



Dajjal

Author: Hugh Beattie

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Introduction

The Dajjal, whose full title is al-Masih al-Dajjal (the false Messiah or Antichrist), plays a key role in Muslim eschatology. He is usually identified as 'the apocalyptic opponent of Jesus' (Cook 2012), who, according to various hadiths (traditions) of the Prophet Muhammad, will appear in the last days. The Dajjal is usually envisaged as 'a malevolent creature in human form' (Cook 2012), and his arrival will follow the appearance of the Mahdi, or 'rightly-guided one'. He will claim to be the returning Messiah (Jesus), and his forces will attack the Mahdi and be on the point of defeating him when the real Jesus will descend from heaven. Working together, Jesus and the Mahdi will destroy the Dajjal and his army. Gog and Magog (Yajuj and Majuj) will be released and will attack the Muslims, but God will save them. After some time, Jesus and the Mahdi will die and the various signs of the end times will culminate in the Resurrection and the Day of Judgment.

Over the centuries, a range of individuals, cultures, states, and political movements, as well as a kind of spiritual incapacity or blindness, have been identified with the Dajjal. He is often said to be Jewish, and during the twentieth century accounts of his activities were given an increasingly anti-Semitic colouring. Some Muslims associate him with Zionism and the state of Israel and the United States, and Muslim apocalyptic writers have developed complex scenarios involving global war between Muslims and 'the West', and the destruction of Israel and the defeat of America. Some American evangelical Christian fundamentalists have referred to the Dajjal as the Islamic Antichrist and regard him as a demonic threat.

Origins and Early History

The word *Dajjal* is usually said to derive from the word for 'deceiver' or 'impostor' in Syriac and means 'cheat' or 'impostor'. Muslims use it to refer in particular to the Deceiver (al-Masih al-Dajjal), the false Messiah. As regards his origins, Jewish ideas about the malign influence of opponents of the Messiah and the Christian belief that Jesus of Nazareth was the Messiah may well have had some influence on Muslim apocalyptic traditions (McGinn 2000, 3). The Qur'an refers to some events linked to the end times and the Day of Resurrection and Judgment (*yawm al-qiyamah*), and according to some verses the end is near. It does not mention the Dajjal, though Muslims have sometimes claimed that it does so indirectly (Saritoprak 2003, 292). The Dajjal is, however, mentioned by name in the principal collections of hadiths, including

those of al-Bukhari (810–70 ce) and Muslim ibn al-Hajjaj (c.817–75 ce), which are regarded as being particularly authoritative. Muslim ibn al-Hajjaj mostly accepts the apocalyptic traditions approved by al-Bukhari, but the ones he includes describe the Dajjal's activities and the last days of the world in more detail (Filiu 2011, 15).

Apocalypticism usually appears in difficult times, and these traditions about the Mahdi and the Dajjal were no exception. They emerged particularly as a result of three civil wars (*fitan*) that occurred in the Umayyad caliphate during the later seventh and mid-eighth centuries (656–61, 680–92 and 744–50 ce) as well as the caliphate's failure to overthrow the Byzantine Empire (Arjomand 1998, 248; Cook 2005, 8). It seems that these apocalyptic narratives helped Muslims to come to terms with their dismay at the fact that Muslims were fighting Muslims and the lack of progress in their campaigns against the Byzantines, and provided a vision of a future in which enemies would be defeated, the just would triumph, and the world would be set to rights.

Drawing mostly on these hadiths therefore, Muslim scholars plotted out the events of the end times. First come various minor 'signs' or indications, including fighting between Muslims, the spread of ignorance, universal prosperity and the construction of excessively high buildings, as well as the appearance of as many as thirty false messiahs. Some minor signs are *ex eventu* prophecies, based on episodes that occurred during the first two centuries of Islam. A good example is the dispersal of the army the second Umayyad Caliph Yazid ibn Mu'awiya (reigned 680–683 ce) sent to the Hijaz to deal with his opponent, Abdallah ibn al-Zubayr (c.624–692 ce), who had taken refuge in Mecca. Yazid's army besieged the city, but Yazid died, and on receiving the news the army returned to Syria. This appears to have been the origin of the prophecy that one of the signs will be the 'swallowing up (*khasf*) of an army in the desert' (Arjomand, 1998, 249). According to Muslim ibn al-Hajjaj, ten major signs will follow the minor ones. These will include an attack by the Byzantine Empire on the Muslims at A'amaq or Dabiq in northern Syria. Following this, the Mahdi will appear and the Muslims will defeat the Byzantine forces and conquer Constantinople. The Mahdi will bring prosperity, peace, and justice, and the triumph of Islam for some years (there are differences of opinion on how many).

Sooner or later, however, the Dajjal, 'a young man with twisted, curly hair, and a blind eye ... will appear somewhere between Syria and Iraq and will spread mischief right and left' (Muslim 41.7015 in Aghaie 2005, 2). Seventy thousand Jews from Isfahan will follow him, as well as Turks and Bedouin and others 'from the marginal groups of the Muslim world' (Cook 2012). The word *kafir* ('disbeliever') will be written on his forehead and 'even the illiterate will be able to read it' (Algar [1993] 2011). He is often described as being of great size and riding on a donkey. He will be a charismatic figure who will perform miracles in order to persuade people to follow him; for instance, he will be able to cure the sick, raise the dead, and conjure up food and drink. His appearance will test Muslims' faith, and only a few will be able to resist his appeal; women especially will find him very attractive, but he will deal ruthlessly with anyone who opposes him. Reciting the first ten verses of Sura 18 of the Qur'an (*The Cave*) will give protection. Some have seen him as a jinn (jinns or 'genies' are a distinct type of being, created from fire, referred to at a number of points in the Qur'an—for example, 15:26–27), but usually he is thought of as a human being, albeit an extraordinary one. According to Muslim ibn al-Hajjaj, he will rule for 'forty days, forty months, and forty years' (Filiu 2011, 16).

The Muslims will fight the Dajjal and his forces, but he will besiege them, either in Jerusalem or in Damascus. He will be about to defeat them when Jesus will come down from heaven 'at the white minaret

on the east side of Damascus' (Muslim 41.7015, in Aghaie, 2005, 2). Jesus will chase him to Lydda or Lod (now in modern day Israel) and kill him, and the Muslims will pursue the Jews in his following who have not converted to Islam. When they try to hide behind rocks and trees, the rocks and trees (apart from one species in particular, associated with the Jews) will reveal their presence and the Muslims will kill them. Jesus will then lead the Muslims to a place called Tur (meaning 'mountain'). The barrier behind which Gog and Magog were long ago confined by Dhul-Qarnayn (the 'two-horned one') will be destroyed, and they and their peoples will burst out (Qur'an 18:92-99). They will drink Lake Tiberias dry and besiege Tur. Jesus and his companions will appeal to God for help. God will send insects to kill the besiegers, and they will all be found dead next morning. After some time, the last major signs will manifest themselves. The sun will rise in the west, a creature or beast will appear out of the ground (Qur'an 27:82), and a great fire will break out in Yemen and drive people to the place of resurrection and judgment (Ali, 2011, 28, Stowasser n.d. 5).

Other apocalyptic hadiths in Muslim's collection that refer to the Dajjal include a description of a meeting between him and a Christian convert, a merchant called Tamim al-Dari. Al-Dari was shipwrecked on an island, where he saw and talked to a giant, bound in chains, who told him he was the Dajjal and that he would soon be released (Cook, 2012). Another hadith mentions Ibn Sayyad (d. 683 ce), a young Jewish man and a contemporary of the Prophet Muhammad. The Prophet's companion Umar ibn al-Khattab (c. 586-644 ce) (the second caliph) mistook Ibn Sayyad for the Dajjal and wanted to kill him. The Prophet ordered him not to do so, saying 'Leave him alone. If it is he whom you fear, you will not be able to kill him' (Halperin 1976, 220). In another influential hadith, the believer is recommended to seek refuge in God from four things: hellfire, the torments of the grave, the trials of life and death, and the evil of the Dajjal (Saritoprak 2003, 296).

Some Later Developments

Muslims continued to reflect on and develop this eschatological scenario and its characters. For instance, the influential historian and traditionist Al-Tabari (839-923 ce) suggested that when the creature or beast mentioned above emerges, it will divide people into believers and disbelievers; the faces of the former will shine, but the foreheads of the latter will have a black mark (Filiu 2011, 22). To take another example, Ibn Kathir (1300-73 ce), author of a highly regarded commentary on the Qur'an, argued that the Dajjal is not actually a very important figure, which is why the Qur'an does not mention him (Filiu 2011, 40). Some Muslims saw the story of the Dajjal and his fate as spiritual metaphors and envisaged him as symbolizing the human capacity for evil rather than an actual person (Aghaie 2005, 2). The great Sufi poet Rumi (d. 1273 ce), for instance, suggested that the fact that the Dajjal has only one working eye signifies his spiritual blindness (Saritoprak, 2003, 300). Some regarded his death at Jesus's hands as a metaphor for the Sufi idea that the lower self (*nafs*) must be mastered by the spirit (*ruh*) as part of 'a process of inner transformation' (Chittick, 2000, 20; Algar [1993] 2011).

Shi'a scholars also wrote on messianic themes. One example is the theologian Mullah Muhammad Baqir Majlisi (1628-99), an influential figure from the majority Twelver or Imami Shi'a tradition (Amanat 2009, 50). The Twelver Shi'a believe in a sequence of twelve Imams, and the Shi'a account of the end times differs from the Sunni one in that it will be the twelfth Imam, Muhammad al-Muntazar al-Mahdi (the awaited Mahdi), currently in occultation or hidden, who will kill the Dajjal, not Jesus. In some Shi'a

scenarios, another malevolent figure, the Sufyani, actually replaced the Dajjal (Filiu 2011, 153). The original inspiration for the Sufyani was probably the second Umayyad caliph, Yazid, mentioned above. He was regarded as having ordered the slaughter of one of the Prophet's grandsons, Imam Husayn (the third Shi'a imam), and his family at Karbala in southern Iraq in 680 ce, and as a result he became a hate figure for the Twelver Shi'a (Arjomand 1998, 254).

Modern and Contemporary Approaches: Muslim (and Christian)

Ways of thinking about the Dajjal and his significance continued to develop. For instance, some Muslim reformers, including Muhammad Abduh (1849–1905), Mufti of Egypt (1899–1905), and his protégé, the Syrian Rashid Rida (1856–1935), took a critical view of the hadiths relating to the Dajjal, and regarded him as 'a symbol of deceit and evil' (Saritoprak 2003, 301). The influential Austrian convert and translator of the Qur'an Muhammad Asad (1900–1992) identified him with Western civilisation (Saritoprak 2003, 301), and in his book *Al-Dajjal yujtah al-'alam [The Antichrist Invades the World]* (1998) the writer Muhammad Munir Idlibi sees him at work in European colonialism (Filiu 2011, 102). Towards the end of the twentieth century, another convert, Ahmad Thomson, suggested that 'the kaffir system, that is the Dajjal system' is a global social and cultural phenomenon that keeps people enslaved in consumerism (Thomson, 2015). Jesus's killing of the Dajjal, some suggested, represented the victory of truth over falsehood, or the killing of 'irreligion or materialism' (Saritoprak 2003, 297).

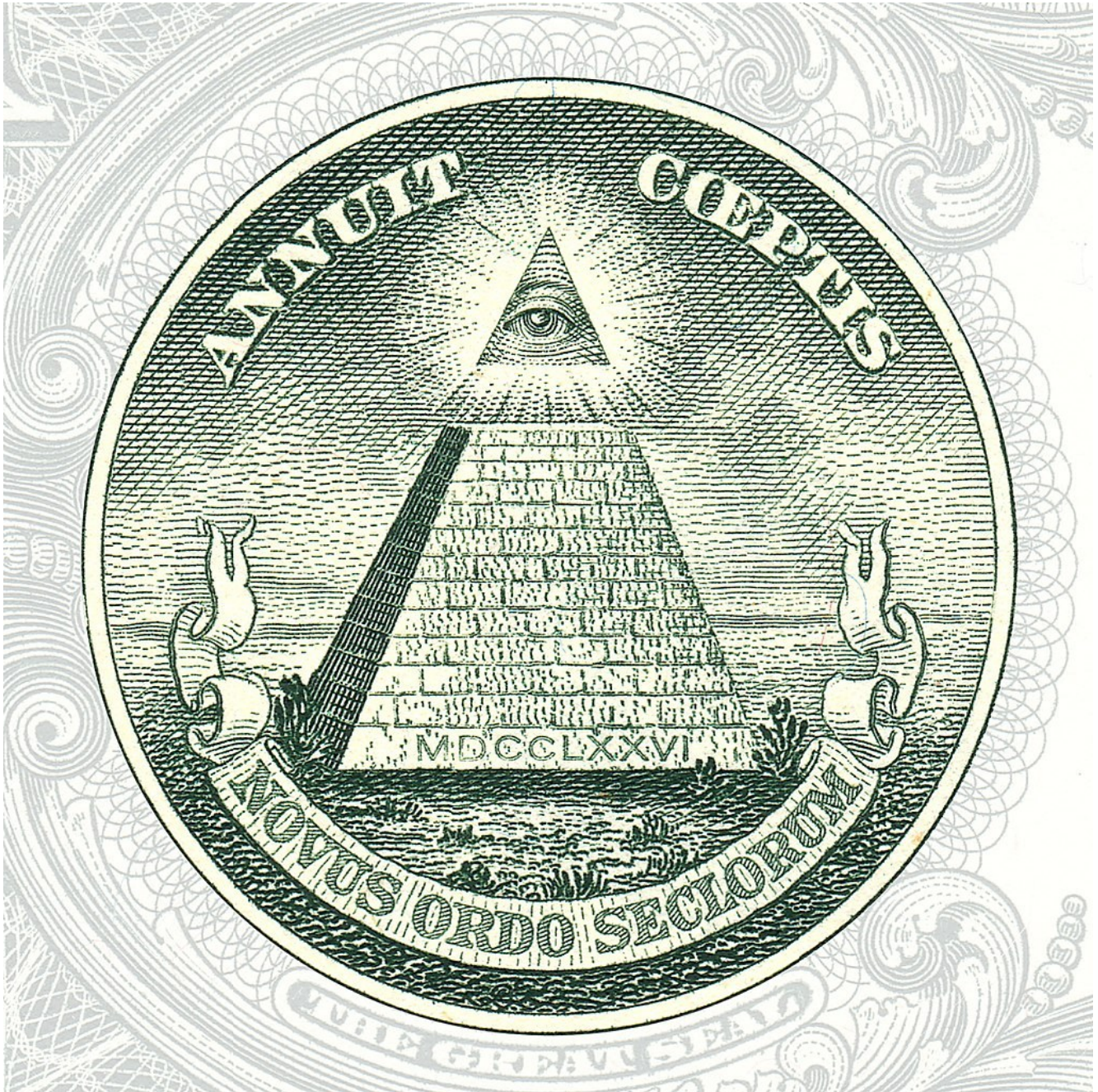
Others have actually envisaged the Dajjal as a contemporary political figure. For example, the influential Kurdish revivalist and founder of the Nur (*Nurçuluk*) movement in Turkey, Said Nursi (1877–1960), suggested that there might in fact be two Dajjals, a universal Dajjal and a 'Dajjal of Islam', hinting that the former was Bolshevism and the latter Mustafa Kemal Atatürk (1881–1938), the secularizing founder of modern Turkey (Bilici 2020, 2). Bahais and Ahmadiyyas have sometimes been identified as among those working for the Dajjal, while the founder of the Ahmadiyya movement, Mirza Ghulam Ahmad (1835–1908), identified the Dajjal with Christian missionaries (Filiu 2011, 90; Hosein n.d.).

Many Muslims, including Rashid Rida and another very influential figure, the Egyptian religious scholar Muhammad al-Ghazali (1917–96), regarded the link between the Dajjal and the Jews as particularly significant. Rashid Rida thought that Jewish scientists would develop technology that would enable them to perform the miraculous feats for which, according to tradition, the Dajjal would be responsible (Saritoprak 2003, 301–2).

During the last forty or fifty years, Muslim authors have produced many books about the Apocalypse and its leading figures. For example, the Trinidadian religious scholar Imran Hosein suggests in his book *Dajjal, the Qur'an and Awwal al-Zaman [The Antichrist, the Holy Qur'an, and the Beginning of History]* that the Dajjal has been responsible for creating the 'arrogant Zionist Judeo-Christian Western civilization' (Hosein 2019, 79). He also speculates that the Dajjal is the *jasad* (according to him a human being without a soul) that the Qur'an (Sura 38:34) tells us God placed on King Solomon's throne in order to teach him a lesson. A similarly anti-Western and anti-Semitic tone has permeated a very popular genre of modern apocalyptic writing, much of it in Arabic. Sometimes its authors have drawn not just on classical Muslim sources but also on biblical ones, particularly the Book of Revelation, as well as publications by various Christian writers, among them the American televangelist and founder of Moral Majority, Jerry Falwell (1933–2007).

They have also relied on anti-Semitic works, including the notorious *Protocols of the Elders of Zion* (Cook 2005, 66, 92, 123; Filiu 2011, 11).

A very influential example is the Egyptian Said Ayyub's *Al-Masīh al-Dajjāl* [The False Messiah] (1987). According to this, the Apostle Paul was the Dajjal, the Jewish Antichrist's first intermediary, and as a result of his activities Christianity developed into 'an apocalyptic cult of the Antichrist' (Filiu 2011, 84). Ayyub traces the Dajjal's nefarious activities in history up to the present day, when he controls the United States and is trying to establish a kind of godless order through his Jewish followers and other non-Muslims. After much fighting, his enemy (the Muslims) will defeat him in a final battle. The malign influence of European anti-Semitism is particularly obvious here, and in scenarios like this one fantasies about the Dajjal merge with anti-Jewish and anti-American conspiracy theories. The Salafi scholar Hani Ramadan, for example, asks whether it is just a coincidence that the Dajjal is one-eyed and that a single eye is seen on 'the alleged Masonic emblem of the *Illuminati*', which appears on the Declaration of the Rights of Man (1789) and on the American dollar bill (Rogozinski 2020, 317).



Detail from US dollar bill showing the "all seeing eye". (Public domain, from wikimedia.org.)

Some authors have incorporated pseudo-scientific theories about the Bermuda Triangle and flying saucers into their apocalyptic fiction. For example, in *Al-Khuyūt al-khāfiyya bayna al-Masīh al-Dajjāl wa asrār muthallath Bermuda wa-l-atbāq al tā'ira* [*The Hidden Links between the Antichrist, the Secrets of the Bermuda Triangle, and Flying Saucers*] (1994), Muhammad Isa Daud imagines that the Dajjal has already emerged and lives in the Bermuda Triangle. Here he keeps an army of jinns and demons and has invented (among other things) flying machines, which Daud suggests are the UFOs identified by conspiracy theorists. Developing this theme in *Iqtaraba khūrūj al-Masīh al-Dajjāl* [*The False Messiah Is about to Emerge*] (2006), Hisham Kamal Abdelhamid imagines the Dajjal's flying saucers as aerial weapons and their pilots as jinns (Cook 2005, 78-83).

Muslims writing in other languages have developed their own end-times scenarios, which likewise involve global conflict, destruction, and death. In these the Dajjal is also usually presented as Jewish, or at least as being supported by the Jews, for example in the Mauritian Muhammad Yasin Owadally's *Emergence of Dajjal: The Jewish King* ([1997] 2001) (Filiu, 2011, 174-5). He may even be represented as 'the collective mind of the world Zionist conspiracy' (Cook 2005, 162).

The Dajjal continues to feature in some Muslim debates and discussions today (much of it on the Internet). Leading figures in the [Naqshbandi-Haqqani Sufi](#) order, for instance, accept the traditional end-time scenario and are convinced that the final battle between Jesus and the Mahdi and the Dajjal is imminent (Netton 2000, 72; Damrel 2006, 122). In his book *Yawm al-Ghadab [The Day of Wrath]* (2003) the Saudi preacher Shaykh Safar al-Hawali (b. 1950) reinterprets the biblical books of Daniel and Revelation in Muslim terms and foresees an end-times battle in which Jesus will emerge to kill the Jewish and Christian Dajjal (Sells 2013, 18-20). His radical approach helped to inspire militant Muslims, and apocalyptic themes and references to the Dajjal have also appeared in writings by theorists of violent jihad, among them Abu Mus'ab al-Suri (b. 1948), as well its practitioners, including Abu Mus'ab al-Zarqawi (1966–2006), the founder of Al-Qaeda in Iraq (Filiu 2011, 189; McCants 2015, 146). ISIS (or Daesh) has also made much use of apocalyptic ideas in its media output, regarding 'the Dajjal and his Jewish followers as leaders of the Jewish conspiracy against Islam' (Rickenbacher 2019, 483). ISIS also denounces Shi'a Muslims (referred to as *rafida*, 'rejecters'), particularly the Twelvers, for collaborating with the Jews in this anti-Islamic movement. It blames Abdallah Ibn Saba, supposedly a Jew who lived in the seventh century ce and converted to Islam, for being principally responsible for the emergence of Shi'ism, and has even argued that the Twelfth Shi'ite Imam, Muhammad al-Mahdi, is the Dajjal and is Jewish (Rickenbacher 2019).

While some Muslims see Christian Zionism as an anti-Islamic American manifestation of the Dajjal, some Christians continue to believe in a connection between Islam and the coming of the Antichrist (Boyer 2002, 319–21). Especially since the end of the Cold War (between the United States and its allies and the Soviet Union) in the 1990s and 9/11, fundamentalist American evangelical Christians have depicted Islam as the enemy. Books by Jack Smith (2011), Joel Richardson (2012) and Michael Youssef (2018), among others, have given the idea of the 'Islamic Antichrist' a new prominence in popular American Christian theology. Richardson, for example, inverts the traditional Muslim narrative, arguing that the Dajjal is actually the Christian Jesus, while the Mahdi is the Christian Antichrist and the Muslim Jesus is the second beast of Revelation 13 (referred to by some Christians as the 'false prophet'). Smith, like ISIS, identifies Muhammad al-Mahdi, the twelfth Imam, as the Islamic Antichrist. Many American evangelicals actually envisage the Dajjal as one of several spirits or demons who, in the wake of 9/11, pose a serious threat to mainstream American society and culture, and against whom they are waging spiritual warfare (White 2014, 193; O'Donnell 2021).

Conclusion

How might we try to understand the appeal of these eschatological narratives? One approach is to see them as comprising a meme or schema based on the idea that 'those who were downtrodden, excluded and persecuted become the chosen ones, God's Beloved' (Rogozinski 2020, 308). Through this lens, we can see why apocalyptic prophecies often emerge in difficult times, and why those involving al-Masih al-Dajjal are a good example. Arguably the end-times narrative of war, death, and destruction, involving the

appearance of the Mahdi and the Dajjal, and the return of Jesus and the Dajjal's destruction, offered a kind of catharsis for the difficulties many Muslims experienced during the seventh- and eighth-century civil wars. It explained why things had gone wrong with the Islamic mission and offered a future in which the enemy would be defeated and Islam would triumph. Subsequently, the narrative has encouraged movements of active resistance to those in power as well as resignation and political passivity. Events such as the creation of the state of Israel in 1948, Israel's victory in the Six-Day War in 1967, and the invasions of Afghanistan in 2001 and Iraq in 2003 helped to spark a renewed interest in the Dajjal. Much of the modern and contemporary writing about him, the Mahdi, and Jesus might be thought of as 'counter-history' in Foucault's terms—a conspiracy theory in which the Dajjal has always been with us and continues to be at work behind the scenes to undermine Islam (Rogozinski, 2020, 318).

To sum up, Muslims have envisaged the Dajjal, the Deceiver, in many forms. He is sometimes said to be a jinn, but is most often thought of as a very persuasive man who is blind in one eye, has curly hair, and has *kafir* ('disbeliever') on his forehead, whose arrival is one of the signs of the last days. He has also been imagined as a political or socioeconomic movement, an empire, and a culture. Sometimes he symbolizes materialism and spiritual blindness. He has often been identified as Jewish or as having a special connection with the Jews, which accounts for the way he has been linked with Zionism. For many, he continues to represent the enemy, and his death in apocalyptic narratives expresses the hope for the defeat of threatening forces, the righting of wrongs, a better future in this world, and at the end salvation.

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