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ISLAM IN IRAN V. MESSIANIC ISLAM IN IRAN

ISLAM IN IRAN

2. Messianism and Millenarianism in Islam

With the rise of political Islamic movements in the latter half of the 20th century, and the increasing politicization of theological conceptions of messianism and millenarianism in Islam, the concept and significance of the Mahdi in Islam in general and in Shiʿism in particular needs to be examined and understood in order to contextualize the central themes of militant Islamic movements, both Sunni and Shiʿite. These issues are discussed in the following sub-entries: “A General Survey of the Concept,” “Mahdi in Sunni Islam,” “Mahdi in Shiʿism,” “Mahdi’s Occultation,” and “Mahdi’s Deputies.”

v. MESSIANIC ISLAM IN IRAN: A GENERAL SURVEY

Messianism is one of the most powerful, diverse and enduring expressions of Islam in Iran throughout its long history. Messianic speculations are evident especially in Shiʿite literature ranging from Hadith, theology, and philosophy to occult sciences, and folklore. Messianic yearnings also motivated a number of epoch-making popular movements with political ambitions and lasting influence on Iranian cultural identity. Shiʿism is the prevalent locus for such activities—though not the only one—extending over thirteen centuries of advocacy for the advent of the Mahdi, and at times striving to fulfill such

expectations. Though only conceptualized as a mode of religious expression in the 20th century, through what is often referred to as *Mahdawiyat* (Mahdism), the Shiʿite authors were well aware of it, as attested by the existence of numerous "books of Occultation" (*ketāb al-ḡayba*; see vii, below). Thriving in the Iranian environment, messianic speculations go even beyond the religious space, as this cultural environment has shown a paradigmatic propensity for the messianic mode since antiquity (see below). Expressions such as "yearning for the manifestation" (*enteẓār-e ẓohur*), waiting for the "signs of final salvation" (*ʿalāmat-e faraj*) and support for the "Lord of the Time" (*Ṣāḥeb al-Zamān*), often intertwined with millennial and apocalyptic motifs, denote the presence of such aspirations not only in the classic works of Shiʿite Hadith and as one of principals beliefs of Shiʿism, but also surpass normative religion to include mystical, literary, and, in the 20th century, revolutionary religion (see vii, below; see also Amir Arjomand, 1996; Amir-Moezzi; Modarresi; Sachedina, 1981).

Pre-Islamic influences. Such expressions are rooted in Iran's per-Islamic past and its memories as conveyed through myth and legend. In early centuries, Islam in Iran incorporated the rich apocalyptic tradition of its Zoroastrian past especially on the advent of the savior *Saošiant*, the millennial cycles (*hazārag*), the renewal of the world (see FRAŠŌ.KƎRƎTI), the ensuing events of the Day of the Judgment and to the eternal residence in paradise (*ferdows*), all purely Zoroastrian notions (see IRAN ix/1). They found their way into the Shiʿite Hadith and more often into the *aḵbār* (reports) of the Shiʿite Imams. Apocalyptic motifs also seem to have reached Iranian Muslims through the medium of Jewish and Christian prophecies, especially as upheld by the Karaite Jewish community of Iran. The Zoroastrian-Jewish cross-cultural exchanges dating back to the Babylonian era influenced formative Shiʿism. Traces of Jewish Messiah (*Māšiaḥ*) are evident as early as in the Kaysāniya movement of the 8th century in Mesopotamia and southwestern Iran. The Judeo-Christian influence also helped augmenting the millenarian aspiration for the Christ's Second Coming. The Shiʿite image of Jesus as the Mahdi, and later as the lieutenant to the Mahdi, looms large in early Hadith possibly through the medium of Byzantine and Eastern churches (see IRAN ix/1).

Non-Shiʿite Iranian messianism of the 8th and 9th centuries, most notably in the anti-Islamic Ḵorramiya and Abu-Moslemiya and the anti-Ummayad Zaydi revolts in the 8th century were, on the other hand, influenced by Mazdakite and other pre-Islamic dissident beliefs and ideologies of Sasanian Iran. The

communistic egalitarianism of the Mazdak movement remained an inherent undercurrent of Iranian messianism and time and again reemerged in later movements. More characteristically, Iranian messianic space allowed the synthesis of two or more trends, notably in Khorasan in the eve of the ʿAbbasid revolution (750 CE), and later in early Ismaʿili-Qarmaṭi movement of the 9th and 10th centuries (see IRAN ix/1.1; Yarshater; Sadighi; Madelung in *EI*2: "Ismailiyya" and cited sources).

Mahdi in Shiʿite denominations. Unlike normative Sunni Islam, where belief in Mahdi is often associated with folk religion, in Shiʿism belief in the Mahdi and expectations for his return is incorporated into the fundamentals of belief (*oṣul al-din*) and a significant part of the principle of Imamate. In Shiʿism, whether Zaydi, Ismaʿili, or Twelver Shiʿism (Eṯnā-ʿašari or Imami), and the extremists (see ḠOLĀT), expectations for the Mahdi are a central part of the religious awareness. The doctrine of Occultation (*ḡayba*, q.v.), and its corollary, the Manifestation (*ẓohur*) of the Hidden Imam in Ismaʿili and in Twelver Shiʿism are doctrinally linked to the eschatological belief in the Return (*maʿād*) and the Resurrection (*qiāma*). As a precursor to the End of the Time, the Mahdi is an inseparable part of the Shiʿite apocalyptic narrative able to transform political and social conditions and initiate cyclical renewal. He is the divine agency that brings the old revelatory cycle to its ultimate totality and potentially stands to start a new religious dispensation (even though the latter aspect is often passed over in silence in the Shiʿite literature). In historical reality such potentiality is often translated into revolutionary aspirations to transform society's political, social, moral, and religious order and offers one of the few perceivable means of protest against political repression, social injustice, and clerical tyranny. Such yearnings thus aspired for a utopian alternative to the prevailing religio-political order. Chronologically, this was a challenge first to the Sunni insti-tution of the Caliphate, Sunni sultans, their conservative *divān* establishment, and the Ashʿarite theology and later to the state-clergy pact of the Safavid and Qajar eras (see vii, below; see also Amir Arjomand, 1996; Amir-Moezzi).

MAIN PHASES OF MESSIANIC MOVEMENTS IN IRAN

Five periods of messianic activities may be identified in Islamic Iran.

The first phase. This phase is marked by proto-Shiʿite trends of the 7th century, the Iranian revivalist movements, and anti-Ummayad *mawāli* movement culminating in the ʿAbbasid revolution of 750 CE. Most notable among these

are the movement of Moḵtār Ṭaqafi (k. 687), the leader of a pro-Alid movement, and the Kaysāniya, the Abu-Moslemiya and a range of persecuted Zaydi claimants, all displaying some form of proto-Mahdi status (see ĠOLĀT; ABŪ MOSLEM; ʿABBASID CALIPHATE).

The second phase. This phase embraces a range of movements with a concrete Mahdistic idea often reflecting frustrated hopes that came in the wake of the ʿAbbasid caliphate's monopoly of power and exclusion of the followers of the Shiʿite Imams and their subsequent persecution in the latter part of the 8th and the early 9th centuries. While the Twelver Shiʿites benefited from the patronage of the pro-Shiʿite Iranian Buyids (q.v.) and their hegemony over the ʿAbbasid caliphate of Baghdad, they eventually resorted to the doctrine of Occultation of the 12th Imam, and the unspecified day of his return in the distant future, especially after the Greater Occultation in 941. Such a quietist position allowed the development of Twelver Shiʿites' theology, and major figures of the period such as Shaikh Jaʿfar Ṭusi and Shaikh Moḥammad Mofid allocated extensive space to the theory of the Occultation (see vii, below). Their work manifests an evident attempt to combat popular messianic aspirations for the return of the Imam. The early Ismaʿili-Qarmaṭi Shiʿism, on the other hand, adopted a clear messianic course with revolutionary potentials advocating the imminent advent of the Imam of the age. Though the Qarmaṭi missionary activity was played out in the Iranian periphery, the Ismaʿili *daʿwa* (q.v.) ultimately came to fruition in the Fatimid caliphate of North Africa and Egypt (q.v.) in the 10th century. The Iranian upsurge of unfulfilled Ismaʿili messianism had to wait another century before the Nezari-Mostaʿli split (see ISMAʿILISM ii) precipitated the emergence of Alamut (q.v.) in 1090 as the nerve center of a network of Ismaʿili mountain fortresses in Iran and Syria with the revolutionary objective of combating the Sunni Saljuq state and the emerging Ashʿarite orthodoxy under its aegis. The inner dynamics of the Nezāri messianism of Alamut eventually culminated in the declaration of *qiāma* (resurrection) under Ḥasan II in 559/1162 (for him see Daftari, pp. 385-91, 410-11). Though the Ismaʿilis of Alamut soon reverted back to the Islamic fold, and even for a while to Sunnism, the messianic spirit of the movement persisted in the Iranian environment. The hermeneutical binary of the inward (*bāṭen*), silent (*ṣāmet*) Imam, and his speaker (*nāṭeq*) in the outward (*ẓāher*) sphere offered the ideal theological format. The fall of Alamut and the collapse of the Ismaʿili fortress "state" in 1258 during the second wave of the Mongol invasion brought this phase to an end (Daftary, pp. 281-98; see also IRAN ix/2.1 and 2.2).

The third phase. The catastrophic Mongol invasion and destruction of major Iranian cities of Khorasan and central Iran during the first half of the 13th century, and the collapse of the ʿAbbasid caliphate of Baghdad in 1260, generated dispersed messianic currents often within the broad framework of popular Sufism and was instrumental in shaping radical Sufi orders both in the Iranian center and on the western periphery (see IRAN ix/2.2. Mongol Period). This phase of messianic activities has not yet been fully explored. It is possible that the post-Alamut dispersed Ismaʿilism influenced the Mahdi aspirations of the Ilkhanid and the Timurid periods through the doctrine of the Perfect Man (*ensān-e kāmel*). More explicitly, it may have contributed to the thriving apocalyptic synthesis of the late 14th- and early 15th-century Iran and Anatolia ranging from Horufism (q.v.) to the Noqṭawi, the Nurbaḵši, and the Mošaʿšaʿi movements—often with ultra-Islamic aspirations. Other trends such as the Qalandari movement and the more politically active Juriya dervish order and the associated Twelver Shiʿite Sarbadāri state in Khorasan also manifested strong messianic aspirations. This most intense episode of apocalyptic activity in the history of Iran, especially after the fragmentation of the Timurid Empire, may be attributed to a new revolutionary synthesis that aimed to embrace Iran's geopolitical and cultural identity at the beginning of the early modern times. The Safavid dynasty, the final product of this grand synthesis, came about as a result of a slow transformation of a Sufi quietist Sunni order in the 13th century to a militant Shiʿite messianic movement in the latter half of the 15th century. The Safavid revolution successfully fused the extremist (*ḡolow*) tendency of the Qezelbāš military confederacy—itself charged with anthropomorphic aspirations of the Ahl-e Ḥaqq (q.v.) pastoral religion of northwestern Iran—with the Shariʿa-oriented Twelver Shiʿism of Iran proper and the adjacent Arab lands. The latter current, which was on the rise since the late Il-khanid era, though devoid of any messianic contingency, condoned the claims of Esmāʿil I (q.v.; r. 1501-24), the founder of the Safavid dynasty, to a Mahdi status and even his implied claims to divine manifestation. The Qezelbāš, on the other hand, were devoted to Esmāʿil as their Perfect Guide (*moršd-e kāmel*) who in their eyes equaled or even rose above the status of the Mahdi (see IRAN ix/2.3; see also ḠOLĀT).

The fourth phase. This phase of Iranian messianic activities stretches from the middle of the 16th century to late 19th century. With the ascendancy of Twelver Shiʿite juristic and later ritualistic orthodoxy in the 16th and 17th centuries and the Safavid patronage for the jurist class, came first the suppression of the revived Noqṭawi movement at the turn of the Islamic

millennium (1593-94) and soon after the elimination of the Qezelbāš and by the late 17th century the purging of nearly all other Sufi tendencies that often harbored latent anti-clerical sentiments along with messianic aspirations. Likewise, the millennial speculations of philosophers of the School of Isfahan were safely aborted. Later, with the collapse of the Safavid state in 1722, and the ensuing crisis of legitimacy that continued on and off until the end of the 18th century, latent messianic aspirations were rekindled. Some pretenders to the Safavid throne, shrouding themselves in Sufi garb, entertained vague messianic claims. The revived Neʿmat-Allāhi order in the latter part of the 18th century was also infused with messianic aspirations. Mir ʿAbd-al-Hamid Maʿṣum-ʿAlišah and Mohammad-ʿAli Nur-ʿAlišah Eṣfāhani made claims to the deputyship of the Mahdi (*niābat*) and even to the status of being a latent Mahdi (see IRAN ix/2.3; Amanat, 1989, pp. 71-83 and cited sources).

The prevalence of the Oṣuli school and the emergence of the *mojtahed* (see EJTEHĀD) establishment in the early Qajar period, and the tacit alliance forged with the Qajar state, created an atmosphere of growing intolerance for alternative thought, which included Aḵbāriya (q.v.) school, Sufism, and the Šayḵi school of theology (see AḤSĀʾĪ), whose doctrines of the Perfect Shiʿa (*šiʿa-ye kāmel*) became the prominent loci for speculative messianism in early 19th century. The Babi movement (see BABISM), no doubt the most conscious and the most explicit messianic current since the rise of the Safavids, was the outcome of nearly half a century of millennial speculations and renewed engagement with Shiʿite hermeneutics within and outside the Šayḵi school. The claim of Sayyed ʿAli-Mohammad Širāzi first to be the Bāb “Gate” (see BĀB) to the Imam of the Age and in 1264/1848 his open claim to be the promised millennial Mahdi, opened the way for an apocalyptic break with Islam and the beginning of a new Bayāni dispensation (see BAYĀN). The movement’s broad appeal to the socially deprived and discontented within the clerical class and beyond to include women, petty merchants, and the guilds, made Babism the most explicitly messianic current in modern Iranian history. Harassed and persecuted by both the Shiʿite ulama and the Qajar state, the Babis (see BABISM) shift to radical millenarianism eventually resulted in armed confrontation with the state, culminating in the destruction of its leadership, exile and banishment, and more than half a century of underground dissent (see Amanat, 1989). In the later Bahai phase (see BAHAI FAITH), the claim of Bahāʾ-Allāh (q.v.) to be the “locus of all divine manifestations” can be seen as further unfolding of the Babi messianic break with Islam. In due course, the formative Bahai thought adopted in the latter half of the 19th century a

universalistic message of moral humanism and religious reconciliation, while the rival Azali Babis advocated political dissent and active engagement with the progressive Shiʿite clerical elements, thereby exerting some influence in the early shaping of the Constitutional Revolution (q.v.). The Babi movement and its aftermath may be considered as a unique experience not only in the Shiʿite context but also in the history of Muslim reform movements for attempting to forge an endogenous form of religious modernity beyond the accepted precepts of normative Islam (see Amanat, 1998, pp. 241-48).

The fifth phase. The final period of Iranian messianic activity may be traced back to militant Islamic activism of the 1970s culminating in the Islamic revolution of 1979 and its aftermath. The invasion of Iran by the Iraqi forces in particular helped sharpen the revolution's latent messianic and apocalyptic aspirations. Even though the leader of the revolution, Ayatollah Khomeini, never entertained an explicit messianic claim, he was viewed by his followers as the deputy of the Imam (*nāʾeb-e emām*) and was recognized as such in the literature and propaganda of the Islamic Republic. This is distinct from the collective deputyship of the Imam of the Age (*niābat-e ʿāmm*) claimed by the Shiʿite mojtaheds at least since the 16th century. More commonly, he came to be known with the popular title of "Imam," the first ever in the history of Twelver Shiʿism, which also implied a latent messianic status, albeit an ambiguous one. Moreover, familiar messianic motifs of Qurʾānic origin also emerged during the revolution with great evocative power including the labeling of the Pahlavi establishment as the apocalyptic Evil (*Ṭāḡut*) and that of the United States as the Great Satan (*Šayṭān-e bozorg*). The revolution itself, and the assumed struggle against the forces of "global arrogance" (*estekbār-e jahāni*), was seen as an apocalyptic challenge. Some factions within the revolutionary forces such as the Ḥojjatiya Society (q.v.), which since the 1960s harbored messianic beliefs infused with anti-Bahai sentiments, viewed the revolution as a prelude to the advent of the Imam of the Age. Persistence of messianic motifs in the post-revolutionary years may be attributed to the potency of messianic paradigm in the Iranian religious culture that were once more triggered by frustrated expectations regarding the outcome of the Islamic Revolution and the apparent failure of the government to tackle the current economic and social problems. At the same time, the recent resort to messianic motifs may also be seen as part of a calculated policy to compensate for the diminishing fervor of the ideological Islam of the revolutionary days by actively encouraging among other things the thriving cult of Jamkarān (q.v.) shrine near the city of Qom, which is dedicated to the Hidden Imam (see

Moṭahhari, 1975, IV, pp. 62-840, for his discussion on resurrection [*maʿād*] and his debates with Mahdi Bāzargān during late 1960s).

State of scholarship. Critical episodes of Iranian messianism, including early Islamic era, development of Ismaʿili and Twelver Shiʿite messianism, the Safavid movements, and the Babi movement have been subject of numerous Western studies from as early as the middle of the 19th century. Late medieval trends such as Ḥorufi, Noqṭawi, Nurbaḵši, and Sarbadāri movements have also received scholarly attention in recent years, as have aspects of speculative messianism and the doctrine of Occultation in the Twelver Shiʿite tradition. Muslim authors of the past, such as Ebn Ḵaldun (q.v.), also devoted some attention to the phenomenon of the Mahdi in Shiʿism. Yet theoretical study of Iranian messianism as a cultural paradigm and its social, political, and cultural implications remains to be further explored (see Amanat, 2002).

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