam Hussein, Ali's son, was martyred in 680 on the tenth day of the Muslim month of Muharram, which is annually commemorated as the Ashura by the Shia worldwide.) When the Mahdi does appear, he will annihilate all the "hypocrites" in Kufa and from Iraq he will move forth to reconquer the world for Islam. Through this re-conquest, the world will be restored to peace and justice for a period of either seven or nineteen years (the traditions are unclear as to exactly how long this will last), and then the final Day of Judgment will come.[2]

Subsequent Shia scholars eventually agreed that the conflagration leading to the return of the Mahdi—or, more precisely, to the return of his apparition (*zuhur*) from concealment—would be marked by a sequence of five events or signs. These signs include: an uprising led by the "Yemenite," the Mahdi's advance scout or herald; a battle with the "Sufyani," a hypocritical tyrant associated with the Sunni oppression; the murder of the "Pure Soul," the Mahdi's envoy; the "Battle of the Clamors" in which the Mahdi's followers shout from heaven in an effort to silence the yells of the evil forces from underground; and the engulfing and destruction of an evil army in the Arabian desert.[3] After this, the Mahdi will arise as the "Lord of the Age" or

the "Lord of the Sword" to lead his "army of wrath" in its re-conquest of the world.

Once the Shia religious hierarchy had conceived of this eschatological narrative, it worked hard to establish a monopoly over the interpretation of the signs in an effort to suppress political mahdism. These efforts by the established Shia scholars to suppress political messianism were not always successful, however. The Safavid Shiite sect (which originally emerged out of a Sufi movement known as the Safawiyya) rose to conquer Persia at the beginning of the sixteenth century. They revered their leader, Shah Ismaïl, as the Mahdi himself. The defeat of Safavid forces by the Ottoman Army in 1514, however, compelled Shah Ismail to restrain his military ambitions. Subsequently, Shah Ismail came to be seen among the Shia as the representative of the Mahdi, not as the Hidden Imam himself. At the same time, Shia clerics celebrated the Safavid's success, and they undertook to spread Shiite teachings throughout Persia. To consolidate Safavid control over Persia, these Shiite clerics, too, eventually came to repudiate political mahdism. This complex historical process led the scholar Zeev Maghen to state that "Shiism as we know it today came into being primarily as a force for anti-messianism."[4]

The Khomeinist Deterrence

The Iranian revolution of 1979 is sometimes portrayed as representing a break with the traditional Shiite quietism. It is true that when Iran's revolutionary rumblings began in the fall of 1978, Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini played every card in his hand to rally the masses against Shah Reza Pahlavi—including the use of subtle messianic references. Subsequently, Khomeini accepted the prestigious title of imam and even allowed his followers to indulge in messianic rhetoric. In one notorious example, Khomeini did not disavow the collective hallucination of November 27 1978, when thousands of his followers claimed to have seen Khomeini's face in the moon.

Since coming to power, however, the leaders of the Islamic Republic of Iran have generally sought to proscribe, or to at least deter, political messianism within their realm. In fact, as a matter of principle Khomeini adamantly opposed political mahdism: His break with the traditional Shiite clergy came not on the issues of messianism, but on the question of political power. During his exile from 1966 to 1978 in Najaf, Iraq, Khomeini developed his political doctrine of *vilayat-e-faqih*, or rule of the Islamic jurist, while the Shiite clerical hierarchy based in Qom continued to advocate a centuries-old separation of religious and political authority.

After the fall of the shah in February 1979, the Islamic Republic was formed around a constitution that described its supreme leader as a representative of the

Hidden Imam. This delegation of supernatural power to the head of state was in line with the dynastical legitimacy instituted by the Safavids. While the ayatollahs in Qom resented this confusion of powers, they shared Khomeini's dislike for messianic excesses. No individual or sect had the right to challenge the occultation or decipher the signs. This was the privilege of the religious hierarchy, which prohibited any messianic attempt to "accelerate" the return of the apparition.

The man who would replace Khomeini, Ali Khamenei, was a revolutionary cleric from Mashhad, in the Khorasan, where the Islamic Republic had boosted the pilgrimage to the shrine of the eighth imam, Reza. The Foundation of the Imam Reza had helped Khamenei in his ascension to power and, after being elected President of the Islamic Republic in 1981, he was able to expand his power base outside of Khorasan. In Qom, the Ayatollah Muhammad Taqi Bahjat, along with his disciple Mesbah-Yazdi, supported him in his rivalry for power with other religious leaders. When Khomeini died in 1989, Khamenei was upgraded as an ayatollah and appointed as Iran's Supreme Leader. Ayatollah Khamenei has followed Khomeini's repudiation of political mahdism.

The next two men to succeed Khameini as president of the Islamic Republic, Ali Akbar Hachemi Rafsanjani (1989-1997) and Muhammad Khatami (1997-2005), were even more hostile to political mahdism than their predecessors. But the 2005 election of Mahmud Ahmadinejad as President of Iran has undermined the mechanisms proscribing political mahdism within the Islamic Republic. The new president has repeatedly invoked the authority of the Mahdi in his tirades against his political opponents. And while the post-Khomeini religious establishment has continued to seek to proscribe political mahdism, Ahmadinejad has given the impression at least that he is the harbinger of the Hidden Imam, and that he is paving the way for the actual re-appearance of the apparition of the "Lord of Time."

Ahmadinejad is the first president of the Islamic Republic to not come from a clerical background, and his embrace of spiritual and political mahdism represents an effort on his part to consolidate a power base that is independent of the religious hierarchy. He has attempted to utilize political mahdism in a number of different ways. For example, he sponsored the activities of the Qom-based Bright Future Institute (BFI), whose stated mission is to "prepare scientific answers to respond to superstitions surrounding" the Mahdi.[5] Since Ahmadinejad's election, the BFI has organized an annual international conference on Islamic messianism, which is held on the fifteenth day of the Muslim month of Chaabane, the alleged birth date of the Hidden Imam. (Ahmadinejad is also known for delivering rousing public speeches on this date.) The BFI describes the Mahdi as the "crusader of equality and world peace" and attacks the "Christian Zionist messianic project [that] represents a fundamental betrayal of the message of Jesus Christ."

Another example of the way Ahmadinejad has attempted to utilize mahdism revolves around the Mosque of Jamkaran. During his rule, Ayatollah Khomeini never felt it was appropriate to visit the Mosque of Jamkaran, which had been built in the eleventh century near Qom to commemorate the appearance of the Mahdi in a dream. President Ahmadinejad, however, has sought to dramatically enhance the prestige of the mosque. Among other things, he has used public subsidies to enlarge the sanctuary at Jamkaran, which in turn, has meant that the mosque has received increasing numbers of pilgrims. Not only has this directly undercut the pilgrimage to the Imam Reza's shrine in Mashad, the regional power base of Ayatollah Khamenei himself, but it has also challenged the traditionalist clerics in Qom who have impugned the fervor of the pilgrims to Jamkaran, the growing use of the Internet to send messages to the Mahdi, and the now widely popular belief among these pilgrims that the Hidden Imam is accessing the sanctuary on a regular basis through a tunnel. The superstitions ignited by Jamkaran clearly clash with the reigning orthodoxy of Iran's mullahs and, in many ways, is subversive of the clerical hierarchy and rule.

Supreme Leader Khamenei has been careful not to publicly support President Ahmadinejad's embrace of political mahdism, and in this regard, he has never wavered from Khomeini's original stance on messianism. However, as the scholar Mehdi Khalaji notes, "Khamenei does not hold a political messianic set of ideas, but his religious mentality, mixed with his five decades of political experience, makes him an ambiguous and ambivalent character" with respect to the issue of political mahdism.[6]

In contrast, Rafsanjani, who was defeated by Ahmadinejad in the presidential race in 2005, has been much more explicit in his rejection of political mahdism. As he has said,

> Some say we have contact (with the Hidden Imam) and the harm comes when they can deceive people with this philosophy. In every juncture of history, you will see that this has always existed. This was the means by which they spread sedition. Today, due to the height of love that people feel for the Lord of the Age, this sedition is being intensified.[7]

The future of political mahdism in Iran is now very much linked to the fate of Ahmadinejad and, hence, to the outcome of the next presidential election. In the meantime, Iran's religious hierarchy and its supporters at the core of the Islamic Republic have developed deep-rooted mechanisms to proscribe opportunistic messianic tendencies that might threaten their rule. The outcome of this competition within the

Islamic Republic between messianic opportunism and the clerical establishment will shape the future of the regime and the political future of Shiism overall in important ways. Meanwhile, messianism is a political card that is also being opportunistically played, marginally but consistently, in Lebanon and Iraq.

Lebanese Ambivalence

Mahdism has played a checkered role in the Islamist politics of modern Lebanon. In 1975 the Lebanese Shaykh Musa Sadr founded the Brigades of National Resistance, the first full-fledged Shia militia that soon became known by the Arabic acronym Amal, which means "hope." Musa Sadr was revered by some as an imam and, after he "disappeared" during a trip to Libya in 1978, his followers came to regard him as the "vanished imam."[8] Lebanon's pro-Iranian Hezbollah (Party of God) movement, which was launched in 1982 and officially established three years later, pursued a revolutionary agenda of militant mobilization, but has nonetheless conventionally eschewed mahdist rhetoric and disavowed messianic expectations.

In light of this history, it came as quite a surprise when Hezbollah's deputy secretary general, Shaykh Naïm Qassem, published a book in 2007 entitled *The Savior Mahdi*.[9] The fact that the official ideologue of Hezbollah devoted his energy and time to write such a book was in itself remarkable: The book was published, after all, only a few months after Hezbollah's grueling 33-day confrontation with Israel. But in the book, Qassem wrote that public longing for the Mahdi had inspired "the movement of the apparition" and he cited many signs announcing the dawning of an "era of the [Mahdi's] apparition." This increase in messianic activity, as Qassem sees it, is the direct consequence of "Iran's march forward, launched by the holy Imam Khomeini and led by Imam Khamenei" (the supreme leader is very seldom called "imam" inside Iran).

Although Qassem praised this upswing in messianic fervor, he was careful not to embrace mahdism overtly and to declare himself or any other living person in possession of any special knowledge of the Mahdi's return. This ambivalence is typical of Hezbollah's recent attitude toward mahdism, which is still eschewed by Hezbollah officials, but is tolerated (and even encouraged) in the areas of Lebanon that Hezbollah controls. For instance, a secular publisher named Shadi (Faris) Faqih has written a series of inexpensive booklets on popular mahdism that are easily found in Beirut, southern Lebanon and the Bekaa Valley, as well as being sold at the Iranian cultural center in Damascus. One of these, *Ahmadinejad and the Next World Revolution,* claims on its front cover that "Ahmadinejad is the leader of the Mahdi's forces that will liberate Jerusalem."[10]

Faqih describes a complex sequence of seventeen signs leading to the apparition

of the Mahdi. The thirteenth of these signs is the rise of Khamenei, who is identified with the Mahdi's standard-bearer al-Khorassani. The fourteenth sign equates Ahmadinejad with Shuaib Ibn Saleh, the Mahdi's chief of staff. The remaining three signs, which involve horrendous battles and massacres, will precede the Mahdi's coming and subsequent triumph.

Faqih furthermore describes the 2006 war between Israel and Hezbollah as a "divine victory" in which the Mahdi himself and his holy sword Zulfikar took part. He portrays white-winged Hezbollah fighters flying and falling upon the Zionist enemy. He hails the missiles that hit Haifa as a "miracle," and declares the war with Israel as the opening skirmish in cycle of doomsday battles.[11] Convinced that we now "are in the era of the [Mahdi's] apparition," Faqih completes his apocalyptic cycle by identifying the Hezbollah secretary general, Shaykh Hassan Nasrallah, as the "Yemenite" who, according to tradition, acts as the herald of the Hidden Iman. He has furthermore announced that Saudi King Abdullah will be the last ruler of Hejaz, where the Mahdi will soon appear.[12]

Hezbollah can rightfully claim that Faqih's popular mahdist literature represents the views of an independent writer who has repeatedly acknowledged his lack of official sanction. At the same time, Qassem's book *Savior Mahdi* did not rebut this apocalyptic literature, and no one tried to stop Faqih from asserting that Nasrallah is the long-awaited Yemenite. This ambivalent attitude toward messianic expressions is even more pronounced in Moqtada Sadr's militia in Iraq. And while Iranian or Iranian-inspired mahdism has generated much debate, the importance of Iraq in contemporary messianism is of particular significance.

Moqtada's Gambles on the Mahdi

The year 1977 marked a watershed in relations between Iraq's Baath regime and its Shia community. The government's ban on the Ashura celebrations led to violent unrest in the holy cities of Najaf and Kerbala. In the same year the Hojatoleslam Muhammad Sadeq Sadr, a junior but ambitious cleric, published a treatise about the Mahdi with a foreword by his cousin and master, Ayatollah Muhammad Baqer Sadr. This fifty-page text foreword became so popular that it was sold as a booklet all over Iraq. Baqer Sadr depicted the Mahdi as a man of flesh and blood who was actually living among human beings, though they were unable to discern his presence. He claimed that modern means of communication and transport enhanced the possibility of the return of the Mahdi's apparition and the implementation of his global rule.

In this and similar ways, Baqer Sadr directly challenged the quietism represented

by traditional Iraqi clerics led by Ayatollah Abulqassem Khoï. After further being emboldened by the Islamic revolution in neighboring Iran in 1979, Sadr's open defiance of Saddam Hussein's dictatorship only escalated. Subsequently, after a Baathist death squad killed Baqer Sadr in April 1980, his followers, led by Sadeq Sadr, kept alive the legacy of this "martyred ayatollah."

When Khoï died in 1992, Sadeq Sadr, who was by then an ayatollah, advanced his claim to be the religious leader of the Shia community. And during the subsequent years of the international embargo against Iraq, and the widespread degradation of living standards, his stance became increasingly militant. In April 1998, Sadeq Sadr decided to organize Friday prayers against the wishes of the Najaf establishment, which had previously ruled in support of suspending the prayers until the Mahdi returned (or his representative was designated). Open to Sunni as well as Shia, these prayers gained in political prominence. They unsettled Saddam Hussein, and he ordered the assassination of Sadeq Sadr in February 1999.

Moqtada Sadr was a 25-year-old student in Najaf when his father Sadeq was murdered. He married a daughter of the "martyred ayatollah" Baqer Sadr, and emerged as an early leader of the so-called "embargo generation" that grew up in the horrible destitution and oppression of Iraq in the 1990s. Soon after the American invasion of March 2003, the neighborhood of Baghdad known as "Saddam City" was renamed "Sadr City" to honor the memories of the martyred Ayatollahs Baqer and Sadeq Sadr. Moqtada, however, was unable to capitalize on this Shiite revival, and he quickly learned that he lacked the personal authority to organize and to lead the Shia community. As eminent Shia clerics began returning to Iraq from exile (mainly from Iran), Moqtada sought a new way to supplant their authority and to establish himself as a leader within the Shia community. He did so by appealing to a source of authority that was higher than the clerical establishment, and by branding the militia that he had formed the "Mahdi's Army."

Moqtada's appeal to the Mahdi was a stroke of political genius. While the Badr Brigade, the military arm of the Supreme Council for the Islamic Revolution in Iraq (SCIRI), and other Shia factions were much better organized and equipped, the Mahdi's Army gained such political momentum that it was able to sustain a weeks-long confrontation with American forces in the spring and the summer of 2004. Moqtada never directly indulged in messianic rhetoric, but his often underpaid and undertrained militiamen found in the mahdist pretense a welcome compensation for their misery—as well as a justification for their violent actions.

After al-Qaeda bombed the shrines of the tenth and the eleventh imams in Samarra in February 2006, the Mahdi's Army was at the forefront of battles against "Baathists" and "terrorists" that often ended in anti-Sunni ethnic cleansing, especially in Baghdad. In August 2007 Moqtada's followers chose the Mahdi's alleged birth date, the fifteenth

day of the Muslim month of Chaabane, to confront their Shi'a rivals and the security forces in Kerbala. Though the resulting popular outrage led Moqtada to suspend his militia's military activity, the Mahdi's Army did not disband, and its networks continued to challenge any gestures by Shia leaders to reconcile with American "infidels."

Moqtada Sadr moved to Iran to complete his religious studies and escape the hostility in Najaf. (The excesses of his militia did nothing to win "hearts and minds" in Shia seminaries there). In August 2008 he publicly commemorated the Mahdi's supposed birthday and asked his followers to renew their pledges of allegiance to the Mahdi—not to himself—with their own blood. This request was anything but orthodox, mixing rites of tribal loyalty with centuries-old superstitions. In this way, Moqtada indicated that he was still trying to tap into popular mahdism to help himself stage a political comeback.

The Doomsday Militia in Southern Iraq

Moqtada's invocation of the Mahdi was not unique within Iraq, however. As early as 1998, long before Moqtada launched the Mahdi's Army in the wake of the American invasion, Ahmad al-Hassan claimed that he was appointed to rule the Shia (*wassi*) by the Hidden Imam. Not surprisingly, Hassan came from Basra in southern Iraq, which for a number of reasons, has historically been a fertile area for mahdist movements. Some of the main southern Iraqi tribes converted to Shiism as late as the nineteenth century[13] (which meant that they were less influenced by Twelver quietism), and the *sheykhya* version of Shiism, which denies the moral guidance of the ayatollahs, remains to this day an influential teaching among them. Moreover, a vibrant nationalism, with hints of xenophobia, also nurtures the popular defiance of "Persian" clerics, whether they preach in Qom or Najaf.

In the late 1990s Ahmad al-Hassan organized his followers into a movement known as Ansar al-Imam al-Mahdi (Supporters of the Imam Madhi). While his early followers were no doubt zealous believers, some accused Hassan of being an agent of the Baathist regime that had executed Moqtada Sadr's father. After the U.S. led invasion of 2003, Hassan began railing against the "American Satan," asserting that the occupation of Iraq by infidel forces was the prelude to the end of time. Hassan's followers then began to refer to him as the herald of the Mahdi, or as the "Yemenite"—a title that Hassan willingly accepted. Hassan furthermore branded the United States the Antichrist that was to be defeated in the doomsday confrontation,[14] and he publicly demanded that Ayatollahs Sistani (of Iraq) and Khamenei (of Iran) pledge their allegiance to him on the basis of his messianic mission.

Ayatollah Kazem Haeri, who is the heir to Baqer Sadr as well as a supporter of

Moqtada Sadr, attacked Hassan from Qom and repudiated his pronouncements.[15] But Hassan, the self-appointed harbinger of the Mahdi's return, was not deterred by this condemnation; in fact, he claimed that the doomsday angels Gabriel, Michael and Asrafil were supporting him.[16] His followers credited Hassan with such "miracles" as the mystical uncovering of the real tomb of Fatima, daughter of the Prophet Muhammad and wife of the Imam Ali. The movement's declarations were sealed with the Star of David, with Hassan's name glowing at its center.[17] His devotees furthermore staged marches and organized ceremonies marking the holiest occasions of the Shia calendar, during which they vilified established Shiite clerics in Iraq and Iran for not believing in the end of the Mahdi's great occultation.

Hassan developed his doctrine and networks for disseminating his propaganda. His movement launched its own newspaper, *Al-Sirat al-Mustaqim* (*The Straight Path*)—a name that refers to the opening lines of the Quran. It also began an Arabic website, www.almahdyoon.org, as well as websites in Persian and English. The English site asserts that in the Book of Revelation, "Babylon refers to Iraq, as it was the capital of Iraq at that time. And all massacres and riots will happen in Iraq and on Iraqi land." The "lamb," which is not mentioned anywhere in the group's Arabic pamphlets, gains prominence on the website's English pages: Those "invited to the feast of the lamb," the sites states, "are the comrades of the first Mahdi, the Yemenite." Furthermore, the site claims that Saint John is supposed to have prophesied Hassan's mission in southern Iraq.

Some of the most radical members of the Supporters of the Imam Mahdi established a camp with their families in the city of Zarga, not far from Najaf, where they became known as the "Soldiers of Heaven." In late January 2007, during the Ashura of the Islamic year 1428, the Iraqi government warned that the Soldiers of Heaven was planning an armed uprising in Najaf, and further accused Hassan of plotting to murder Ayatollah Sistani (as well as other major Shia religious figures). The Iraqi government then moved to crush the Soldiers of Heaven, and hundreds of people were killed in the ensuing bloodbath, including many women and children trapped in the besieged camp.

Baghdad claimed that the "rebels" wanted to take over Najaf during the 1428th Ashura in a bid to fulfill the prophecy that the Mahdi's apparition would return during the Ashura of an even year. The Iraqi army led the assault against the Soldiers of Heaven, but U.S. forces were involved as well. (Two American soldiers died when their helicopter crashed.) Tehran, incidentally, wholeheartedly supported this campaign against the mahdist movement, backing the Iraqi government's claim that the Soldiers of Heaven represented a messianic insurgency with murderous designs.[18]

Hassan himself denied any responsibility for the bloodbath at Zarga, which may have helped him shed some of his most extremist followers.[19] Yet the Supporters of the Imam Mahdi have continued to recruit new members, and now claim to number

five thousand all over the southern provinces. The group's newspaper announced that many local commanders previously loyal to Moqtada Sadr had, in fact, defected from the Mahdi's Army and subsequently pledged their allegiance to the "Yemenite" Hassan. And, during the following Ashura in January 2008, the movement deployed an aggressive militia that humiliated the security forces in Basra. Dozens of people were killed in two days. Hassan ordered his fighters to withdraw to their safe houses, but he declared that the blood of the "martyrs" would be revenged.

Iraq is now home to a full-fledged madhist militia movement. It is extremely difficult to assess the real dimensions of the phenomenon because of the disparity between the accounts of the Iraqi government and Hassan's disciples. The Supporters of the Imam Mahdi might be seen as just one more Shiite militia in an insecure country where tribal groups and criminal networks have produced numerous similar groups. But among these movements, the messianic message of Hassan's movement is quite unique, and the fact that it has been able to attract new recruits—including from Sadr's Mahdi Army—makes it difficult to treat this particular mahdist movement as insignificant.

Indeed, in many ways, southern Iraq is now the main arena for the evolution of militant mahdism. Whether Moqtada's followers come to adopt a more genuine and active form of messianism is likely to be critical. And the very existence of a self-proclaimed Yemenite and his apocalyptic militia adds an ominous dimension to this new reality. These developments must be carefully studied.

More generally, the return of political mahdism in Iran, Lebanon, and Iraq has sent shockwaves throughout the Shiite world, where it has challenged the traditional quietism and authority of the highest ayatollahs. Engaging in eschatological rhetoric and playing to popular messianism has thus far proven to be a convenient and effective way for radical Shiite leaders to increase their political power. This has been especially the case for ambitious men like Mahmud Ahmadinejad, Moqtada al-Sadr and Hassan Nasrallah, who cannot realistically hope to reach the top levels of the clerical hierarchy. The forthcoming Iranian elections (in which Ahmadinejad will be running for re-election) will likely shed some light on whether political mahdism will remain an asset or become a liability for these men as well as other aspirants to leadership of the radical Shia movement.

NOTES

1. Moshe Sharon, *Black Banners from the East* (Jerusalem: Magnes Press, 1983), p.117.
2. Sheikh al-Mufid, *Kitab al-Irshad* (London: Balagha Books, 1981), pp.541-54.

3. Jassim M. Hussein, *The Occultation of the Twelfth Imam* (London: Muhammadi Trust, 1982), pp.26-7.
4. Zeev Maghen, "Occultation in Perpetuum, Shi'ite messianism and the policies of the Islamic Republic," *Middle East Journal*, 62 (Spring 2008): 242.
5. For this quote and the following ones, see the BFI website www.mahdaviat-conference.com.
6. Mehdi Khalaji, "Apocalyptic Politics," Washington Institute for Near East Policy (WINEP), *Policy Focus,* 79 (January 2008): 20.
7. Interview of Ali Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani by the Iranian state TV, 31 October 2008.
8. Fuad Ajami, *The Vanished Imam* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1986).
9. Naïm Qassem, *Al-Mahdi al-mukhaless* (Beirut: Dar al-Hadi, 2007).
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11. Shadi Faqih, *Al wa'ad al-sadiq* and *Al-Imam al-Mahdi wa-al intisar* (Beirut: Dar al-Ilm, 2006).
12. Shadi Faqih, *Anta al-an fî 'asr al-zuhur* (Beirut: Dar al-Ilm, 2006).
13. Yitzhak Nakash, *The Shi'is of Iraq* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1994), pp. 25-48.
14. Ahmad al-Hassan's statement, 22 May 2004.
15. www.alhaeri.org/iraq/right-iraq.html.
16. Ahmad al-Hassan's statement, 29 November 2003.
17. Hussein al-Mansouri's declaration on behalf of the Supporters of the Imam Mahdi, 21 July 2005.
18. On 31 October 2008, in an interview on Iranian state TV, the former president Rafsanjani still recalled with disgust how "in Iraq, those who claim to be disciples of the Lord of the Age wanted to destroy the sanctuary in Najaf."
19. Ahmad al-Hassan's statement, 28 September 2006.