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The Murshids and the Messiahs: popular Messianism as a grassroots political movement in contemporary Iran

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ABSTRACT

Messianic aspirations have been growing in Iran over the last two decades. With Mahmoud Ahmadinejad's coming to power in 2005 and his apocalyptic language including his claim to have direct connections with the hidden Imam, a noticeable shift took place in the religious and political orientation of the Islamic Republic. Does this flow represent a return to traditional Shiism or a break from it? In what way do Messianic aspirations challenge the Shiite theology of salvation and existing clerical rule? This paper attempts to answer these questions by examining popular Messianism and Mahdism (Mahdaviyyat). While popular Messianism is a redemptive political movement, Mahdism is a political project to reappropriate the popular imagination through the messianization of politics and hastening of the Parousia. Mahdism reveals a discursive turn in which the Iranian Revolution and the Islamic Republic are imagined as a prelude to the Parousia and the appearance of the Hidden Imam. Nevertheless, it resulted in the 'routinization of the Messiah'. The paper examines the Messianic imagination and the ways in which it challenges clerical rules and investigates the dilemma it poses for it.



KEYWORDS

Mahdism; popular Messianism; era of appearance; redemptive aspirations; Messianization of politics; permanent disorder; routinization of the Messiah

For the Islamic Revolution to be legitimate, it must prepare the ground for the hidden Imam to emerge.¹

Introduction: from early Messianism to Mahdism

Chilastic vision of history is a key element of Shiism. It is the expression of its redemptive aspirations from tyrannical rule and injustice.² The evolution of Shiite messianism

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¹<https://hawzah.net/fa/Magazine/View/4180/6789/81228> / آشنایی-با-مراکز-مهدویت

²Abdulaziz Sachedina, *Islamic Messianism: The Idea of Mahdi in Twelver Shi'ism* (Albany: SUNY Press, 1981), p. 1; Hossein Modarresi, *Crisis and Consolidation in the Formative Period of Shiite Islam: Abu Ja'far Ibn Qiba Al-Razi and his Contribution*

could be traced from the notion of a leader who would bring justice to the oppressed to a complex concept of the Hidden Imam. The idea that at some future time a revolutionary leader would rise, would right all wrongs, deliver the community from misery and distress, overthrow the unjust government, and set up the rule of justice was common among the Muslim community by the late first or early eighth century.³ Shiites called this figure the Qaim, the one who stands up. These redemptive aspirations are gradually merged in the figure of Mahdi, who is the savior and the Imam of the Age. A descendant of the Prophet, Mahdi since his major occultation in 941 CE is believed to live in secret until his second coming, of which only God knows.

The development of Shiite Messianism from the present charismatic figure of Qaim to the absent Mahdi was gradual and went through ups and downs. In the early years, Qaim was imagined as a revolutionary figure who would rise against the despotic rule. He was the exemplification of those Muslims who looked forward to a charismatic leader, not unlike the Prophet himself.⁴ When the Umayyad monarchy grew unpopular, many believed that Imam Muhammad al-Baqir (676-733 CE) as the fifth Shiite Imam might lead an uprising. However, he refused and with his disinclination to political involvement a definitive shift took place in the role of the Imam.⁵ The followers, whose conceptions of the Imam of the House of the Prophet required him to act when conditions were right, were surprised by this stance. In response to a question about why he had not led the awaited rising, he excused himself by saying that he was not the awaited leader.⁶ He added that the Qaim would appear in the future when the time was right for such a step. Two decades later, his son, Ja'far al-Sadiq (702-765 CE), also refused to act as the Qaim that many expected him to be.

The disillusionment led the Shiites to reexamine long-established beliefs.⁷ A period of reorientation of the belief in the Imamate toward pacific religious leadership seems to have begun at this time.⁸

Early Shiite disciples didn't conceptualize the Shi'i Imamate as two divisions, temporal and religious. But with the latter being postponed, these divisions gradually became clear to them during the Imamate of the fifth and sixth Imams, al-Baqir and al-Sadiq. After the Shiite reoriented themselves toward a more politically quietist posture, postponing the establishment of true Islamic community until later, the Imamate became a more spiritual office, sustaining the Shi'i aspiration for creation of the ideal public order while potentially assuming temporal authority.⁹ As Abbas Amanat notes, 'Though the

to the *Imamite Shi'ite Thought* (Princeton: Darwin Press, 1993); Said Amir Arjomand, *The Shadow of God and the Hidden Imam: Religion, Political Order, and Societal Change in Shi'ite Iran from the Beginning to 1890* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1984); Jassim Hussain, *Occultation of the Twelfth Imam: A Historical Background* (London: Muhammadi Trust, 1982); Omid Ghaemmaghami, 'Seeing the Proof: The Question of Contacting the Hidden Imam in Early Twelver Shi'i Islam' (PhD Dissertation, University of Toronto, 2013); Zackery M. Heern, *The Emergence of Modern Shi'ism: Islamic Reform in Iraq and Iran* (London: Oneworld, 2015).

³Said Amir Arjomand, 'The Crisis of the Imamate and the Institution of Occultation in Twelver Shiism: A Sociohistorical Perspective' (henceforth 'The Crisis of the Imamate'), *International Journal of Middle East Studies*, 28:4 (November 1996), p. 492.

⁴Lyakat N. Takim, *The Heirs of the Prophet: Charisma and religious Authorities in Shi'ite Islam* (Albany: State university of New York Press, 2006).

⁵Modarresi, op. cit., p. 7; Amir Arjomand, op. cit.

⁶Amir Arjomand, 'The Crisis of the Imamate', op. cit., p. 492.

⁷Modarresi, op. cit., pp. 6-7.

⁸Sachedina, op. cit., p. 18; Abdulaziz Sachedina, *The Just Ruler in Shi'ite Islam* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988), p. 36.

⁹Sachedina, *The Just Ruler*, op. cit., p. 36.

Mahdi's very existence was naturally confirmed by Shi'i theology and made an item of faith, his Advent was invariably relegated to a distant and unspecified future (perhaps with the exception of the fourteenth-century Sarbadari state of Khurasan). Speculations on the return of the Hidden Imam were thus discouraged and any attempt to hasten the Mahdi's return was condemned. The thrust of the messianic literature was decidedly on the side of Occultation (*ghayba*) rather than Advent (*zuhur*), hence providing the jurist theologians of the earlier centuries with a suitable climate for developing a stable judicial theory in the absence of the Imam and in due course consecrating their own authority as vicegerents of the Hidden Imam'.¹⁰ Saïd Amir Arjomand describes the postponement of the Messianic event as 'the taming of antinomian messianism by means of rational/theological proof of Occultation'.¹¹ This attempt was meant to achieve a balance between Messianism and temporary rule, which also paved the way for the development of Shiite Law and canon.¹²

With the Babi movement (1840s and 1850s) in the nineteenth century Iran against the Qajar rule a noticeable shift took place in Shiite Messianism.¹³ Sayyid 'Ali Muhammad Shirazi (1819–50), later known as Bab, was the leader of this movement declared that he is the Bab (gate) to the Hidden Imam. Babi movement could attract converts from all over Iran from different social classes with diverse backgrounds.¹⁴ Messianic aspirations of Babi movement posed a major threat not only to the Qajar rule but also their clerical allies as the Babis criticized the *ulama* and the *mujtahids* for their immoral conduct, their usurpation of the Imam's authority, and their worldly attachment.¹⁵ As a result, since the establishment of the institution of *marja'iyat* (religious authority) in the late eighteenth century, the clerical institution reclaimed authority over occultation and the Parousia (the appearance of the hidden Imam) and deputyship of the Imam. It succeeded in institutionalizing Shiite messianism and marginalizing its revolutionary tendencies.

The Islamic Revolution of 1979 was another turning point in Shiite Messianism. Although during the Iran-Iraq war (1980–88), when Iranian warriors were called the 'Army of the Time' and the slogan 'God! God! Protect Khomeini until Mahid's revolution!' the 1979 revolution implicitly negated Mahdism and its quietism. Also, Khomeini in contrast to the traditional Shi'i view, did not advocate Messianic beliefs.¹⁶ Moreover, the Hojjatieh Association founded by Sheikh Mahmoud Halabi (1900–1998) in 1954 to promote Mahdi against the Baha'i faith during the westernized Pahlavi monarchy, was shut down after the revolution by Khomeini's direct order. This was despite the association's active role in the Revolution and its successful recruitment of Islamist younger generations.

¹⁰Abbas Amanat, *Apocalyptic Islam and Iranian Shi'ism* (henceforth *Apocalyptic Islam*) (I.B. Tauris, 2009), p. 244.

¹¹Saïd Amir Arjomand, *Sociology of Shi'ite Islam: Collected Essays* (Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2016), p. 5. For further discussions, see also chapter 4 of the book.

¹²Ibid.

¹³Amanat, *Apocalyptic Islam*, op.cit., p. 53.

¹⁴Ibid., p. 57; Abbas Amanat, *Resurrection and the Renewal: The Making of the Babi Movement in Iran, 1844–1850* (Los Angeles: Kalimat Press, 2005).

¹⁵Amanat, *Apocalyptic Islam*, op.cit., p. 162.

¹⁶On Khomeini's avoidance to connect his rule with the Hidden Imam and for that matter to any supernatural affiliation see Majid Rahnema, *Superstition as Ideology in Iranian Politics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), pp. 105–107.

In the post-Khomeini era, however, a new wave of Messianism has been on the rise especially since the mid-1990s onwards. With the rise of Ahmadinejad in 2005 as the Iranian president Mahdist rhetoric became an inseparable part of politics. The new wave was supported by some powerful conservative clerics such as Muhammad-Taqi Misbah Yazdi (1935-2021), an outspoken critic of the reformist politics.¹⁷ Irony is that if messianism was used against the government and the *ulama* during the Qajar period, this time it was the turn of the *ulama* and government to use it against society. With the apocalyptic and anti-Israeli tone of the Iranian president, the political and religious discursive regime underwent a serious transformation. Mahdism is the reappropriation of a grassroot movement used to weaken reformers and revisionists. However, it turned out that Ahmadinejad's claim to have a direct link with the Hidden Imam is a circumvention of the *velayat-e faqih* and the clerical monopoly of this issue. Equally problematic was his overt messianic advocacy, which frightened the orthodox clerical establishment as it could lead to a crisis of faith once it failed to materialize.

The master signifier of the Messianic shift is the Jamkaran Mosque. Previously a small place with a limited range, the mosque became a symbol of the Imam's imminent appearance. With its blue dome and special nights, Jamkaran is a visual signature of the Parousia. In this place the spiritual and the profane powers merge (Figure 1). Jamkaran is not merely a place; it is rather a discourse. Mahdism uses Jamkaran to appropriate and tame Messianic desires.

In the meantime, many institutions have been established to promote Mahdism. In the past few years, dozens of books have been published concerning the hidden Imam and his impending appearance. More importantly, the Iranian revolution and the Islamic Republic are now represented as a prelude to the emergence of the Hidden Imam, which itself is the admission of failure in bringing the promised justice. As the sociologist Hesam Mazaheri notes, the major difference of the new era is that in it, the path of religious identity passes not through Tehran as the modern capital of the country, but through Qom.¹⁸

Popular Messianism poses a serious challenge to clericalism as well. Despite similarities between popular Messianism and Mahdism, there are unmistakable distinctions between them. While popular Messianism represents anti-establishment longings, Mahdism reclaims such yearnings in an attempt to promote the regime base at a time when the clerics are in danger of losing grassroots support.

To demonstrate these transformations and contestations, I will first focus on the Jamkaran mosque to describe the positionality of Messianism in today's Iran. As will be manifested, Jamkaran is a multi-layered messianic locus, where competitive popular Messianism and Mahdism mingle. While at one layer, it reflects ordinary people's redemptive aspiration, at another level, it is a place where hierarchical power relations based on class, gender, religion, and ethnicity are constantly produced and reproduced. This section will be followed then by a brief explanation of popular Messianism and the ways in which it challenges the exiting political apparatus. In the next section I will explain the developments of Mahdism and popular Messianism and the ways in which

¹⁷Amanat, *Apocalyptic Islam*, op. cit., p. 225.

¹⁸<https://t.me/mohsenhesamzaheri/553>.



Figure 1. Prayers in the courtyard of the Jamkaran Mosque.

Messianism serve the consolidation of power of the theocratic rule, especially during Ahmadinejad's presidency. Finally, I will explain how Mahdism resulted in the neutralization of the Messianic element and routinization of the Messiah.

Part of this paper is based on ethnographic field research including conversations and participant observation conducted in Qom and Jamkaran during Summer 2021. But I faced a few obstacles: First, the Covid-19 and other official restrictions that made it impossible to access other sources. Second, popular Messianism is an extremely sensitive

issue for the government. Therefore, I was not able to access the Messiah claimants or their families and friends. To compensate for this shortcoming, I tried to gather as much information as possible from websites and social media such as Instagram and Telegram that are widely used and are very popular in Iran despite being blocked by the regime.

Since the subject is securitized, it is extremely difficult to collect reliable information about them. I was not able to study further the role of gender in Messianic aspirations. However, this is particularly interesting because women also joined Messianic movements in the past. Most notable among them is Zarrin Taj Baraghani (1814–52) also known as Qurrat al-'Ayn (the solace of the eye) and Tahereh. Coming from a well-known clerical family, Tahereh was a female Mujtahid, a mystic figure, and a poet, and later a Babi leader and chief advocate of the break with Islam. Such prominence contrasts with the misogynistic imagery of Judeo-Christian and Islamic Messianism, which usually associates femininity with passiveness and evil.¹⁹

Jamkaran

For the inhabitants of the holy city of Qom, it would have been striking to note the newly installed path signs all over the city. These signs show the route to Jamkaran, a neighborhood about six kilometers southeast. As a result of recent expansions of both the city and the mosque, it has become part of Qom. Jamkaran is best known for its mosque, where the twelfth Hidden Imam (Mahdi) is believed to have appeared for a moment. Attention to this mosque started at the end of the Qajar period (1789-1925) and the beginning of Pahlavi era (1925-1979). In the 1970s, with the propaganda of Sheikh Ahmad Kafi (1936-1978) and some other popular preachers its development and reconstruction began. Qudratullah Latifi Nasab (1925-2007), who chaired the mosque's board of trustees for three decades, played a prominent role in this development. Nevertheless, with the Islamic Revolution in 1979 Jamkaran declined rather dramatically. During the Revolution of 1979, Qom and its shrine played a major role,²⁰ while Jamkaran remained marginal. Today this relation is reversed. While Jamkaran is ascending, Qom and its shrine are declining.

When Mahmoud Ahmadinejad became president in 2005, as one of his early efforts he distributed a considerable amount of money to the mosque to fund an expansion plan. As a result, large-scale constructions started to attract as many pilgrims as possible. This growth was also supported by some conservative clerics. Notable among them was Mohammad Taqi Bahjat (1916-2009). Bahjat is widely believed to have said once: 'We also preach to the elders that they will see the time of reappearance'.²¹ He also said even though people flocked to Jamkaran, they did not understand that the hidden Imam was also in need of the people's prayers so that he may reappear. The hidden Imam needs the people to pray for his return.²² Bahjat played an instrumental role in the genealogy of Ahmadinejad's Mahdism.²³

¹⁹Amanat, *Apocalyptic Islam*, op.cit., p. 57.

²⁰Roy Mottahedeh, *The Mantle of the Prophet: Religion and Politics in Iran* (London: Oneworld Publications, 2000).

²¹<https://www.aparat.com/v/rli5h>.

²²Rahnema, op. cit., p. 5.

²³Ibid., p. 54.

New construction in Jamkaran included large naves (*shabestan*), a huge kitchen, and new minarets, arcades, and domes, as well as vast courtyards. The hidden Imam did not have a shrine; Jamkaran is now being transformed into one. It now symbolizes the new Iranian Shiite identity based on Mahdavi doctrine (*doktorin-e mahdaviyyat*).

Parallel to the expansion projects, thousands of institutions, publications, websites, blogs, journals, books, newspapers, and more recently many Telegram Messenger channels were funded to propagate Mahdism. More than thirty new institutions²⁴ such as the Professional Center of Mahdism (*markaz-e takhassosy-e mahdaviyyat*), the Cultural Foundation of the Promised Mahdi (*markaz-e farhangi-e hazrat-e Mahdi-e mo'oud*), The Institute of Mahdaviyyat (*mo'assesse-ye mahdaviyyat*), Armageddon Institute, and many others were established. Moreover, dozens of books have been published about the hidden Imam and the Mahdist discourse (*gofteman-e mahdaviyyat*). They include *On the Threshold of Advent*, by Ali Akbar Mehdipour (2010), *The Last Six Months*, by Mojtaba Al-Sadeh (2011), *The World on the Threshold of the Advent of His Majesty* by Hamid Reza Azarian Boroujeni (2017), *The Promised World* by Ebrahimi Shahfiei Sarvestani (2018), *Eastern Fire* by Mostafa Amiri (2022), and so forth.

Newly coined words such as the discourse of Mahdism (*gofteman-e mahdaviyyat*), the doctrine of Mahdism (*doktorin-e mahdaviyyat*) and the experts of Mahdism (*karshenas-e mahdaviyyat*) are to make Mahdism attractive to younger generations. Experts in Mahdism are mainly seminarians (*talabeh*) with the responsibility of propagating Mahdism and combating doubts about the occultation and the Parousia. They present hadiths and arguments for the rationality, necessity, and normativity of Mahdism. It is estimated that around five hundred experts have been trained to do this mission.²⁵

As in the sanctuary of Majesty Masoumeh, women must wear a chador to enter the Jamkaran mosque. Those who do not have their own chador can borrow one and return it after the pilgrimage is over. In keeping with the separation of the sexes, women are placed in their own designated cordoned-off area. Since my friend Zizi and I did not have a chador, we had to borrow one. We entered the women's entrance (*vorudiy-e banovan*), while Majid, Zizi's partner, entered the men's entrance (*vorudiy-e aghayan*). By wearing chador, Zizi and I became somewhat unrecognizable and it took Majid a few moments to recognize Zizi and me after we wore chador.

Inside a half-built nave, a group of children are instructed by a young woman wearing an unusual blue chador covering her body. She sings hymns and poetry in praise of the hidden Imam, while children repeat them after her. I tried to take a picture of this interesting event, but she did not allow me. I then looked around to see if I could find more blue chadors, but I couldn't. The nave is controlled by female servants (*khoddam*) wearing a black chador to discipline the pilgrims and prevent sacrilegious behaviors.

Jamkaran has an undeniable effect on pilgrims. Before visiting the place, I had come across the following melodramatic piece about this place on the mosque website. It was apparently written by a young *talabeh* (seminary student) about the healing effect of this

²⁴<https://hawzah.net/fa/Magazine/View/4180/6789/81228/آشنایی-با-مرکز-مهدویت>.

²⁵<https://www.mahdi313.org/page.php?page=showarticles&cat=1&id=1317&office=markaz>.

place: 'I was fifteen years old when I became a *talabeh* ... So, I chose Qom to be away from my family. Everyone around me opposed me from the beginning. They warned me I was ruining my future by doing this. They said you would regret it. They said there would be no way back. No matter how stubborn you are, no matter how confident you are in yourself and in the way you have chosen, you will sometimes doubt yourself. Somewhere you see faith that has been tainted with doubt. However, I had promised myself to keep my appearance and not to show weakness. I had promised myself that I would never and anywhere express my unhappiness; never and anywhere except Tuesdays in Jamkaran. I kept this night to myself. I had allowed myself to be weak tonight. I cry for one night. To be alone with my truly fragile self on this night. Every Tuesday at this time, I would ride the buses that seemed to have dumped all the despair of the world in Jamkaran. I prayed and then stayed there until morning. In the mosque, however, those doubts were more subtle. It was as if something in that air, in those bright scenes, in those crowds, was making one's heartbeat faster. It removed sorrow from the heart. Now that a few years have passed since those depressing days, now that I am no longer as fragile as in those days, I sometimes think to myself that with the help of those Tuesday nights, with the help of those who walked in the courtyard of the mosque until morning, with the help of the cries I survived. That I kept my faith in the way I chose'.²⁶

In Jamkaran, Tuesday nights are a special occasion. Thousands of pilgrims attend the mosque for the ceremony and prayers. Cries and emotions fill the air. If one is lucky and faithful enough, she might even visit the Imam with her own eyes. It would suffice to beg him. He would appear if he heard the complaints and the sufferings of his people. However, it would be a mistake to think that all pilgrims (*zaer*) are religious or believe in the Mahdi and his imminent arrival. Many of them come to this place because of its facilities that they are unable to afford due to the increasing costs of living. On this night, the mosque's kitchen provides a free evening meal for the pilgrims. Vendors sell items on the pavements and parking lots, families picnic without being expelled, and children play in the vast courtyard of the mosque. There are also lovers who come to Jamkaran to meet each other and be free from parental control. In spite of this, they are not free here because of the large number of crew and agents. In the eyes of children, Jamkaran is merely a vast playground. Majid talked to a group of teenage boys who came to Jamkaran to smoke and entertain themselves without being caught by their parents. However, since the Covid-19 pandemic started, the number of pilgrims has significantly decreased, despite the mosque growing. Consequently, the mosque's courtyard is deserted on this day, which is usually crowded.

At first glance, Jamkaran appears to be another Shiite holy place. Yet, it is in many respects at odds with them. This can be seen more clearly if compared with the shrine of Masoumeh in Qom. First, compared to the commercialized and expensive pilgrimage to the holy shrine of Masoumeh in the center of the city of Qom, Jamkaran is more open, especially for low-income families. Moreover, clerics do not frequent Jamkaran, in contrast to the shrine of Masoumeh and its many study rooms (*hojreh*), which are dedicated to the classes and discussions (*mobaheseh*) of the seminarians.

²⁶<https://media.jamkaran.ir/groups/?cat=92&mo=1>.

Let's talk to the Imam from the heart

Jamkaran is famous for its petition well (*chah-e arizeh*) in which the needy throw their letters hoping that they would be received and attended by the hidden Imam. However, I noticed that the well was removed recently, and requests are no longer received. Next to the place where the petition well once stood, they have now installed a plaque saying, 'Asking the Imam for help can be done from the heart. This means that it does not have to be written. Alternatively, you can throw the petition into running water. Please talk to the Imam with your heart!' (Figure 2).

There is a heated debate about the petition and its authenticity. This issue has been raised in a question (*istifta*) to Makarem Shirazi, a distinguished clergyman and a source of emulation. The question asks, 'has the petition well that exists in Jamkaran Mosque been excavated by the order of Imam Zaman [Mahdi] and is it valid? 'The answer is certainly negative', he replies. 'It was not dug by him and or at his order in any way ... perhaps because when one is in the Jamkaran Mosque, one is in a special state. One seeks guidance from an expert and asks for help. During the period of the Imam's absence, they wrote letters to him. It is common to send a letter to him. However, the well is not his and was not dug by him or by his order in any way. Rather, it is an ordinary well, and letters do not need to be thrown in this well but in any well or water'.²⁷

I was curious about why the petition was closed. So, I asked a servant in the yard. 'The petition well was used by the Wahabis and Zionists to spread anti-Shiite propaganda', he replied. 'They would say, look! Their Imam lives in a well. It was not healthy for the prestige of the Imam'. 'But what about the petitions? What happened to them', I asked. 'Destroyed, of course; what about them?!', he replied.

Petitioning (*arizehnevisi*) was a way for ordinary people to transfer their frustration to the Imam. Petition letters included all kinds of problems including health issues, poverty, bankruptcy, family issues, disability, and so on. The growing petition letters implies the inefficiency and malfunction of the existing ruling apparatus. That might be the main reason of its removal.

In another corner of the vast courtyard of the mosque, there is a store selling items such as religious books and CDs, rosary, chadors, manteaus, scarves, toys, shoes, and so forth. In the window, a poster draws attention. It shows a group of people and a few historical monuments behind them while a man standing at the front is taking a selfie with them (Figure 3). Next to the young man, stands a smiling old lady, who is likely his mother. Behind the young man, a teenage boy raises his head. Behind the teenage boy, and only in the corner of the picture, is the profile of a middle-aged cleric in a black turban and a faint smile on his face. Next to him another old man stands with the disfigured face of a child and then there is the face of an old man with a white beard. Other young men, who are without a beard are illustrated in the back. Young women are shown only in the background of the painting, though one raised her hand to be included in the photograph. Everyone looks happy, contrary to the reality on the ground. In this image, a vibrant and faithful man is portrayed at the front, while the aging clergy is depicted only in the corner.

²⁷<https://www.makarem.ir/main.aspx?lid=0&mid=246653&typeinfo=25&catid=23309>.



Figure 2. After the petitioning well was removed, a plaque was installed saying, 'Talk to the Imam with your heart!'

The poster also illustrates the gendered hierarchy of the Islamic government, in which men are ahead of women in all domains. The poster portrays a shiny and happy picture of Iran and its nation, while minorities such as Kurds and Baluchis are also absent from it. The poster contrasts sharply with motivations that bring people to Jamkaran.



Figure 3. Iranian society's favorable imagination is depicted in a poster on a store window in Jamkaran.

Restoration and redemption

In both academic and non-academic works, the Mahdist turn has been the subject of heated debates and discussions. Among the scholars, Ali Rahnama discussed this issue at length. He maintains that Mahdism is a superstitious discourse with the aim of restoration of Safavid rule. It discloses the influence of Mohammad Bagher Majlesi, the famous

jurist of Safavid era (1501-1736).²⁸ Assuming 'he has a sacred mission to speed up the reappearance of the Twelfth Imam',²⁹ Mahmoud Ahmadinejad is, according to Rahnema, the most prominent example of 'Majlesism'. By Majlesism, he means the rigidity and persistence of the superstitious ideas elaborated by Majlesi. Rahnema draws on the distinction between Safavid, and Alevi Shiism made originally by Ali Shariati (1933-1977). Shariati viewed Safavid Shiism as a reactionary and repressive political ideology.³⁰ For Rahnema, Ahmadinejad's Mahdism signifies a restorative project to recover Safavid Shiism after its temporary decline by the revolution.

Abbas Amanat³¹ on the other hand, presents a more nuanced picture of Mahdist aspirations in contemporary Iran. 'At one level' he notes, 'this seemingly curious phenomenon may be attributed to the religious convictions of Ahmadinejad and his cohorts who, being in control of the state, promoted their own messianic faith. At a deeper level however, the systematic advocacy of the Mahdi cult may be seen as a conscious policy to play on the people's frustration with the slogans of revolutionary Islam'.³² For him, Jamkaran represents anti-establishment sentiments.³³

Ze'ev Maghen,³⁴ however, rejects the idea that the Islamic Republic especially during Ahmadinejad is based on Shiite Messianism. He maintains that the Mahdist rhetoric of Ahmadinejad and other authorities of the Islamic Republic consists of a very this-worldly set of aspirations involving Iran's burgeoning power.³⁵

As I describe in the following, I differentiate Mahdism from popular Messianism to provide a detailed picture of the Messianic imagination. Mahdism represents a rupture within the ruling class to consolidate power and combat internal dissent and external threats, whereas popular Messianism represents the anti-establishment redemptive aspirations of common people.

Popular Messianism

In the last two decades, Messianic aspirations have been on the rise in Iran. It might be puzzling that self-proclaimed Messiahs, who are called *mutemahdi*, can gather a sizable number of followers. One of the famous claimants in contemporary Iran was Sayyid Ghanfar Vaziri (d. 1955). He reportedly claimed to be the Imam of the time for half a century in different parts of Iran, especially around Mahalat and Kashan. Vaziri was arrested and sentenced to ten years in prison. After being released in 1941, he resumed his activities. In 1955, he was again arrested and tried for the crime of murder. But in one of the last court sessions, he had a stroke and fell into a coma. He died a few days later in the prison hospital. His trial and death in prison drew the public's attention to this issue at that time, so that *Tehran Mosavvar*, one of the most popular magazines of the time, published a detailed report on this issue.³⁶

²⁸Rahnema, op. cit., p. 17.

²⁹Ibid., p. 44.

³⁰Ibid., p. 18.

³¹Amanat, *Apocalyptic Islam*, op. cit., p. 244.

³²Ibid. p. 245.

³³Ibid., p. 235.

³⁴Ze'ev Maghen, 'Occultation in "Perpetuum": Shi'ite Messianism and the Politics of the Islamic Republic', *Middle East Journal*, 2 (Spring 2008), pp. 232-257.

³⁵Ibid., p. 255.

³⁶<https://www.parsine.com/fa/news/15543/> . سید-غضنفر-مدعی-هشتاد-چهارساله-امامت-در-سال-۱۳۳۴-شمسی

In the last two decades, the number of *mutemahdis*/ self-proclaimed Messiahs has increased unprecedentedly. It is estimated that around three thousand individuals were persecuted and detained because they claimed to be the promised Mahdi or his deputy. In 2007 five persons were in custody in Qom as claimants of the Imam of the Age.³⁷

The position of the Messiah claimants is complicated in a secularizing Iran. They seem anti-modern and 'traditional'. Therefore, they are easily exposed to human rights violations including imprisonment, torture, and even execution. Despite there are known as madman, imposter (*shayyad*), trickster, and spurious (*ghollabi*),³⁸ for the regime's paranoid security apparatus they are extremely dangerous.³⁹ However, they are neither traditional nor old-fashioned. They have websites and use contemporary technologies of communication.

Popular Messianism is to be seen as a grassroot political movement and a serious challenge to the clerical rule, though it hardly draws the attention of sociologists or civil society activists. The is the reason why Makarem Shirazi called on the authorities to decisively deal with the 'false' claimants of Mahdism, which according to him, will weaken the global uprising of Hazrat-e Mahdi.⁴⁰ In what follows I will list some of the Messiah claimants or those who claimed to have connections with the Imam and their fate:

- (a) Seyyed al-Yamani Ahmad al-Hassan, known as Yamani, is one of the popular Messiahs in recent years. According to his website⁴¹ he lived in Basra and southern Iraq and completed his academy education and received a bachelor's degree in civil engineering. He then moved to the holy city of Najaf and settled there to study religious sciences. The reason he joined the seminary was because of a dream about his father, Imam Mahdi. In this dream he ordered him to inform the people that he was a messenger from the hidden imam. The public invitation to Yamani began in Najaf in 2002. His followers are called Ansar ul-Mahdi in Iraq and Yamani in Iran. Yamanis (followers of Yamani) come from various towns. He even has followers among the Qom seminarians. In the last days of August 1997, news was published of a protest rally in the city of Torbat Heydariyeh in Khorasan Razavi province to support the son of the Imam of the age. The protest ended with violent interference by the police. In December 1997, sixty Yamanis were detained and fifty-eight of them were sentenced to long years of prison, lashes, and exile. Along with the persecution of the group, a propaganda machine was launched to defame him and his da'wa. These efforts were followed by several justification workshops in Qom and Mashhad, authoring books, and making documentaries and television programs against the group.
- (b) Mohammad Hosseinpour, known as Dr. Sayan is another Messiah claimant. As an elite, inventor, and the war veteran, he was repeatedly invited to speak on state Radio and Television. In a short video that was broadcast on cyberspace, however, while

³⁷<https://www.jamaran.news/%D8%A8%D8%AE%D8%B4-%D8%A7%D8%AE%D8%A8%D8%A7%D8%B1-59/62110/>
چرا-اظهارات-مربوط-به-ظهور-از-تب-تاب-افتاده-است-رسول-جعفریان

³⁸Rasoul Jafarian, *False Mahdis* (Tehran: Nashr-e Elm, 2012), pp. 265–266.

³⁹<https://www.mashregnews.ir/news/285259/چگونه-بشناسیم>

⁴⁰<https://yazdfarda.com/news/fa/14524/post-standart.html>

⁴¹<https://www.ahmedalhasan.org/fa/Post/سید-احمد-الحسن-یمانی-کیست>

- riding a horse and drawing a sword he claimed to be the Imam of the Age and that he was preparing for an uprising. He owns an Instagram page with 8198 followers.⁴²
- (c) Alireza Payghan, was a messiah claimant in Qom. According to authorities, he was able to attract a sizable number of people to his da'wa. He was finally arrested in the fall of 2006 and was sentenced to death on charges of corruption on earth.
 - (d) In September 2007, Mohammad Hosseinzadeh Abu Jasi, known as Darvish, had been executed in public in Qom on charges of claiming the Imam of the Age.
 - (e) Fazel Marsoumi in Iraq and Abdulwahab Basri in Bahrain are among the claimants outside of Iran. Fazel Marsoumi reportedly declared that Mahdi is not a person, but whoever can reach this position, would be the Qaim. Reportedly, Abdulwahab Basri dreamed of Imam Mahdi, who appointed him as his ambassador.⁴³
 - (f) The *Rasekhoon* website, a governmental platform, has also reported on women who claimed to be the savior or have connections with the Imam.⁴⁴ Their names and identities remain unknown, however. According to one of these reports, a woman in Dashtestan claimed to have a relationship with the Imam and to heal patients. On the night of Ashura, she was supposed to heal seventy-two people with the intention of the seventy-two companions of Imam Hussain. During her special meeting, she held the flag up and said to the crowd: Now the Imam of the Age has arrived in the crowd, and you should show respect to him. She was arrested by the police, while the 'deceived' claimed that if you take her away, there will be an earthquake.
 - (g) The *Reasekhoon* website also reported on another woman, who claimed to have connections with the Imam and is among his companions. According to this report, Mrs. F.A.M was unveiled before the revolution and her husband was also 'mis-guided'. She used to publish other people's books under her own name. Then she built a Hosseiniyeh on which she wrote: 'This is the place where the comrades rise'. She continues on to explain that the Imam of the Age is sending her a message that his appearance is imminent.⁴⁵ Her fate remains unknown.

To understand Ahmadinejad's Messianism, it is necessary to place his claims in the context of the rise of popular Messianism. This has been happening since the early 2000s. By reappropriating Messianic aspirations, the new conservatives not only silenced internal dissidents, but also provided a different base of legitimacy. This was at a time when popular demands for change were on the rise.

Appointed by the hidden Imam

Iran's transition to the twenty-first century coincided with a dramatic decline of democratic politics. What was happening on the political scene was disturbing for millions of Iranians. Mohammad Khatami's reformist administration (1997–2005) enjoyed an elevated level of popularity, especially among educated young women. For the conservative faction, however, this was a major threat. As a result, they tried to weaken reformism and undermine its popularity.

⁴²<https://www.instagram.com/doctor.sayan/?hl=en>.

⁴³<https://hawzah.net/fa/Magazine/View/4227/6333/70460> . مدعیان - سفارت - و نیابت - قسمت - دوم

⁴⁴<https://rasekhoon.net/article/show/713308/1> - مدعیان - مهدویت - در - دهه های - اخیر -

⁴⁵Ibid.

The anti-reform campaign succeeded in crippling Khatami's administration with various crises. These efforts caused frustration among his advocates. Gradually, many of those who had enthusiastically voted for him, became disappointed. This discouragement showed itself in the low level of participation in the local council elections of February 2002 and the next parliamentary elections in June 2003. While most of the reformist candidates were disqualified by the Guardian Council and could not run in the parliamentary elections, Khatami's opposition formed a coalition of *Abadgaran*.⁴⁶ In response, the reformist candidates planned a sit-in on February 23, 2003. It ended without any tangible results, however. Due to the low level of participation, the coalition won both elections.

The U.S. military invasion of Iraq in 2003 following the announcement of the axis of evil, including Iraq, Iran, and North Korea, also radicalized the political atmosphere in the Middle East. The invasion of Iraq was the last nail in the coffin of declining reform. The US military presence in the region empowered anti-American and anti-western factions in both Iran and Iraq while contributed to the new apocalyptic rhetoric adopted by the conservatives.

After the parliamentary election, Ahmad Pishbin, a deputy of the newly elected conservative *Majles* (parliament) declared: 'I hope we [the newly elected candidates] will not be ashamed of Imam-e Zaman [Imam of the Age]'.⁴⁷ Some members of the newly established parliament went so far as to claim that the Imam always visits the parliament and has full control over it. As Rabinbach notes, 'Messianic ideas always threaten to subvert themselves into a Machiavellian disregard for civil liberties or ethical norms in the name of virtue'.⁴⁸

In another instance, Ali Meshkini (1921–2007) a conservative clergyman and the chairman of the Assembly of Experts at the time, claimed in the Friday prayer ceremony that the approval of the conservative candidates for the parliament came directly from the Imam, who 'signed them all'. Meshkini's remarks were widely criticized, even by the traditional clergy. To claim that authority comes not from the ballot boxes, but directly from the occult and the hidden imam was unprecedented in post-revolutionary Iran.

Because conservatives did not enjoy popular support, they gradually turned to other sources of legitimacy. One of them was the Hidden Imam. They claim to relate to the Hidden Imam based on older traditions in post-occultation Shiism, which serve to justify their position. In this way, jurists who seek legal solutions to problems try to approximate the Imam's point of view that is supposed to be included in the debate. Many traditional clerics would begin their speeches or talks with 'in the presence of the Imam-e zaman' (*beh huzur-e agha emam-e zaman*). A novel approach was to use the Hidden Imam for political purposes.

In response to these allegations, critics pointed out that these remarks confirmed that members of parliament had been appointed in advance and that the people's vote was decorative. Mehdi Karroubi, who was at the time a member of the Expediency

⁴⁶A conservative coalition was formed in the second election of the Islamic Councils in 2002.

⁴⁷Waqaye' Ettafaqieh Daily, 24 June 2004.

⁴⁸Rabinbach, Anson, 'Between Enlightenment and Apocalypse: Benjamin, Bloch and Modern German Jewish Messianism', *New German Critique*, 34:34 (1985), pp. 78–124.

Council protested Meshkini's remarks by saying: 'The members of parliament are elected by the people, not by the hidden Imam'.⁴⁹

Although the claim of appointment by Imam Zaman may seem messianic, it was not. This dispute dates back to the conflict about the origin of legitimacy in the Islamic Republic. It was on the one hand the ballot box that served as the basis of legitimacy and on the other hand, the representation of God, the Imam, or his vicegerent served as the basis of legitimacy.

Ahmadinejad's Mahdism: Messianization of politics

As a sincere observer, I tell you: the last movement has begun. Today, we are in the context of a monumental world revolution led by the hidden Imam (the Imam of the Age). The world is in turmoil and a massive awakening is underway.⁵⁰

The citation is taken from the words of Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, president of Iran from 2004 till 2013. The speech was delivered at the celebration of the thirty-second anniversary of the Iranian Revolution. No matter how we interpret the Iranian Revolution, it is difficult to make a connection between its ideals and Ahmadinejad's speech on the occasion. In another provoking speech, he similarly declared, 'the Islamic government which is today wearing the garb of an Islamic Republic has no other responsibility but that of preparing for the reappearance of the Twelfth Imam'.⁵¹ In this speech, Ahmadinejad bluntly negated the republican aspect of the government, which has been legalized by the Iranian Constitution.

As mentioned earlier, before Ahmadinejad took power in 2005, popular Messianism was on the rise. However, with his presidency, the atmosphere changed dramatically. Once in power, he distributed some \$10 million to the expansion and renovation of Jamkaran.⁵²

In one of the dozen journals budgeted by the state, Ahmadinejad was praised for his role in the promotion of Mahdism:

The discourse of Mahdism and the more contemporary and serious approach to this lofty doctrine, as the only way forward for contemporary human beings, has been growing in recent years. This rapid growth and exodus from exclusion is due to a few factors, one of which is undoubtedly the coming to power of an educated, scholastic president. This is due to a strong and profound belief in the teachings of the velayat and Mahdism.⁵³

The goals of the Imam, according to the author, are diverse including preserving and expanding the religion and Shiism, setting up a center and government for the Shiites, preserving and strengthening Iran as the center of Shiism, and finally a world government. The most significant objective is to develop a monotheistic and universally just government that allows people to grow and perfect themselves.

⁴⁹Nader Farzan, *Naqd va Ta'ammoli dar Mored-e Dolat-e Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, Dolat-e Emam Zaman, Dolat-e Moqaddas* (Sherkat-e Ketab, 2016), p. 11.

⁵⁰Mashregh News, January 2010, at: <https://www.mashreghnews.ir/news/29135/احمدی-نژاد-حرکت-آخر-آغاز-شده-است>.

⁵¹Rahnema, op. cit., p. 79.

⁵²Ibid., p. 68.

⁵³Masoud Pour Aqayi, 'Modiriyat-e Emam-e Zaman', *Mashreq-e Mo'ood*, 3:1 (2008), <https://www.m-mahdi.com/persian/articles-405>.

Ahmadinejad's promotion was rooted in a series of events and factors including the organized and systematic efforts of the conservatives, Pasdaran, and the office of the Supreme Leader. He introduced himself as the representative of the oppressed strata and war veterans. With the emphasis Ahmadinejad put on justice, he was able to upset the dichotomy between freedom and authoritarianism on which the reformist's success was grounded. As a result, many of those who would not vote and viewed the dichotomy between the 'moderates' and 'hardliners' simply as a show of democracy, took part in the elections and voted for Ahmadinejad.

Ahmadinejad, whose victory in the presidential elections was contested in 2005 and more seriously in 2009 with the eruption of the Green Movement against the fraudulent election, claimed a direct connection to the Imam. He called his cabinet the cabinet of the hidden Imam, meaning that it is the Imam himself who is governing. On several occasions, he made controversial allegations about the hidden imam and having connections with him. In one of the most controversial statements he claimed, 'We have a document that the United States wants to prevent the emergence of the hidden Imam'.⁵⁴ On another occasion he declared that the Americans were looking for him: 'So much research has been done on him in American universities. If I were to count thousands of times the total work of the seminaries of Qom, Najaf, and Mashhad, I would not have spoken much. However, I would have said less than you would believe. They have contacted many people who they thought could have been in contact with the Imam and interviewed them and released their information. According to a friend who said that they had completed the case of the hidden Imam and were about to arrest him, they only lacked his photo. They know that the only fundamental threat to their centuries-old empire is the hidden Imam'.⁵⁵ To complete this adventurous story, he added, 'The scent of the Imam has filled the air. Everywhere in the world now there is talk of the Imam by thinkers, experts, even ordinary people. There was resistance once when the Imam's name was mentioned, and they were stigmatized and branded. Of course, some are still beating. But we have already been through them. We are seeing a welcoming mood these days'.⁵⁶

There is a strong resemblance between Mahdist discourse and what Gershom Scholem describes as 'Messianization of politics'. By this, he means the mindset of the Israeli state that instead of promoting civil liberties, equality before the law, universal peace all-around ethical and human progress, thinks and acts in terms of Armageddon, a heavenly Jerusalem descending from above, or the 'son of David' riding on an ass. 'Since the Yom Kippur War', he notes, 'a trend toward a 'messianization' of politics has become noticeable in Israel, especially among groups advocating settlements on the West Bank or Jewish rights on the Temple Mount'.⁵⁷ Messianization of politics generates permanent disorder and chaos, making questioning politicians extremely difficult.

It was within this atmosphere that in 2010, a CD called *The Appearance is Approaching* (Zohour nazdik ast!) was released and caused a major controversy. This widely circulated CD claimed that the world was on the brink of chaos and

⁵⁴Tabnak, 4 December 2009, <https://www.tabnak.ir/fa/news/510906/هستند-امام-زمان-هستند>.

⁵⁵Irna, 22 June 2015.

⁵⁶Isna, 26 July 2013.

⁵⁷R.J. Zwi Werblowsky, 'Messianism in Jewish History', *Journal of World History*, 11:1 (1968), pp. 2–45.

ready for the Parousia. The CD identified Seyyed Hassan Nasrallah as the Promised Yamani,⁵⁸ Ali Khamenei as Seyyed Khorasani⁵⁹ and Mahmoud Ahmadinejad as Shu'ayb b. Saleh,⁶⁰ the Shiite apocalyptic figure. The producers declared: 'We believe that we are at a critical historical point in history, according to the orders of the elders and the fulfillment of signs; that is, we are on the verge of appearing, and society must be made aware of it. But unfortunately, many of our people are involved in unimportant issues, material businesses and unnecessary things, and they have been unaware of this especially critical event that is about to appear ... Our main axis is the velayat-e-faqih and whoever is with this axis is with us and everyone who does not go with this axis, we do not think it is heading in the right direction'.⁶¹

Following after the release of the CD, its producers released another CD titled *The Moment of Meeting*. It was a continuation of the earlier CD and uses theatrical methods and movies to induce imaginative aura.

Apologists

Ahmadinejad's Mahdism was severely criticized even by conservative clerics. One of the conservative godfathers, Mohammad Reza Mahdavi Kani, accused him of sacrilegious claims. He remarked, 'if the country is run by the Imam of the Age, it means he (the Imam) cannot end the mafia'.⁶²

The most outspoken critic of Mahdism, however, is Rasoul Jafarian, whom I mentioned before. To nullify Messianic fever, Jafarian also authored a book called *The Fake Mahdis* (2012). As an apologist of the clerical rule, he distinguishes between 'true' Messianic expectations for the return of the Mahdi and false messianism.⁶³ True Mahdism belongs to the future and except for God, nobody knows about it. False Mahdism, on the other hand, gave the Iranian Revolution a Shiite color which intensified and provoked the Arab nations against it, while the Iranian Revolution was not Shiite in essence; it was based on Islam and Islamic unity. According to Jafarian, this wave is 'sinking into a swamp of intellectual degeneration from which we will not easily come out ... It will keep society from the path of science and progress and a kind of Islamic civilization ... This is because to protect the rights of the people, the country needs strategists who know the world, and scientists who know the science of law. When you have filled the minds of the people with these baseless words like the rules of the Parousia, what other scientific statement will be acceptable? You will have naïve and superficial

⁵⁸In Shiism, Yamani is a pre-messianic figure who is prophesied to appear to the people to guide them to the right path prior to the arrival of Mahdi.

⁵⁹In the Shiite Apocalypse, Seyyed Khorasani is a Muslim leader whose rise is believed to be essential for the appearance of the Imam.

⁶⁰He is among those believed to make uprisings before the reappearance of Mahdi. He is supposed to be the commander of a strong army that defeats the Sufyani army. Sufyani is an evil figure, usually portrayed in Hadith as a tyrant who spreads corruption and mischief. It should be noted, however, that before Ahmadinejad, Rafsanjani was nominated as Shu'ayb b. Saleh.

⁶¹Ibna, 13 June 2014, <https://www.ibna.ir/fa/tolidi/201168/> - عصر ظهور در گفت و گو آیت الله علی کورانی تطبیق روایات زمان معاصر - خلاف شرع.

⁶²https://www.radiofarda.com/a/F1_hidden_Imam/447762.html.

⁶³<https://www.jamaran.news/%D8%A8%D8%AE%D8%B4-%D8%A7%D8%AE%D8%A8%D8%A7%D8%B1-59/62110/> چرا اظهارات مربوط به ظهور از تب تا تب افتاده است - رسول جعفریان.

people who boil for no reason and throw themselves into the water without any hesitation, and then waste the efforts of several generations'.⁶⁴

Jafarian holds that 'deep thinking, planning and religious rationalism have no place in Ahmadinejad's government, because the foundation of this government started with these praises ... It has prevented the creation of a system of thought, and instead of bold claims, populist claims have been made that will gradually replace the dominance of jurisprudence and put another strategy before us'.⁶⁵

Makram Shirzai also criticized Mahdist discourse by depicting a picture of Mahdavi society that is coming in an unknown time at the future. While Mahdist discourse tries to hasten the Parousia, Makarem attempts to postpone it. In his official webpage, he describes it as such: '*bit by bit*, the time will come when there will be a single world government to end the destructive arms race; To end the growing conflicts of the world's leading powers; To pull the world off the brink of war; It will be felt as a necessity and an inevitable fact that these false and troublesome borders must finally be removed and all the people of the world must live under one flag and with one law'.⁶⁶ 'The emergence of a universal reformer' he notes, 'is to eradicate oppression from the earth. At the time of advent, all oppressive governments will surrender to the power of that Imam and his divine protection, the veils of negligence are lifted, the minds are awakened, and the people are ready to accept the divine rule of His Majesty, Mahdi'.

Moreover, Mahdavi government avoids 'hermeneutics', which according to Makarem 'is the same as the various interpretations, that is, the interpretation according to the opinion and practice of the personal interpretation of the verse, and they say that everyone is free in their religion, which they also consider right'. Thus, Mahdi's government puts an end to intellectual dispersion and as a result, 'the spirit of monotheism rules over all the contents of the call of Islam, and the unity of religion includes the unity of human society, the unity of races and countries in the light of a single Islamic rhetoric'. The reason is that 'religious differences are not compatible with a monotheistic system in all respects; because this difference is enough to disrupt any kind of unity. It is the unity of religion that has the most impact on unity. This is because it can rise above differences in races, languages, and nationalities. As a result, diverse cultures can become part of one society in which they are all like brothers and sisters. For this reason, one of the main programs of that historic reformer and revolution is the unity of ranks in the shadow of the unity of religion'.

Despite his effort to give a rosy picture of the Mahdavi society, Makarem's Mahdavi government seems not only intolerant but also totalitarian: 'Because of the intense care that is exercised during the reign of that Imam, even criminals are not safe in their home environment, because they may be controlled by advanced devices and even their sound waves on the wall can be controlled. This is another indication of the extent of the fight against corruption during his rule. Therefore, such security in the shadow of his rule pervades the world. According to a tradition, a woman can only go from the east of the world to the west of the world without being disturbed by

⁶⁴Ibid.

⁶⁵Ibid.

⁶⁶<https://makarem.ir/main.aspx?lid=0&typeinfo=1&catid=40677&pageindex=2&mid=395184>; emphasis mine.

anyone! Religious unity in the shadow of the denial of religious pluralism. Today, proponents of 'pluralism' (that the path to God is not limited to one path, but all paths lead to God) say that the followers of all religions are salvation Jews, instead of the illusion of Christians themselves. In response, it should be said: This is the same argument that the Sufis put forward under the title of 'total peace' and said that even idolatry is godliness.

In addition to the previous criticisms, the story of Hassanzadeh Amoli (1928-2021), a conservative clergyman with mystical tendencies has been widely circulated.⁶⁷ Based on the story, at the height of the Messianic fever a murid presented his research findings about the symptoms of the Parousia in a session with Amoli. After listening to the presentation, Amoli contemplated a few moments, then looked at the crowd and commented, "The summary of the gentlemen's research is that the event [of the coming of the Imam] is approaching. What if I say it has already taken place?" The murids did not expect this and were all puzzled by this statement. Seeing astonishment in the faces of the students, Hassanzadeh Amoli continued, "The Islamic Revolution of Iran is the planned personal and legal appearance of the Promised Mahdi and his universal rule. Now is the time for everyone to do whatever they want, because the time has come, and the ground is ready in every way.

It seems that in stark contrast with the Mahdists and popular Messianism tending to hasten the Parousia, the orthodox clerical establishment tries to postpone it.

National Mahdism

Despite criticism, Mahdism did not stop. It grew even further and reached an incredible level. Once the Jinni came out, it was difficult to return it to the bottle. It seems that Ahmadinejad's redefinition of the Islamic Republic as the path makers for the Mahdi has become a dominant discourse of the Islamic Republic in recent years. The success of Mahdist rhetoric in silencing domestic opposition forces could not be ignored easily, even after Ahmadinejad's relationship with the leader became strained. Thus, despite the fact that he was pushed to the sidelines, his method of using the speech of Mahdism to achieve political goals persisted. With the escalation of tension between Iran and Israel, this time the arrowhead was aimed at Israel and Zionism.

One of the proponents of Mahdism was Ali Korani. Born in 1944 in Jabal Amil in Lebanon, Korani is interested in fiction and stories. He believes that the Islamic Revolution paved the way for the advent of the Imam, which began in the land of the East. To strengthen his views, he narrates Hadiths from the Ahl al-Bayt on Islamic Revolution of Iran as one of the groundbreaking movements for the arrival of Imam Mahdi.⁶⁸

Korani is the author of an apocalypse called *The Epoch of Appearance*. The first edition was published in 1990 and the second in 2004. With the rise of Mahdism he made some crucial changes to the older version. For example, while in the first edition he said that the appearance would take place in Mecca, in the next edition he predicted that it would happen in Iran. Conflicts between the Saudi Arabia and Iran appear to be influencing this change of opinion.

⁶⁷Ibid.

⁶⁸Ali Korani, *Epoch of Appearance* (Tehran: Al-Huda, 2004), p. 13.

According to Korani, ‘the hidden Imam is the present ruler and overseer who, with all his holiness, shines in the passionate hearts of the people, in the cries, in the slogans, in the naming of children, in institutions, in streets, and even in glorious commercial centers’.⁶⁹ He warns against Nostradamus’ prophecies, calling them products made against the Shiites. ‘Today’s political experts’, he notes, ‘despite their differences of opinion about the political position of the Islamic Revolution in Iran, agree that this movement is in preparation for the advent of the Imam Mahdi’.⁷⁰ ‘In the current atmosphere, it is felt that the presence of Mahdi is essential and is far more prominent than the role of the revolution and its leadership, and in fact he is the spiritual leader of the revolution and the system’.⁷¹

Korani enumerates three characteristics for the age of appearance: widespread oppression and sedition found in every home, enemies who are constantly attacking including those in Iraq and other parts of the world that are against the Shiites, occupy Syrian territory and taking over the government (i.e. ISIS), and finally, a young generation of Imam Mahdi’s companions and followers are scattered throughout the Islamic lands spreading the memory and name of Imam Mahdi.

For Korani ISIS victories in Syria were analogous to the appearance of the Sufyani (the Mahdi’s arch-enemy). He described the Sufyani as not only a close ally of the Jews but also acting on their behalf as their proxy.⁷² Therefore, ‘The role of the IRGC in Syria today’ he notes, ‘is to lay the international and regional ground for the emergence of the Imam of the Age ... God has willed to enlighten the world to the coming of Mahdi and to prepare the ground for his emergence, but the arrogant powers are trying to prevent the will of the transcendent essence’.⁷³ Following Korani, Ayatollah Seyyed Muhammad Ali Musavi Jazayeri, the Supreme Leader’s representative in the Khuzistan province declared the presence of ISIS as the sign of the appearance of the Mahdi and rise of the Sufyani. Moreover, Abdullah Hosseini, an ‘expert’ on the Parousia, predicted that 2022 would be the year when Israel would perish.⁷⁴ He notes that based on hadith methodology, we can say that even though the Supreme Leader predicts the destruction of Israel for 2022, the Iranians should only be ready when the Imam himself performs the act. Therefore, the destruction of Israel and the liberation of Palestine will not happen before the Appearance’.⁷⁵

Such remarks caused an unprecedented level of anxiety among the clerical establishment. They feared that they would create uncontrolled emotions. As a result, Grand Ayatollah Ali Sistani, the foremost Shiite authority in Najaf rejected any link between the rise of ISIS and the coming of the Sufyani. Korani, presumably due to pressure from his peers, retreated from his previous position reversed his previous position⁷⁶ and joined the effort to calm the messianic talk by pointing to textual

⁶⁹Ibid.

⁷⁰Ibid., p. 12.

⁷¹Ibid.

⁷²Meir Litvak, *Know Thy Enemy: Evolving Attitudes towards "Others" in Modern Shi'i Thought and Practice*, (Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2021) p. 106.

⁷³<https://isna.ir/fa/news/92122415784/نازه-آوردیم-برای-نازه>

⁷⁴<https://www.khabaronline.ir/news/368058/اسرائیل-در-سال-۲۰۲۲-میلادی-نابود-می-شود>

⁷⁵<https://u313.ir/2014-02-05-14-05-43/item/1398-2021-12-29-06-08-40.html>

⁷⁶<https://hawzah.net/fa/Magazine/View/4227/8286/110750> . آیا-در-روایات-ظهور-به-داعش-اشاره-شده-است

sources on the matter.⁷⁷ He then declared: ‘It is important for the Iranian people to know that the government of the Islamic Republic is efficient at accelerating this movement’.⁷⁸

Occultation industry and routinization of the Messiah

In recent years, parallel to the spread of Mahdism and the rise of popular Messianism, thousands of images of the hidden Imam were disseminated and distributed on websites, journals, and TV channels. These images depict the Imam in various positions. In one image, he wears a green cloak and keffiyeh, while he carries a sword around his waist. In another image, he rides a horse and wears a war helmet. He is also depicted walking down a picturesque road filled with flowers while his face radiates light.

Such images evoke nostalgia for an era of simplicity. They create a sense of healing, a temporary release from the burdens and complexities of daily life, filled with corruption, lack of law enforcement, violence, sanctions, economic hardships, and many other problems the country faces. In this imaginary world that the Imam is said to live in, even asking how the Imam would handle them is blasphemous. Therefore, although the images and aura of the hidden imam might have a therapeutic function, they also could be manipulative. Mahdism sweeps away all questions about harsh reality.

These images also convey a sense of proximity between the believer and his Imam. Photo, perfume, letter, information, visit, connection, and signature are some of the words that are used by the Mahdists to allude to the hidden Imam or his presence. Despite being a solace, this language and imagination resulted in the routinization of the Messiah by making him accessible and imaginable. In Weber’s perspective, routinization of charisma occurs when charismatic leaders die and the mundane and ordinary mode of existence returns. When charisma becomes routine, it loses its essential characteristics as a force for social change. A distinct social structure emerges after a charismatic leader has died, and charisma becomes a component (sometimes a very insignificant component) of a changed social structure.⁷⁹

Salvific aspirations would be revolutionary by investing in collective despair of reality and projecting it onto a nonexistent one. The image of waiting is beneficial if the satisfaction of the desire is permanently delayed. Messianic imagination will endure as long as the gap between redemptive aspiration and ordinary harsh realities endures. But it will lose its effect if it becomes routine. This is the crisis that Messianic aspirations face in today’s Iran especially after Ahmadinejad’s Mahdist fever.

It is not enough to claim that appearance is imminent while nothing changes in reality. Therefore, Mahdism contradictorily resulted in disbelief. Suspicions about the figure of Mahdi and his existence have increased, which verifies the concerns of the orthodox clerics. This disbelief seems to be behind the popularity of Hossein Modarresi’s book,

⁷⁷Litvak, op. cit, pp. 181–182.

⁷⁸ibna, 13 June 2014, <https://www.ibna.ir/fa/tolidi/201168/>-عصر ظهور در گفت و گو آیت الله علی کورانی تطبیق روایات زمان معاصر - خلافت شرع

⁷⁹Max Weber, ‘Charisma: Its Revolutionary Character and Its Transformation’, in Norman Birnbaum and Gertrud Lenzer (eds) *Sociology and Religion: A Book of Readings* (Englewood Cliffs: Prentice Hall, 1969), 188.

School in the Process of Development (Maktab dar Farayand-e Takamol).⁸⁰ The book, which is a Persian translation of its English original edition, investigates the doubts and suspicions about the existence of the hidden Imam and occultation among the early Shiite communities. The book has been widely read, especially in religious circles. It seems that Messianic fever was the flip side of the routinization of the Messiah and disbelief in the occultation and Parousia.

Conclusion

While popular Messianism signifies redemptive aspirations of the disappointed and frustrated ordinary people, Mahdism represents the authorities' claim to supernatural power, at the time when republican aspect of the Islamic government has gone to the sidelines. At first, Mahdism was adopted to play a trump card in the hands of conservatives to expel reformists and buy the loyalties of the ordinary people. However, it gradually went out of control. This development poses a dilemma for the clerical establishment and demonstrates its contradictory situation. If it confronts Mahdism as apologists such as Ja'farian do, it will be further marginalized. If it accepts the Mahdist discourse, it debunks its own existence and contributes to further profanation and routinization of the clerical rule. In light of this concern, Kazem Sediqi, head of the Friday Prayer in Tehran, declared that the velayat-e faqih is the minor Parousia (*zohour-e sughra*) and a prelude to the major one (7 June 2022).⁸¹ His speech seemed to be a response to Mahdist critics of the velayat-e faqih.

According to Anson Rabinbach, there are four major kinds of messianism: (a) restorative, (b) redemptive and utopian, (c) apocalyptic, involving a caesura separating the past from the future, (d) expectative, characterized by a swing between hope and despair and esoteric knowledge.⁸² While popular Messianism in contemporary Iran is a grassroots political movement with redemptive aspirations, Mahdism is neither redemptive nor restorative. It might appear apocalyptic, but it is post-apocalyptic. Mahdism represents a shift that Alexei Yurchak described as the 'transformation of the discursive regime'.⁸³ By this he means a major reorganization of the hegemonic political, scientific, and cultural rhetoric. It is the appropriation of the aspirations of the most oppressed parts of Iranian society with the purpose of causing a sense of eschatological existence through the hastening of the Parousia.

In this sense it contradicts the postponement of the Messianic event by the Shiite jurist in the tenth century. As mentioned earlier, ever since the tenth century 'major Occultation' the Shiite establishment attempted to make a balance between Messianism based on the imminent return of the Mahdi and the messianic hope based on his advent in a distant future. In doing this it attempted to avoid reckless messianic outbursts that would either end in disastrous defeats or in a severe crisis of faith once the Mahdi would fail to return.

⁸⁰ *Ibid.*, p. xiii.

⁸¹ <https://www.isna.ir/news/1401031711586/ولایت-فقیه-ظهور-صغری-برای-رسیدن-به-ظهور-کبری-است>.

⁸² Rabinbach, *op. cit.*, pp. 84 ff.

⁸³ Alexei Yurchak, *Everything Was Forever, until There Was no More: The Last Soviet Generation* (Princeton University Press, 2006), p. 29.

Jamkaran exemplifies a new political imagination, in which the revolution is no longer seen as the constituent event, but merely a prelude to what is supposed to be the Mahdi's universal government. It implicitly declares the beginning of a brand-new era, without explicitly announcing the end of the earlier one.

Mahdism and Messianism though being different, share one thing: They signify the dramatic decline in the status of the *ulama* as one of the main social and political players in modern Iran. The history of contemporary Iran cannot be said without the recognition of the role of seminarians.⁸⁴ The Messianic fever of the recent years and the subsequent popular uprising against the regime in its entirety in the last months of 2022 demonstrate that the clerical establishment faces a deep crisis which might be inflicting on it for a long period of time.

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⁸⁴Hamid Algar, *Religion and State in Iran 1785–1906: The Role of the Ulama* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1980); Juan Cole, Mottahedeh, op. cit.