



Twentieth-Century Iranian Messianism

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Introduction

Twentieth-century Iranian Messianism is rooted in Twelver Shi'i belief in the return of the Mahdi (the Twelfth Imam). Although the belief itself has been developing since the tenth century CE, it has changed a lot, especially in the last century when it would be understood as a response to the calamities of modernity. In the second half of the twentieth century, the belief changed to some form of fulfilled messianism, where preparation for the coming of the Mahdi was read in political philosophical terms. In this entry, after a brief introduction of the general tenets of belief in the Mahdi and rituals of waiting, I will show how the Mahdi was invoked during several political events. Then, I will deal with the legal, political, and philosophical re-readings of 'the messianic' that were also crucial in Iranian intellectual history.

Twelver Shi'i messianism

Twelver Shi'i messianism involves the idea that the Twelfth Shi'i Imam, Muhammad b. al-Hassan (Mahdi) (born presumably in 869), will rise in due course to restore justice to earth—i.e., take vengeance of the blood of his ancestor Husayn, as well as other righteous Shi'is who had been oppressed. The term 'Mahdi' (literally the guided one) has been applied since the eighth century to various messianic figures, but its most well-known holder is Muhammad b. al-Hassan. *Qā'im* (the revolutionary one) was another well-known title for the Islamic messiah, which was also applied to the Twelfth Imam. His other titles include: *Imām-i zamān* (the Imam of the Age), *Sāhib al-zamān* (the Lord of the Age), *Hojjatallah* (Ultimate Truth from God), *Baqiatallah* (the one that Allah lets remain). Although the historical details about his birth are not clear, in Shi'i memory he went to Occultation immediately after his father's death when he was only five. His Minor Occultation lasted from 874 until 941, during which he was believed to have communicated with the faithful through four successive representatives. With the end of the Minor Occultation, which was marked by a message from the Imam to the effect that until his reappearance, people should refer to religious scholars for their guidance, the Major Occultation started. During both Occultations, though less so in the minor one, there were disputes about who should be his true representatives and/or scholars. But consensus determined various leaders. The spiritual and political authority of any particular leader was entirely based on their perceived representation of the Imam, although during the Major Occultation this did not mean a direct communication.

Messianic Rituals

Messianic waiting was expressed through certain actions. There are reports about those who engaged in regular small military manoeuvres in the deserts in preparation for the coming of the Mahdi (Ibn Battutah 1997, 174; Hamawi 1990, 336). Chiliastic dating, although officially seen as reprehensible, was practiced extensively. So were more-or-less successful claims to messiahship by various figures. More prevalent is the practice of regular fervent prayers to ease the coming of the Mahdi. In most of these formulaic Arabic prayers, the reciter complains of the hard times and difficulties that are to be resolved with the coming of the Imam. These prayers are regular parts of many Shi'i congregations, school programmes, as well as individual piety. One of them reads:

O God! Great is our trial! Visible is our trouble! Our hope is cut! The veil is taken up! The earth is too small! The sky has stopped raining! We bring suit to you! In our hard and easy times, we trust you! O God! Send your peace on Muhammad and his household, the Imams whose obedience you made binding on us, by which you showed us their status! In their names, we beg you to resolve our difficulties, in the wink of any eye or less! O Muhammad! O Ali! Please help us! O our lord! O the Lord of Age [i.e., Mahdi]! We ask you! We ask you! We ask you! Please come to our help! Please come to our help! Please come to our help!

In a morning prayer called 'The Prayer of Covenant' (*Du'ā' al-'ahd*), the reciters ask God to greet Imam Mahdi on their behalf. The prayer continues like this: 'This morning, I renew my covenant and oath with him...Please have me among his companions and helpers and defenders and those who hurry to follow his requests.' Then the reciters ask that, if they die before seeing the Imam, God resurrect them to be able to help the Imam. Then they ask God to show them the 'bright light' of the Imam's face, and hasten his coming, and fulfil what the Imam is going to do so that the truth prevails.

Among sacred sites, the Jamkarān Mosque in a village by the same name near Qom attracts a number of messianic pilgrims every day, especially on Tuesday nights. According to disputed evidence, the building of the Mosque was ordered by Imam Mahdi himself. Over the years, especially since the 1980s, the Mosque and its surrounding areas have developed tremendously. There are a number of hotels, restaurants, and markets nearby. With what is known as the 'rise of rituals' in Iran in recent years, celebrations that are related to the Imam are taken very seriously. Two public holidays are dedicated especially to him: the 15th of Sha'ban in the hijri lunar calendar is celebrated as the birthday of the Imam, while the 8th of Rabī' al-'awwal is celebrated as the day of the commencement of his Imamate (one day after the supposed date of his father's death). The former occasion has always been celebrated on the street, as well as in the mosques. Children and young people start collecting money for the occasion, and they make small decorations with lights and other materials that are available to them. Depending on the season, different kinds of food, drink, and sweets are given away on the streets, and happy religious birthday chants are heard from big loudspeakers. In more observing communities, people greet each other with 'Eid Mubarak.' The celebrations have become more elaborate in recent years.

Development of Modern Shi'i Messianism Parallel with Babi-Baha'i Beliefs

A major messianic event in modern Iran, which had adopted Shi'i belief in the Mahdi since the domination of Shi'i Safavids in the 1500s, was the rise of Ali-Muhammad Shirazi (1819–1850), also known as Bab [i.e., the gate of the Imam]. The founder of Babism declared his mission in the year 1260 AH (After Hijra, date equivalent to 1844), exactly one thousand years (according to the Islamic lunar calendar) after the absence of the Twelfth Imam, when the latter's coming was, in classic chiliastic terms, expected. The subsequent developments of millenarianism in the Baha'i and Babi-Azali movements are beyond the scope of this entry. But it is important to note that, for the rest of the modern period, Babi and Baha'i tendencies became a foil for Shi'i concepts of waiting. If a Babi or Bahai was one who held that the Imam had already appeared, it was believed that a true Shi'i will keep alive the spirit of intense waiting.

Throughout history, different events were seen as a sign of the coming of the Imam. In the Constitutional Revolution (1905–1911), for example, both the very active Azali Babis and the mainstream Shi'is detected messianic elements. Azalis read it as evidence of the Bab's cosmic role, while the Shi'i intellectual Nazim al-Islam Kirmani read the revolutionary emancipatory signs as harbingers of the reappearance of the Twelfth Imam, hence calling the dead revolutionaries martyrs in the cause of Imam Mahdi (Cole 2002, 302).

Philosophical Re-readings of the Mahdi

The 1960s and 1970s marked an era of rapid economic development and political dictatorship in Iran. The rise of wider public education in the 1960s and 1970s meant that many supernatural details of the life of the Twelfth Imam were questioned. However, at the same time, after the 1953 coup d'état and the suppression of liberation movements (including Islamist ones), there was little hope other than for some unknown event that would turn the tables towards a utopian future. Leftists prepared in communal houses for an unknown, probably imminent moment of guerrilla fighting. However, under severe suppression and surveillance, it was uncertain how far or how soon they could achieve their goals. All of this means that there was a desire for action, manoeuvre, and preparation; but all of this was accompanied by a deep disappointment at the possibility of any change. Agency was expressed in waiting for a utopian change. The philosophical readings below should be read in light of scientific uncertainty regarding the details of the Mahdi's life, a desire for taking responsibility and preparing for change, and a sense of disappointment of liberation.

Scientific Criticism and Responses

As regards the question of scientific uncertainty, one of the most vocal critics of supernatural interpretations was Ahmad Kasravi (1890–1946), the historian and linguist, and a proponent of purifying 'original' Islam from what he deemed immoral and irrational superstitions. One of these was belief in the supernatural powers of the Imams. In *Dar piramun-eislām [On Islam]*, he described the faithful as,

believing in the return of Jesus and the appearance of the hidden imam (imām-e nāpaydā) and the eternal life of Khidr, all of which goes against the laws of the world. [Khidr is, in Islamic tradition,

described as the wise man who outwits Moses in Qur'an 18:60-82, and who is said to have been immortal. His long life was taken as the possibility of a long life for Imam Mahdi.] And if you criticize them, they will say, 'Is this far from divine power?' Little they know that God has put boundaries and laws for exerting his power, not that everything that could be should be. (Kasravi 1963, 10-11)

In his most well-known work, Kasravi criticised belief in the supernatural powers of the Imams:

The Eleventh Imam had no known child. Therefore, upon his death, his followers disputed about his succession. A group held that imamate had ended. Another group followed his brother Ja'far (who is called 'Ja'far the liar' by the Shi'a), while another group announced that the Imam had a five year old son who is hidden in the basement, and who is the next Imam. ... I repeat that this is a very surprising story. It is not possible that no one was aware of the birth of this child. If the Eleventh Imam did really have a child, why should he be hidden? Why would he not come out of the basement. If the Imam is the leader, he must be among the people and guide them. Why hiding? But in the Shi'a, asking for proof and rational judgment of the events has not ever existed, nor does it exist now. (Kasravi n.d., 7)

Over time, many clerics and public intellectuals have sought to articulate the waiting for the Mahdi in ever new ways. In 1970, for example, the Iranian man of letters, Mohammadreza Hakimi [b. 1935], who is known for his rejection of philosophical interpretations of religion, published *Khurshīd-i Maghrib (The Sun of the West)*. In this book, Hakimi relied on the Qur'an and traditional literature to argue for the existence of the Mahdi, and resorted to scientific explanation to support the Imam's long life (Hakimi 2001).

The Mahdi, Islamic Law, and Politics

The hugely influential theologian Ayatollah Mortaza Motahhari (1919-1979) offered a novel formulation of messianic waiting. Motahhari (2008) set out two conceptions of history. According to one, history ends in a moment of eruption. Therefore, to prepare for its end (if there is such a thing as preparedness in this conception at all), one should let human society stay as corrupt as it is. It might also mean that a Muslim neglects parts of the law, thus being almost complicit in the corruption. According to another understanding of history, however, the end of the world is like the slow ripening of a fruit. The reason that the Imam has not reappeared yet is that the world has not yet reached a capacity to welcome him. Human evolution is as slow as the movement of a snail, and only in long view is it clear that order and disorder follow each other. According to Motahhari, while human species would not have ever thought so, they are now confident that the only solution to our problems is the establishment of a 'single global government.' Although by no means a leftist, here he is relying on the very widespread internationalist jargon and the phrase has become very popular in Shi'a communities since. This is entirely concomitant with the internalisation of legal morality: 'These reforms bring about the appearance of the Mahdi, just as those disorders do. The idea of waiting for his coming does not mean that any obligation—great or small—is not any longer binding to us' (Motahhari 2008, 179-80).

Motahhari's major mentor Ayatollah Khomeini (1902-1989) also interpreted the waiting politically, though

more in traditional legal terms. In one of his very few references to the role of the Mahdi, Khomeini (1994) mentioned him in his legal-political understanding of Islamic government. A highly authoritative book for Muslim clerical revolutionaries, Khomeini's teachings on government were published in the mid-1960s when he was in exile in Iraq. These teachings comprised Islamic governmental theory, the establishment of law by the state, as well as the role of the religious scholars in establishing those laws. One major part of this was the aforementioned role of religious leaders as the representatives of the Imam during his absence. In this sense, Islamic government was necessary because the Imam was absent and hence could not himself take up implementing the Shari'a, and because his only legitimate representatives were those well-versed in religious texts. Although the extent of the intervention of religious scholars in political affairs had been a matter of dispute in Shi'i legal thought, the broad lines of Khomeini's picture had already been established for centuries. In this sense, he added almost nothing new. However, there are points where he radicalised the human role during the Occultation:

Since the Minor Occultation until now a thousand and a few hundred years have passed. It is also possible that a hundred thousand years will also pass before his coming becomes expedient. Should Islamic laws be left on the ground, unenforced, and everyone abandoned to do what they want? Should this disorder be allowed? Were the laws for which the Prophet suffered for twenty-three years to announce, promulgate, spread, and implement only assigned for a short period? Did God restrict the enforcement of his laws only for two hundred years [of the Imams] and after the minor occultation, has Islam left everything? A positive answer to these questions implies belief in the abrogation of Islam. (Khomeini 1994, 19)

This change—directed to immanentization and millenarian fulfilment of the utopia here and now—did not only happen on the theological or legal side by Motahhari and his mentor respectively. Important radical existential philosophies also came along.

Radical Existentialist Response

The existentialist public intellectual Ali Shari'ati (1933–1977) is sometimes known as the ideologue of Iranian Revolution (1979). Influenced by the anti-imperialist, anti-colonial, existentialist, and Third-Worldist movements in France and North Africa, as well as a tradition of Islamic reform thought, Shari'ati's zealous speeches, which were a call to a 'true' Islam of 'spirituality, equality, and freedom,' attracted many young people. His speeches were widely (and often secretly) distributed among middle-class religious youths. In his 1971 lecture titled 'Waiting, the Religion of Protest,' he offered an influential reading of messianic waiting. Shari'ati was quite aware of the rationalist criticism, as well as the rationalist justifications of belief in the Mahdi. Many had contested, in reaction to the prominent Shi'ite perspective, that it was impossible for the Mahdi to have lived for around a thousand years. Others brought out scientific justifications to say that it could happen. Shari'ati did not determine his position on the rational possibility; rather, he suggested a 'functional' interpretation of having a messianic element in one's belief system (Shari'ati 2009, 241–56). First of all, he offered a 'democratic' reading of the authority of religious leaders during the Major Occultation. Shari'ati reinterpreted this authority to claim that in this time, the leader of the community is elected by the community; but they are responsible to their imam (i.e., leader). This means that the leaders are not to only implement what the people want, but also the purpose and the guiding

rule of the entire community. Being elected by the community, the leader is involved in a global conflict between the forces of truth and falsity. Clearly, Shari'ati was not a huge fan of liberal democracy (Shari'ati 2009, 250-68).

Second, Shari'ati divided the messianic into two kinds: negative (i.e., evil) and positive (i.e., good). Negative messianism leads to decadence and conservatism, while positive messianism leads to progress and movement. Negative messianism means accepting the status quo, relegating everything to the emergence of the Mahdi, and not taking charge of things so that one does not disturb divine providence. This has not only been the attitude of the people; the rulers have also taken advantage of this conservatism (Shari'ati 2009, 268-71). Positive messianism, on the contrary, works like a weapon to ruin corruption. It is a tool to move forward. Shari'ati explained this idea by reference to Third-Worldist theories.

First, messianic waiting is both an intellectual, social principle and a human principle. Every society has some idea about the past golden age, but it also tries to look forward to the future. Shari'ati even went so far as to assert that the more forward-looking the wait, the more human (the more progressive) a society was. Second, messianic waiting is the synthesis of two contrasting principles: truth and fact. The contrast between the dominant false fact and the dominated salvific truth can only be resolved in messianic waiting (Shari'ati 2009, 271-76). Messianic waiting means saying 'no' to whatever *is*. It means protesting against what exists in the world. Expecting the change in the future means that one is not happy with one's situation (Shari'ati 2009, 277). Third, messianic waiting is the same as historical determinism. This, Shari'ati claimed, is exciting for the intellectuals who are familiar with (leftist) philosophical schools. It means that justice is to be fulfilled, and that history is not haphazard or disconnected. Although we see that capitalists, unjust rulers, and oppressors are successful while the righteous and the masses are exploited and oppressed, according to scientific determinism—based on scientific laws about time and movement in nature and society—history finds its own path, so that in the future there will be a classless society. In this classless society, there will be no exploiter or exploited, no oppressor or oppressed. By believing in this messianic future, the oppressed will be encouraged that society will experience salvation in the future. Divine providence, which runs as scientific laws in both nature and history, promises the final fulfilment of the mission of the [prophets](#), which is, according to the Qur'an, knowledge and justice (Shari'ati 2009, 279-83). Fourth, messianic waiting connects different historical periods. The three periods of prophecy, imamate (i.e., the leadership of the Imams), and knowledge are connected. A messianic person is always prepared intellectually, materially, and practically. In a barrack, the soldiers are ready and vigilant for the command of their general. They cannot play cards or consume drugs. Any moment, they may need to go to jihad (Shari'ati 2009, 283-84).

Radical Messianism, Observed by Michel Foucault

The immanentization of the messianic among Iranian revolutionaries was so significant that it could not escape Michel Foucault's attention in his reports on the Iranian Revolution, a couple of months before its victory. Foucault observed that in Shi'i understanding, waiting for a future event, when the Mahdi 'will reestablish the egalitarian system in its perfection,' corresponded with defending the community of believers against evil powers (Afary and Anderson 2005, 201). In this report and in another, Foucault mentioned the significance of this belief for a political theory:

After Muhammad, another cycle of revelation begins, the unfinished cycle of the Imams, who,

through their words, their example, as well as their martyrdom, carry a light, always the same and always changing. It is this light that is capable of illuminating the law from the inside. The latter is made not only to be conserved, but also to release over time the spiritual meaning that it holds. Although invisible before his promised return, the Twelfth Imam is neither radically nor fatally absent. It is the people themselves who make him come back, insofar as the truth to which they awaken further enlightens them. It is often said that for Shi'ism, all power is bad if it is not the power of the Imam. As we can see, things are much more complex. This is what Ayatollah Shari'atmadari told me in the first few minutes of our meeting: 'We are waiting for the return of the Imam, which does not mean that we are giving up on the possibility of a good government. This is also what you Christians are endeavoring to achieve, although you are waiting for Judgment Day' (Afary and Anderson 2005, 203).

The Mahdi and Overcoming Self-Alienation

The political and philosophical significance of the Mahdi continued with no less force after the establishment of the Islamic Republic of Iran. Heavily relying on the West-East dichotomy and an amalgamation of continental and Islamic philosophies, Ahmad Fardid (1909–1994) (Fardid 2002) offered what he claimed to be a Heideggerian interpretation of the Mahdi. From outside both the religious establishment and state establishment, Fardid, who became an avid fan of the Iranian Revolution soon after its victory, called for censorship and the implementation of the laws of Islam. He criticised those who tried to draw liberty, human rights, and democracy from the Qur'an. While the Islamic Republic of Iran officially limited its opposition to the West merely on the political and cultural level, in Fardid's view even Western technology was capable of alienating the Eastern humans from themselves. His major targets were those intellectuals who maintained that in encountering the West, even if the West-East dichotomy was to be held at all, one could discern what is beneficial and what is harmful. The valorisation of the Orient in Fardid's work was ironically based on his reading of Heidegger's critique of Enlightenment and technology.

Fardid (2002) divided human history into five periods: the day before yesterday, yesterday, today, tomorrow, and the day after tomorrow. In this cyclical picture, the day before yesterday was a moment where spirituality was starting to grow. Fardid's portrayal of this period is reminiscent of an archetypal Orient (though not a geographical one). But with the dominance of Greek philosophy and metaphysical discussions, humans started to feel that they are autonomous. This is portrayed as an archetypal West. What is started there and then is the reason why in modernity today, with the rise of technology, this self-alienation has reached its zenith. While tomorrow (post-modernity) is merely a moment of awareness about this calamity, the day after tomorrow is the end of human history. It is where the subject and object are united; God's power is replaced by God's mercy, and a united *ummah* [community] of the human race is established on earth. The day after tomorrow, one returns to the native self of spirituality. This is concomitant with the return of the Mahdi, who, for Fardid, is not so much the Shi'i historical character as some indeterminate messianic figure (Hashemi 2007, 112). Just as Heidegger's reading of technology ended with a notion of *alethia* (literally, unveiling), Fardid held that illuminating wisdom, the native self of the Orient, is unveiled with the coming of the messiah. The Iranian Revolution was one giant step from tomorrow to the day after, though active waiting has yet to continue. There are debates among the followers and critics of Fardid alike as to whether this denial of the self-alienating West means living without technology in preparation for the Mahdi, or whether until the coming of utopia there is no way

other than suffering the ills of technology.

The former view—though in non-philosophical terms—is shared by the followers of Ayatollah Sadeq Tabrizi (1857–1932), the anti-Constitutional cleric who opposed the modern reforms of the early twentieth century. Later on in the 1980s, his followers migrated to a village in Taliqān, in the north of Iran, and started a life of seclusion, outside modern developments such as identification cards, electricity, modern schools, banks, asphalted roads, or any other product of modern governments. The village is called Īstā, meaning ‘static,’ both in the sense that it has not accepted modern developments, and in the sense that the inhabitants have stayed following an Ayatollah a few decades after his death. The significance of the village for the present discussion is that its inhabitants deem technology as a hurdle in Imam’s reappearance.

State Discourses on the Mahdi

The rhetoric of messianic vigilance has continued to influence Iranian society. However, with the amalgamation of state and religious institutions since 1979, the state controls the right and wrong kinds of waiting for the Mahdi. According to official discourses, the right kind of waiting involves actively preparing the world through political participation. But this should not go so far as following a messianic claimant. Those who claim to be the Mahdi, or who claim to be holding a special relation with him, face prosecution. Another wrong kind of waiting is relegating the political to the future coming of the Mahdi, thus separating the religious and the political. In the official self-representation of the state, the state itself is construed as a preparation for the coming of the Mahdi. It is a valuable preparation, and is continuous with the Mahdi’s kingdom. In many mosques, this rhyme is recited immediately after the congregational prayer: *‘khudāyā khudāyā/tā inqilāb-i mahdī/az nahzat-i khomeini/muhāfizāt bifarmā’* (‘O God, please protect Khomeini’s movement until the Mahdi’s revolution’). The idea of the revolution as a harbinger of the coming of the Mahdi had become so prominent that an association called the ‘Hujjatiyah’ [followers of Hujjat, i.e. the Mahdi], which had been dedicated to fighting the Baha’i faith since 1953, was accused of having the wrong idea of the messianic. According to disputed allegations, the Hujjatiyah tried to stay quietist because they held that the spread of sin will ease the coming of the Imam. Under these accusations, it stopped its activities in 1983.

Interestingly, however, the Iranian officials—the supreme leaders or the presidents—did not resort to messianic rhetoric explicitly. Consequently, many observers were startled to see ex-President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad’s (b. 1956) constant references to the Occultation and waiting for the Mahdi since his election in 2007 until the end of his presidency in 2013, and even beyond this throughout his political activism. He did not stop using this language even in his international speeches, such as at the UN General Assemblies, where he started his speeches by praying for the reappearance of the Mahdi and for becoming a companion to the Imam. In 2007, at the UN General Assembly in New York, Ahmadinejad ended his speech by announcing the good news of the Mahdi in non-sectarian terms (Ahmadinejad 2007). According to Ahmadinejad (2007), the coming of the ‘Promised One’ is a moment of global peace and unity, the ‘final cure to all the wounds.’ He ended the talk by saying that he believed that the coming of this man will happen in the ‘near future’ (Ahmadinejad 2007). In his final appearance at the same place in 2012, Ahmadinejad continued this rosy picture of a future utopia:

The arrival of the Ultimate Savior [i.e., the Mahdi], Jesus Christ and the Righteous will bring about an eternally bright future for mankind, not by force or waging wars but through thought awakening and developing kindness in everyone.... He will bless humanity with a spring that puts an end to our winter of ignorance, poverty and war with the tidings of a season of blooming.... Long live this spring, long live this spring and long live this spring. (Ahmadinejad 2012)

The idea of the 'government of the spring' continued to shape Ahmadinejad's further political activities. It is as if his opposition to the current government is a harbinger of the utopian 'government of spring'.

This non-sectarian globalised reading of the Mahdi has, in recent years, co-existed with sectarian readings. It is noticeable in some Shi'i Christmas greetings, where the Mahdi and Jesus are seen together. (Christmas has never been celebrated in Iran. Only in recent years have people tried to respond to it in some way.) The globalised understanding of the Mahdi is also reflected in the annual conference on the 'Doctrine of the Mahdi,' where a number of guest speakers from outside the Iranian Shi'i community are invited to present their respective notions of a future messianic community. The goals of the conference, according to its website, are: 'The belief in Mahdi as an international, interreligious discourse among thinkers and authorities of religions and cultures; belief in Mahdi as the leader of a utopian society, desired civilization, and a proper response to the needs of human society; strategies for fulfilling the real divine human civilization; perversions and enemies of the belief in the Mahdi' ('Ahdafi Hamayesh' 2018).

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