A Western View on Iran’s WMD Goal:
Nuclearizing the Eschaton, or Pre-Stocking
the Mahdi’s Arsenal?

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Introduction on Mahdism: A (Mainly Sunni) History

WWJD—“What Would Jesus Do”—has been a favorite slogan of many American evangelical Christians for some time; in fact, former President George W. Bush was often accused by critics of letting this consideration influence his policy decisions.¹ But actually such Protestants who hold to the much-maligned, Jesus’-coming-is-imminent, “Left Behind” mindset comprise a minority both of this country’s 240 million, and of the planet’s 2.3 billion, Christians.² In the world’s second-largest religion, however, a messianic imperative really does dominate the thinking of crucial players on the geopolitical stage: WWMD—“What would the Mahdi Do?—is a question increasingly being asked in the Islamic world, not just in the usual suspect Shi‘i quarters but in Sunni ones, as well.

In Islamic thought al-Mahdi is “the rightly-guided one” who will appear before the end of time to create a global caliphate. The Qur’an says nothing of this figure; rather, he is predicted in a number of hadiths, “traditions” or, more accurately, “sayings,” attributed to Islam’s founder Muhammad. Even so, neither of the two most authoritative compilers of Sunni hadiths, the 9th century AD Isma’il al-Bukhari and Muslim b. al-Hajjaj, mentions the Mahdi. This has led some Sunni Muslims over the years—such as the brilliant North African scholar Ibn Khaldun (d. 1406 AD)—to brand belief in the Mahdi as merely a superstition. Nonetheless, despite such skepticism Mahdism did become firmly entrenched in Sunnism, whose adherents comprise about 85 percent of the world’s Muslims. In this view the Mahdi will emerge onto the stage of history at some point when the situation of the ummah, the Muslim “community,” is most dire and eventually be acknowledged as the leader thereof. He, along with the returned prophet ‘Isa, the Arabic name for Jesus—who in Islamic teaching was neither crucified nor resurrected,³ but taken directly to heaven like Elijah⁴—will fight the forces of unbelief led by al-Dajjal, “the Deceiver” (the Islamic analog to the Antichrist). There are some traditions that the Dajjal will be preceded by epigones, the most powerful of which will be al-Sufyani. The ranks of evil will also include al-Dabbah, “the Beast,” and the rapacious hordes Yajuj wa-Majuj, “Gog and Magog.” In a series of Armageddon-style battles Jesus will serve as the spiritual leader and kill Yajuj and Majuj as well as the Dajjal, whereas the Mahdi will lead the Muslim forces in battle and take over the Middle East, then Rome, and finally the entire world on his way to establishing a planetary caliphate. The Mahdi and Jesus will then cooperate in global governance and for a time the world will enjoy peace and prosperity. Eventually (the hadiths differ on just how long), Jesus and the Mahdi, being mortal men, will both die—as did Muhammad—and after that the Islamic utopia will disintegrate, with sin and unbelief again coming to predominate, and at some point the world will truly end and all humans will be summoned to Judgment Day before Allah to receive their final consignment to either Paradise or Hell.⁵


² Jesus’ eventual return is of course a mainstream belief in Christianity, spelled out best in the Apostles Creed: “I believe in Jesus Christ, [God’s] only Son, our Lord, who...was crucified, died and was buried....rose again from the dead. He ascended into heaven and sits at the right hand of the Father. From thence He will come to judge the living and the dead.” But there is a wide range of opinion among Christian denominations (and non-denominational churches) concerning when this return will be, whether it can be predicted and the nature of His subsequent rule.

³ Sura al-Nisa’[IV]:156ff

⁴ 1 Kings 18:41-II Kings 2:14

⁵ For this Islamic eschatological timetable, see my doctoral dissertation, “Eschatology as Politics, Eschatology as Theory: Modern Sunni Arab Mahdism in Historical Perspective,” The Ohio State University, 2001; pp. 87ff.
In the course of 14 centuries of Islamic history scores of men have claimed to be the eschatological, awaited Mahdi—both Sunni and Shi’i milieus. The two most successful Sunni Mahdist movements in history were those of Ibn Tumart (d. 1130 AD), whose al-Muwahhids (Almohads) took over most of what is now Morocco and Algeria and ruled it for over a century; and Muhammad Ahmad (d. 1885), who inspired thousands of Sudanese to rise up in eschatological fervor and take power. Both the Muwahhids and the Sudanese Mahdists fought primarily against other Muslims—the former against the extant al-Murabit (Almoravid) state, and the latter against the Ottomans and their British allies led by the famous General Charles Gordon (decapitated by Mahdists when Khartoum was taken in January 1885, as immortalized in the movie *Khartoum*). Many other Sunni Mahdis have declared themselves and led such Islamic revolutions, most notably: Sayyid Ahmad Barelwi of 19th c. India, against the British and their Sikh allies; Muhammad Amzian of 19th c. Algeria, against the French; and Juwayman al-‘Utaybi who led the abortive 1979 uprising in Saudi Arabia in the name of the Mahdi, and his brother-in-law Muhammad al-Qahtani.7 Often Sunni Mahdism has occurred at the turnover of a Muslim century, following hadiths predicting a centennial “renewer,” a *mujaddid*, an idea that tends to get conflated with Mahdism; hence, Muhammad Ahmad decided he was the Mahdi in the year 1300 AH,8 and al-‘Utaybi moved against the Saudis in 1400. The next Islamic century, 1500 AH, occurs in 2076 CE—coinciding, perhaps ominously, with the American tricentennial.

The Shi’a view is similar but with crucial differences, most of which stem from Islamic political history. After Muhammad’s death in 632 CE, his closest companions chose his *khaliifah* (caliph), or “successor,” on the basis of political and military acumen to lead the expanding Muslim empire. A minority, the *shi‘at ‘Ali*—“faction of Ali”—felt that only a bloodline male descendant of Muhammad should be caliph, and the only contender was the Muslim prophet’s younger cousin and son-in-law Ali. He was not chosen as caliph until 656, however, and after five contentious years was assassinated, whereupon his followers then supported the caliph candidacy of his sons Hassan and Husayn. But with the military conquest of the Umayyad dynasty (ruled 661-750 CE) Hassan was denied power and, according to the Shi’a, poisoned while Husayn was “martyred” by the perfidious Sunni Umayyads at Karbala during his ill-fated rebellion in 680 CE. Shi’ism was driven underground, its adherents taking refuge in the belief that Ali’s line of descendants—the Imams—were the true leaders of the ummah. The Shi’ a regained favor, but not power, after the Abbasids supplanted the Umayyads in 750, only to face extinction in 874 when the 11th Imam, Hasan al-Askari, died childless. But Abu Sahl al-Nawbakhti of Baghdad saved what would be known as the Twelver Shi’i by

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6 As explained more fully in my first book *Holiest Wars: Islamic Mahdis, their Jihads and Osama bin Laden* (Westport, CT: Praeger, 2005)

7 The most detailed description of this movement is Yaroslav Trofimov’s excellent book *The Siege of Mecca: The Forgotten Uprising in Islam’s Holiest Shrine and the Birth of Al Qaeda* (New York: Doubleday, 2007).

8 AH means “After Hijrah”—the Muslim calendar begins with the *hijrah*, “fleeing,” of Muhammad and the nascent Muslim community from oppression in Mecca to power in Medina in 622 CE. Since the Muslim calendar is lunar, the months’ lengths vary, unlike the case with the solar-based Western/Christian calendar—and so there is not a one-to-one correlation between years in the two calendars. However, I do not subscribe to the politically correct notion that dates in Islamic civilizational history should be put in their religious context (A.H.), but those in Christian civilizational history should be denuded of their religious content as “C.E.” (Common Era)—rather, the analogue to A.H. is A.D. For that reason, it is perfectly acceptable to use A.D. and/or C.E.
asserting that al-`Askari had had a son, named Muhammad, who had gone into ghaybah, “occultation” or “hiding.” This hidden 12th Imam led the Shi`i community via intermediaries such as al-Nawbakhti until 939 CE, whereupon communication with him ceased. The first period is known as “the Lesser Occultation,” and the latter one with the Mahdi “offline,” which has lasted over a millennium, as the “Greater Occultation.”

The Twelver Shi`a believe that the 12th Imam will re-emerge before The End as the Mahdi to establish global Islamic rule. (Other Shi`a, like the Seveners Isma`ilis or Fiver Zaydis, believe that one of the Imams at any given time actually was, or is, the Mahdi present in history). His role will be virtually the same as that of the Sunni Mahdi, then, except for his promotion of Shi`i Islam and perhaps a greater emphasis on establishing a just socioeconomic regime. In essence, the major difference between Sunnis and Twelver Shi`is regarding the Mahdi is that for the former he will come out for the first time, whereas for the latter he will come again. A number of movements and states in Islamic history have been founded on Shi`i Mahdism, the two most important being the Fatimid Empire which ruled Egypt (and sometimes North Africa, the Levant and the Hijaz) from 969-1171 AD; and the Safavid Empire of Iran, 1501-1722. The Fatimids were Isma`ili Shi`is, while the Safavids were Twelver Shi`is (and a Sufi order, to boot, in the beginning) and under their ruling Shahs, beginning with Isma`il (r. 1501-1524), forcibly converted Iran (and Iraq) to Twelver Shi`ism. The Fatimids believed, at least in the early days of their dynasty, that each of their Qa`im-Caliphs12 was the eschatological Mahdi present on Earth—and were, as such, bitter opponents of contemporary Sunni states, most notably the Abbasid Caliphate based in Baghdad. The Safavids believed that Shah Isma`il was the Mahdi (the returned 12th Imam) who would lead the Twelver Shi`is to victory against their Sunni enemies, in particular the Ottoman Empire, thus enabling the (re)establishment of true social justice.13

There have also been Mahdist-based movements in Islamic history that transformed into New Religious Movements (NRMs), rather than collapsing back into the more mainstream Sunni (or Shi`i) folds. Perhaps the two most influential of these were the Baha`is and the Ahmadis. The former are an offshoot of Twelver Shi`ism which developed in the 19th century. Sayyid Ali Muhammad Shirazi (d. 1850) first declared himself the Bab, or “gate,” to the Hidden 12th Imam, then later that he was the “manifestation” of the Imam. After his execution, Mirza Husayn Ali Nuri (d. 1892)—also

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12 al-Qa`im means “the arising [one]” and is another, more mystical, term for the Mahdi.
13 Mitchell, p. 20. The Ottoman Empire was of course the preeminent Sunni power of that, and perhaps of all, time; the Safavids also fought against the Qara Qoyunlu, a rival Shi`i confederation in what is now Azerbaijan and eastern Turkey. But it was against the Ottomans that Safavid propaganda and power were most directly, and often, aimed.
14 See the excellent description of both these groups’ origins in Abbas Amanat, Apocalyptic Islam and Iranian Shi`ism (London: I.B. Tauris, 2009), pp. 53-61.
known as Baha’ullah—“claimed to be the messianic fulfillment of all monotheistic religions”\textsuperscript{15} and directed the Baha’i faith from exile in Akka (Acre), located in Ottoman Palestine. Baha’is are severely persecuted in Iran today but do number perhaps 10 million worldwide. The Ahmadis, now also some 10 million strong, began when an Indian Muslim, Mirza Ghulam Ahmad (d. 1908) “claimed to be the locus of divine revelation and the advent of both the Islamic Mahdi and the second coming of Jesus Christ...”\textsuperscript{16} Although Ahmadis claim to still be Muslim—unlike Baha’is—they are severely persecuted in Pakistan, as the murder of 94 of them by Sunni Muslim fundamentalists in Lahore clearly shows.

**Mahdism Today: Stalling, or Hotwiring, the Apocalypse?**

Thus, as these historical examples of Mahdism’s religious and political power demonstrate, it is not simply a Muslim belief about some far-in-the-future, largely irrelevant events (as Jesus’ return is for many Christians). Often violent movements centered around, and led by, an individual claiming to be the Mahdi have bedeviled the Islamic world since its early days. But \textit{contra} conventional wisdom, the majority of such movements have occurred in the Sunni world. There are two reasons for this. First, Sunni Islam lacks Twelver Shi’ism’s institutional apparatus of \textit{marji’yat}, the hierarchical authority of ayatollahs who can pass judgment on religious issues, including anyone claiming the Mahdiyat. Second, a very specific person must reappear as the Mahdi for Shi’is, whereas in Sunni Islam the mantle of the Mahdi can be appropriated, in the right context, by a charismatic leader megalomaniacal enough to believe Allah is directing him to wage divinely-guided jihad. These factors taken together allow for, in Sunni Islam, “freelance” mahdis—unlike in Shi’ism (similar to how Sunnism allows for freelance fatwas, such as those of the non-mufti Usama bin Ladin and other jihadists). \textsuperscript{17}

Some argue that this very institutionalization of Mahdism in Iran (and Iraq) serves to blanket, and eventually extinguish, overt Mahdism. As one astute Israeli scholar of the topic points out:

> Three or four decades into the Safavid reign and the \textit{`ulama} [religious authorities] had already won: the eschatological enthusiasm was considerably muted.... Those Sufis who persisted in their mystical-messianic veneration...were rounded up and massacred by their very objects of adoration at the behest of the \textit{mujtahids}. Yet another millenarian movement had been crushed by the Shi’i clerical establishment.\textsuperscript{18}

He maintains that this is because “Shi’ism in general, and post-revolutionary Iranian Shi’ism in particular, is \textit{not} only \textit{not} messianic or apocalyptic in character, but is in fact the \textbf{fiercest enemy of messianism} to be found anywhere in the Muslim world or Islamic history”\textsuperscript{19} [emphasis added] because “the very phenomenon of Shi’ite [Mahdist] empowerment was inimical to the ramified

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{15} Ibid., p. 59
\item \textsuperscript{16} Ibid., p. 60
\item \textsuperscript{17} A reason that the re-establishment of the caliphal office in Sunni Islam might not be an entirely negative thing—as I will argue in my upcoming book \textit{The Caliphate: Threat or Opportunity?} (Praeger Security International, 2011).
\item \textsuperscript{19} Ibid., p. 237
\end{itemize}
learning institution which had become the butter on their [the Shi`ite religious scholars’] bread and the meaning of their lives.”20 In other words, “conferring legitimacy on an individual or religious minority with Mihdistic [sic] claims is tantamount to a termination of the Trusteeship of the Imam and by extension the ulama’s own rule.”21 It has even been argued that in Khomeini’s thought, as distilled from his writings, the role of the Mahdi has been supplanted by that of the people led by the religious scholars—to the extent that Khomeini created, and foisted upon Iran, “a new type of eschatological movement without a specific person as the leader.”22

While modern Iranian Shi`ism in its present political incarnation might be institutionally opposed to anyone overtly claiming the Mahidyah, that certainly has not prevented the Qom-Tehran axis from exploiting Mahdism for both domestic and international purposes—even before Ahmadinejad came to power. Rumors, in 1978-79, that Ayatollah Khomeini might be the Mahdi were never quashed by the revolutionary cleric (although after his death in 1989 his position was posthumously downgraded to harbinger of the 12th Imam).23 During the 1990s Mahdism remained a favorite belief among the masses, even if it was not officially sanctioned or supported. But since Ahmadinejad’s election to the Presidency in 2005, populist Mahdism has been reinvigorated, via: his many statements on the topic;24 the official Islamic Republic of Iran (IRI) funding for the Jamkaran mosque complex (where, according to Iranian Shi`i tradition, the Hidden Imam will reappear25) and for the Bright Future Institute26 (dedicated to bringing Mahdism to Sunni Muslims and Christians) and the annual Mahdism conference in Tehran; and the steady stream of Mahdist propaganda being disseminated to the larger (Sunni) Islamic world from the IRI’s many media outlets and websites. In fact, “the Islamic Republic of Iran is using Mahdism as a pan-Islamic ideology to challenge Saudi Arabia,”27 in large measure because its leadership seems to have realized, and decided to exploit, the fact that “Islamic militancy is now moving in the direction of a monolithic outlook and ideology” in which “the messianic characteristics of both Shi`ism and Sunni Islam seem to embrace a common pattern.”28 This Mahdist da`wah29 has been universalized into a global ideology in which the IRI is the leader of the “oppressed” against the “oppressors” led by that most arrogant of the “arrogant

20 Ibid., p. 246
23 This was the view of Khomeini presented to me during a conversation at his tomb complex, outside Tehran, by several Iranians when I was there in August 2008.
25 http://www.iwpr.net/en/node/45714
26 http://www.mahdaviat-conference.com/vsdpercent7D7q87a-2k8-y5a2.html
27 See my articles “The Importance of Being Mahdist,” The Weekly Standard, September 8, 2008, pp. 17,18, and “Dueling Messiahs: Jesus v. the Mahdi in Iran,” The Lutheran Witness, February 2009, pp. 17-20. In particular the weeping men in Jamkaran mosque importuning the Mahdi to return—whom I saw on my trip there in August 2008—were clear evidence of Mahdism’s popular power in Iran.
28 Abbas Amanat, p. 70. Much the same observation had been made some years ago, by: Marvin Zonis and Daniel Brumberg, Khomeini, the Islamic Republic of Iran and the Arab World. Harvard Middle East Papers Modern Series: Number Five (Cambridge, MA: Center for Middle Eastern Studies, 1987); and Graham E. Fuller and Rend Rahim Francke, The Arab Shi`a: The Forgotten Muslims (London: MacMillan Press, Ltd., 1999).
29 “Summons, call, appeal, invitation, missionary activity, propaganda,” in Arabic.
powers,” the United States—which explains Khomeini’s, and now Ahmadinejad’s, “emphasis on the anti-imperialism struggle...which linked what was happening in Iran with the struggle of liberation movements all over the world, in particular to those in Palestine and Latin America” because the mission of feeding the hungry masses, and rescuing them from oppression, “was closely related to the Shia [sic] imamate.”

This view is even codified in the IRI Constitution, Article 154, which says that Tehran “supports the just struggles of the oppressed against the oppressors in every corner of the globe.”

Ahmadinejad is alleged to have imbibed this “hotwiring the appearance of the 12th Imam” belief from his mentor, Ayatollah Mesbah-Yazdi, whose “view that a great war would hasten the return of the Mahdi is shared with only a small minority—but conventional wisdom in conservative American circles has it that this “small minority” calls the shots in the IRI. In sum, the view imputed by many (neo)conservative American (and Israeli) analysts to this minority within the vilayet-i faqih regime is that it wants to spark a global (or at least regional) conflagration, most likely by acquiring nuclear weapons and employing them against Israel, in order to force Allah’s hand into sending the Mahdi. Not just TV personalities and authors but well-respected analysts, such as Dr. Michael Rubin, hold this view: “Ahmadinejad believes that he and his fellow travelers could perhaps hasten the Mahdi’s return by precipitating violence, setting the stage for the return as prophesied in some readings of Islamic texts.”

This is, it seems, the transference of the concept of “hotwiring the apocalypse” from a Sunni jihadist register into a (Twelver) Shi`i one—to which Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu evidently ascribes, having described the IRI as run by a “messianic, apocalyptic cult.”

On the other side of the political and analytical fence are those analysts and commentators who argue that the IRI is not a messianic, apocalyptic cult dedicated to destroying Israel in order to hotwire the return of the 12th Imam. Much of this argument hinges on a detailed discussion of just which Persian verbs Ahmadinejad, and Khomeini before him, used—and whether they were active or passive—in referring to Israel being “eliminated/wiped from the pages of history.”

A prominent liberal Islamic historian—despite his outrageous (and wrong) comments about other topics—has a defensible point when he avers that in Ahmadinejad’s view it is “the collapse of what he calls the Zionist regime...that will provoke the Promised One to come”—not the other way around—and that

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31 [http://www.servat.unibe.ch/icj/ir00000_.html#A154](http://www.servat.unibe.ch/icj/ir00000_.html#A154)
33 “Can a Nuclear Iran be Contained or Deterred?,” *American Enterprise Institute Outlook Series*, No. 8, November 2008.
36 This debate is painstakingly described by Jonathon Steele, “Lost in Translation,” *The Guardian*, June 14, 2006. See also “Iranian President at Tehran Conference: Very Soon, This Stain of Disgrace [i.e., Israel] Will be Purged from the Center of the Islamic World—and This Is Attainable,” MEMRI Special Dispatch No. 1013, October 28, 2005.
he “did not then and has never called for the violent destruction of Israelis or Israel.” In most mainstream Twelver exegeses of eschatology “the reappearance of the 12th Imam…is not in the control of man and the will of humanity. It is in the hands of Almighty Allah. When the time is right, Allah…will give the Imam…the order to appear and to establish the system of divine religion in the human society.” “Hotwiring” the Mahdi’s reappearance depends not on WMDs but on “the realization of an Islamic political, social, economic, and legal system, and presenting this to the world as a viable alternative….” Ahmadinejad may be “ascetic, absolutist, opinionated, intolerant and something of a religious zealot with a Himalayan-sized ego and a ravenous appetite for publicity,” but he sees “that his two predecessors—both high-ranking clergymen—had failed to establish a ‘true Islamic state’” and “it was his primary duty to achieve that goal in preparation for the Imam’s return”—rather than, primarily, to destroy Israel. As such, Ahmadinejad’s anti-Zionist entity’ fulminations “are arguably symptomatic of a geo-strategic—rather than ideological—collision that's been long in the making.” Educated Iranians know their regional history, and are no doubt aware that the last time prior to the founding of modern Israel that Jerusalem (al-Quds, “the Holy *sanctuary*) was held by non-Muslims was under the Christian Crusaders—a disgrace that, fortunately for the Muslims, lasted only 88 years. And note that Salah al-Din retook al-Quds with the help of neither the Mahdi nor WMDs, but rather through conventional warfare.

Much of the acrimonious disagreement between the (neo)conservative and liberal camps regarding the IRI revolves around ignorance, willful or not, of the aforementioned Hujjatiyah organization. Founded shortly after Mossadeq’s overthrow in 1953, by Shaykh Mahamud Dhakir Zaddah Tawalla’i, a.k.a. Mahamud Halabi, the Anjuman-i Hujjatiyeh had as its “explicit goal…to train cadres for the ‘scientific defense’ of Shi’ite Islam in the face of the Bahai theological challenge.” The group recruited among the pious Shi’i merchants and professionals, teaching how to debate Baha’is and convince them to (re)convert; AH also created “fifth columns” of covert Shi’is within Baha’i ranks and, by the 1970s, was working in Pakistan and India. Under Shah Reza Pahlavi

37 Juan Cole, “How Zoroastrianism Influences the Worldview of Iran’s Leadership,” History News Network, March 10, 2010. For two examples of how he lets his liberal world-view overwhelm his historical training and engages in intellectual dishonesty: 1) in this aforementioned article, Cole says “Iran converted to Islam gradually (and mostly willingly)”—but even assuming *arguedo* that that is true for Iran’s initial conversion to Sunni Islam, it is NOT true at all for the forcing of the population to adopt Twelver Shi’ism under the Safavids; 2) he claims, vis-à-vis Iraq, that decapitation was largely a (Revolutionary and Bonapartist) French invention—ignoring the 14 centuries of Islamic sanction for beheadings. Nonetheless, like a stopped clock, Cole is occasionally correct.


41 Amuzegar, pp. 4,5.


43 Jerusalem was taken by the knights of the First Crusade in 1099 and re-taken by Salah al-Din’s army in 1187.


45 The various transliterations for أَلْحَمَّامٌ حَجْمُ تَّنِيَّهُ stem from differences in transliteration systems employed.

46 “Hojjatiya,” *op. cit.*
they were tolerated but pressured to stay out of politics. In fact, although as part and parcel of their anti-Baha'i messianism they naturally held that the 12th Imam was yet to return, AH members also believed that “neither political nor military organizations were permitted to oppose oppressive regimes before the Imam’s appearance.”47 After the establishment of the IRI in 1979, AH was increasingly in conflict with Khomeini and his supporters because:

1) AH advocated waiting for Imam Mahdi before jihad could be declared; IRI said Khomeini could do so.
2) AH considered Iran’s main enemies to be Baha’is and Communists; Khomeini said it was the U.S.48
3) Halabi disliked philosophy, relying solely upon Qur’an and Hadith (Muhammadan traditions); Khomeini, however, loved philosophy.
4) AH preferred apolitical ayatollahs; Khomeini, of course, was quite political.49
5) AH maintained that religion should mainly be used to help individuals achieve happiness on this earth and paradise afterwards; not, as per Khomeini, for constructing an ideal Islamic state.50

What this meant was that AH “discourage[d] active revolt in order to hasten the appearance of the Mahdi, or any attempt to build the promised Islamic utopia in [his] absence….The revolutionary activism of Khomeini, on the other hand, is reminiscent of the post-millenarian tendencies in Christianity and Judaism in that it advocates taking an active role in bringing about the just Islamic society prior to the appearance of the Mahdi in order to hasten his coming”51 [emphasis added]. Under pressure from Khomeini, Halabi dissolved AH in 1983, and the Supreme Leader followed up with a purge of AH members from the government and education realms throughout Iran. Nonetheless, for the past quarter-century, both Khomeinists, on one side, and their (extra-Iran) secularist critics, on the other have maintained that AH “remains alive and continues to pose a threat to the revolutionary cause in Iran—according to the former52—and/or that “the association, despite its fall from favor, has been the true power broker behind the scene”—according to the latter.53

Thus, it seems that an honest, non-alarmist appraisal of AH reveals that far from being a crazed messianic cult, AH was/is primarily a religious, Jesuit-like, (re)conversion organization trying to bring Baha’is back into the Shi’i fold; furthermore, its official disenfranchisement has made AH a

47 al-Qazwini, p. 274
48 Although this did not stop Khomeini, and after him his followers, from conflating Bahai’s and Israelis/Jews together—largely on the basis of the location of the global Baha’i headquarters in Israel—and seeing both the religion of Baha’ism and the state of Israel as a dual foreign/domestic and military/existential threat to Iran. See Mehrdat Amanat, “Messianic Expectation and Evolving Identities: the Conversion of Iranian Jews to the Baha’i Faith,” in Dominic Parviz Brookshaw and Seena B. Fazel, eds., The Baha’is of Iran: Socio-Historical Studies (London and New York: Routledge, 2008), pp. 6-29.
49 al-Qazwini, p. 275
51 “Hojjatiya,” op cit.
52 For an example, see “Brother of Iranian Leader Khameini Warns Against Second Islamic Revolution by Messianic Circles Led by Ahmadinejad and Khameini,” MEMRI, Special Dispatch No. 3044, June 18, 2010.53 Ibid.
scapegoat, or even eidolon, for (ironically) both hard-core Shi`i adherents of vilayet-i faqih and for Western armchair apocalyptists. Ayatollah Mesbah-Yazdi’s alleged Hujjatīyeh fervor is likewise greatly exaggerated:

His “extensive written and spoke oeuvre evinces no evidence whatsoever of the fanatical messianism so often attributed to him. Indeed, on the rare occasions when Mesbah-Yazdi discusses topics related to eschatology—such as in a speech delivered in 2004 at the Jamkaran Mosque itself—he goes out of his way to reinterpret the yearning for the Imam’s advent in mundane, psycho-political terms….Mesbah-Yazdi returns to the subject of the Mahdi only in the last 20 seconds of his hour-long lecture, hurriedly rattling off the required formula about how ‘we pray for his speedy arrival to fill the world with justice, etc.’’”

Messianism, let along apocalypticism, is simply nowhere in view.”

Mesbah-Yazdi is a Shi`i Islamic ideologue and, as such, a worrisome figure—admittedly. Ahmadinejad is a charismatic, piously Muslim politician who abhors the U.S., the current world system and the state of Israel and would like nothing better than to see all three of them wiped from the pages of history. Both Mesbah-Yazdi and Ahmadinejad almost certainly want the IRI to acquire nuclear weapons. But does either of them harbor a desire to employ such weapons in a nuclear jihad in order to hotwire the arrival of the Mahdi?

The Islamic Republic of Iran, Mahdism and Jihad: Will There Be Blood?
Twelver Shi`i jihad has, historically, labored under a burdensome yoke, unlike Sunnism; namely, full-blown jihad has been ipso facto illegitimate since the Greater Occultation cut off communications with the Mahdi in 939 AD. Thus, legitimate jihad before the 19th century was rare, because only someone claiming to be the Twelfth Imam—meaning, in effect, only the first Safavid Shah, Isma`′īl—or the Imam’s proxy could wage it. By the 1800s, under pressure from, most notably, the expanding Orthodox Christian Russian Empire, the Qajar rulers of Iran allowed their activist ayatollahs to re-define (to some extent) Twelver Shi`i jihad. Jihad-i difa′l, “defensive jihad,” in the Mahdi’s absence was made permissible under the following conditions:

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54 One especially alarmist devotee of this world-view is Reza Khalili: “An Ex-CIA Spy Explains Iran’s Quest for Nuclear Weapons,” Christian Science Monitor, March 24, 2010. Khalili states therein that AH is “essentially a cult devoted to the reappearance of the 12th Imam, Mahdi, and Islam’s conquest of the world” and that “to achieve that end the radicals believe they must foment chaos, famine, and lawlessness, that they must destroy Israel, and that world order must come to an abrupt halt.” Of the same ilk is Sean Osborne, “Armageddon and the Hujjatīyeh Sect of Islam,” Northeast Intelligence Network, January 31, 2006.

55 Maghen, p. 253. Also, according to Nicola Pedde, of Globe Research in Rome, who has researched AH, “a lot of people [in Iran] are supposed to be part of the Hujjatīyeh….the most famous [suspect] is Ayatollah Mesbah-Yazdi but nobody can really confirm this information…” [emphasis added]; source is Mazyar Mokfi and Charles Recknagel, “Could Ahmadinejad’s Mix of Mysticism and Politics Lead to a Power Grab?,” RadioFreeEurope/Radio Liberty, August 5, 2009.


57 Although there is also an alternative viewpoint that legitimate jihad ceased with the Lesser Occultation, which had commenced 65 years earlier.
1) Defending Muslim territory under attack
2) Preventing non-Muslims from ruling over Muslims
3) Ejecting non-Muslims from Muslim territory.

Furthermore, and rather oxymoronically, defensive (desperation?) jihad was released from caveats that normally applied to offensive jihad; for example:

1) Dhimmis (Jews and Christians living under Muslim rule) were deemed expendable
2) Hudnas, “truces,” with infidels were no longer sacrosanct and could broken at will
3) The ancient stipulation that infidels should be invited to convert was waived
4) Permission was granted to kill fellow Muslims complicit in, and with, infidel invasions
5) Modes of fighting usually ruled off-limits, such as surprise attacks, rifled weapons, grenades, uprooting trees, flooding lands (in effect, 19th century versions of weapons of mass destruction), were allowed.58

Under the dispensation of the IRI, the definition of jihad has been further refined,59 into:

1) Jihad-i ghalaba, “victorious holy war:” suspended until Mahdi comes
2) Jihad-i istimata, “jihad of death/desperation:” allowable martyrdom (as that practiced by Iranian soldiers during the war with Saddam)
3) Jihad-i `ilmì wa-tablighì, “jihad of knowledge and [religious] propaganda:” perfectly acceptable and epitomized by Iran’s bringing students to study at Qom, its Shi`i-dissemination websites and publications, the aforementioned Bright Future Institute—even, arguably, the IRI’s entire foreign policy.

Although it has never been spelled out as such, the IRI is operating vis-à-vis Israel as if it were practicing defensive jihad on the behalf of its fellow Muslim Palestinians. And while to date the IRI seems to be letting rational diplomatic and geopolitical considerations outweigh any intrinsic proclivities to, say, get rid of dhimmis or fellow Muslims who cooperate with Islam’s enemies, there is in the fifth caveat of defensive jihad a matter of some concern: would Twelver Shi`i nuclear weapons be analogized to permitted archaic weaponry? Or, even more ominous, might atomic weaponry under Tehran’s (or, perhaps more accurately, Qom’s) control be deemed permissible under jihad-i istimata, if not jihad-i ghalaba?

Twelver Shi`i theology may allow for the acquiring of nuclear weapons—as Mesbah-Yazdi is said to have written60 and as is quite popular not just in Ahmadinejad’s office but also among the Iranian street61—but there seem to be serious theological constraints, if not outright prohibitions, on actually using them62 (although an alleged fatwa to that effect by Supreme Leader Khamenei has never been seen in print). Recently one IRI media mouthpiece, Asr-i Iran, published an article

60 “Ayatollah Mesbah Yazdi…Implies in a Theological-Political Book that Iran Must Acquire a Nuclear Weapon…..,” Intelligence and Terrorism Information Center, March 2, 2010.
62 “Ayatollah Mesbah Yazdi…Implies….”
saying that “even if Iran obtains nuclear weapons, it will never use them except in self-defense....Rather, Iran’s possession of such weapons will sow in Israel a sense of insecurity—and this sense alone will be enough to shatter the glass palace of this illegitimate regime....An Iran with nuclear weapons means an end to the dream of ‘secure Israel’—and this means the exodus of most of the residents....and therefore will be a death sentence for this regime.”63 (Note that actually nuking Israel is never mentioned.) In addition to pressuring Israel, Iran might have three other reasons for wishing to acquire nuclear weapons: regime insurance; regional clout vis-à-vis, in particular, its Sunni archrival the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia; and, possibly, to hand off to the Mahdi should he actually return. 64 Regime insurance is the most important of these to the Tehran-Qom axis, because after the U.S. invasion of Iraq in 2003 failed to uncover Saddam’s nuclear weapons “[t]he Iranians...drew the only conclusion that was rational: the United States invaded Iraq because it knew Saddam did not have any weapons of mass destruction and therefore seemed an easy target.”65 One might observe that the immunity from attacks that North Korea enjoys, now that Pyongyang has nuclear weapons, is also likely a factor in Tehran’s thinking.

But using nuclear weapons to spark the Mahdi’s coming is not an operative idea according to traditional Twelver Shi’i thought. First, the predominant view is that nothing humans (even pious Shi‘is) can do will force Allah’s hand—He will send the Mahdi on his own timetable. Second, for the minority of Shi‘i thinkers who do nonetheless maintain that Muslims can actually facilitate his return, the primary position is that this can be done by “active waiting,” consisting of adopting individual Islamic virtues and creating a Mahdist community in microcosm66—not by creating a radioactive wasteland as the Mahdi’s kingdom. The Mahdi, along with the returned Islamic prophet Jesus, will rule this world for some years; this is a fact that many Western commentators seem to overlook, assuming that when the Mahdi shows up it truly is the end of history. Third, while there are Shi‘i (and Sunni) traditions that the Mahdi will (re)enter the stage of history during a time of great duress, chaos and even violence67—according to a tradition attributed to the Fifth Imam, Muhammad al-Baqir, “there must be bloodshed and jihad to establish Imam Mahdi’s rule”68—this does not mean that he will cause these disasters—or that his followers will, preemptively.

This by no means makes the IRI a peaceful or trustworthy state, from an American perspective. Besides its aforementioned placement on the U.S. State Department list of terrorism sponsors, the IRI almost certainly has irredentist designs on large, extra-Iran, areas of the Middle East and South

63 “Iranian Website: Iranian Nuclear Bomb Spells Death to Israel,” Special Dispatch No. 2820, February 23, 2010, MEMRI. This is supported by a private email I received several months ago from a clerical contact I made while in Iran in 2008: “Islamic Republic of Iran definitely is not going to start a direct war against Zionists’ regime. I confirm this as a person who is aware of political issues.”
64 This was the point of a paper presented at the 2008 Mahdism Conference in Iran by Dr. Mariam Taber, who asserted that “the military capabilities of the future Mahdist state depends on Islamic governments in the here and now acquiring abilities to stand against the enemies of the Imam.” See my article “The Importance of Being Mahdist.”
65 Arjomand, After Khomeini, p. 197
66 Chagpar, unpublished paper
67 Much the same view is held in Christianity; in Matthew 24:3ff, when asked about the sign of His coming and the end of the age by the apostles, Jesus replies that there will be “wars and rumors of wars,” as well as “famines, pestilences, and earthquakes,” not to mention persecutions and, eventually, celestial disasters.
68 This (alleged) hadith was cited by Ali Larijani in his closing speech at the Fifth Mahdism Conference in Tehran, August 2008.
Asia, perhaps hoping to re-create the Safavid state as the Greater Dar al-Shi`. While this might solve the Iraq and Afghanistan problems—it probably would run afoul of the neo-Ottomans in Ankara and Istanbul.) But the leadership of Iran is too geopolitically realistic, and too theologically constrained, to attempt a violent Anschluss—much less a nuclear one. How would the equation change if the IRI were to transmogrify into a military dictatorship, as Secretary of Defense Robert Gates said in June 2010? If it is true that “many of the religious figures are being set aside,” by the IRGC, then two crucial questions come to mind: 1) would the regular military go along with this—and if not, might this be an exploitable seam for U.S. foreign policy? and 2) would a transition to a traditional military dictatorship erenate the power of religious ideology such as Mahdism or even the regnant vilayet-i faqih system? Possibly. But, alternatively, perhaps the IRI’s evolving (or devolving) into a military dictatorship would make it a more dangerous polity, loosening the constraining shackles even of Shi’i theology and allowing Iranian nationalism freer reign.

While in Iran for the 2008 Mahdism Conference, I heard both President Ahmadinejad and Prime Minister Ali Larijani speak. Ahmadinejad said, regarding Israel and Shi’i eschatology, that “the [problem of the] false, fabricated Zionist regime” would not be solved “in the absence of the Perfect Man, the Mahdi”—effectively dousing the alarmist, and inaccurate, view that the IRI’s chief executive wishes to “hotwire the apocalypse.” Islamic fervor for lighting that eschatological detonation cord exists among certain Sunnis groups (including, quite possibly, al-Qa’idah)—but it is not characteristic of Twelver Shi’ism. Larijani, in the closing speech of that same conference, proclaimed that “Mahdism has three pillars: spirituality, rationalism and jihad.” It is admittedly possible, despite all the aforementioned reasoning, that “their own vitriolic rhetoric could conceivably run away with the leaders of the Islamic Republic, and an Iranian nuclear weapon find its way to Tel Aviv.” But the preponderance of evidence—Islamic history in general, specific Shi’i traditions and teachings as well as modern religio-political discourse in Iran—indicates, rather, that the rationality and spirituality of Iranian Mahdism is holding at bay its undeniable jihad aspect. Tehran thus, ironically, finds its potential nuclear policy fettered by Qom: mainstream Shi’i theology does not support violence (nuclear or conventional) in order to precipitate the return of the 12th Imam; furthermore, employing nuclear weapons is verboten in the Mahdi’s absence—except, perhaps, under the rubric of defensive jihad, were Iran itself to be attacked or invaded. Seen in this light, the Islamic Republic’s pursuit of nuclear weapons falls from the overly-alarmist apocalyptic register into a more mundane, and manageable, geopolitical one.

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69 On this topic see my blog post “Back to the (Iranian) Future,” May 16, 2010 at www.mahdiwatch.org
71 Ibid.
72 This position—that the coming of the Mahdi precedes the dissolution of Israel, not the other way around—is that taken in a new book published in Iran, Saqt-i Israel (“The Fall of Israel”), by Mahdi Hamd Inqlavi. The author also maintains that Islamic unity and assisting the Palestinians “may be the reason for arrival of Imam...”
73 See the final chapter of Holiest Wars, pp. 150ff.
74 Furnish, “The Importance of Being Mahdist”
75 Maghen, pp. 256-57.
76 My position on this issue has changed since my trip to Iran and the publication of “The Importance of Being Mahdist,” wherein I said, p. 18, that “the longing for the Mahdi is so fervent...that an event unthinkable even a few years ago, an open Mahdist claimant in Twelver Shiism [sic], no longer seems out of the question.” After more careful study of the relevant Twelver Shi’i doctrines, I now think that the institutional opposition to actualized Mahdism effectively precludes anyone making such a claim in modern Iran.
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