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The Impact of Mahdist Belief on the Political Thought of the Ayatollah Khamenei

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Abstract: Belief in the Mahdi, in his life and in his appearance, is one of the doctrines on which Twelver Shiʿism rests, and one of the marks by which Twelvers distinguish themselves from other Islamic schools and from other religions. Within Twelver Shiʿism there have long been two ways of holding that doctrine, and of thinking about the end of time. One says that the right posture is a passive one, and that the belief should be kept from shaping political thought or the pattern of rule. The other says that the Mahdi, the saviour expected at the end of time, bears on every part of a believer's social life, and that public life has to take its direction from that expectation.

The study draws a purposive sample, closed at theoretical saturation, and analyses it thematically. Six themes organize the material: the making of hope and the refusal of historical dead-ends; the raising of learning and of scientific work; security in its several forms, treated as the ground on which a society can live; a wider share in material welfare; a deeper hold of spirituality and of religious belief; and a firmer public place for ritual and for the emblems of the school. The analysis shows that, in the thinking of the martyred leader of the Revolution, Mahdist belief is more than a point of doctrine. It works as a practical pattern for running a society, as a reason not to sit still, as a source of inner authority, and as one of the foundations on which a new Islamic civilization is meant to rest.

Keywords: Mahdism; the culture of awaiting; preparatory governance; Ayatollah Sayyid Ali Khamenei.

Introduction

Twelver political and social culture does not speak with one voice about Mahdism, or about *intizar al-faraj*, the awaiting of the relief that the Mahdi's appearance is said to bring. On one account the doctrine is an abstract tenet, a piece of theology, a picture of a future too far off to date. On the other it is a frame of mind and a working pattern, and it sets the direction of personal life, of social life, and of politics in a Muslim society. A good number of contemporary Shiʿi scholars have refused to treat belief in the promised one as a feeling people fall back on when the Occultation is hard to bear. They take it as a doctrine that builds a society, and as one of the forces that goes into the design of a system of rule. Set against that background, the record of policy and of thought among leading figures in the Muslim world — Ayatollah Sayyid Ali Khamenei, as leader of the Islamic Revolution, above all — shows Mahdist belief doing more than decorating the speeches. For him it was a way into the understanding of religion, and the basis of the society's movement toward what he took to be its completion. It gave his principles of rule their direction.

That is the premise of this article, which asks how Mahdist belief and the culture of awaiting carry over into political thought as it is actually practiced, into governance, and into the public positions of the martyred leader of the Islamic Revolution. In his account, Mahdism belongs to the same line of purposes for which the prophets were sent: a world ordered by *tawhid*, the setting up of equity and justice, and the opening out of the capacities human beings carry (Khamenei, 2002, 2008). The age of the appearance, as he puts it, is where the rough tracks and the rock-faces of history stop, and where human beings come out of a dead-end into a life that can be called desirable in a real sense (Khamenei, 2005, 2008, 2014). The problem worth working on is how that horizon, and the civilizational outlook tied to it, acts on the running of a society during the Occultation: how the doctrine is made into a pattern for decisions, and for the large choices of an Islamic order (Khamenei, 2005, 2011).

Awaiting the relief, in this political thought, is not a still idea, not a stiffened one, and not a matter of prayer and patience alone. It is active. It is meant to be practiced, and it is meant to change the situation. It means not being content with things as they are

(Khamenei, 1370 SH; 2005; 2011).[1] An Islamic society, on this view, has to set its social, political, economic, and security arrangements on the pattern of the Mahdist society, and move toward the rule of the Imam of the Age (Khamenei, 1369 SH; 2011).[1] If the link between "belief in the appearance" and "the way the country is run" is not grasped, Mahdism shrinks to a private conviction, or to political quietism — the posture usually pinned on the current known as the Hojjatieh Society. The leader's own position is the reverse of that. Building a new Islamic civilization, and administering society justly, are for him the direct and principal preparation for the appearance of the Lord of the Age (Khamenei, 2008, 2011). The speeches seldom name the Society outright.[2]

A full account of this effect cannot be written from summaries; it has to be built from the speeches and messages themselves. The article takes its six fields from the Mahdist verses and reports, and from work already done on them, in particular Najm al-Din Tabasi's *An Outlook on the World Government of the Mahdi* and Sayyid Murtada Mujtahidi Sistani's *The Noble Government of the Imam of the Age*. Those fields are the making of hope and the refusal of a historical dead-end; care for learning and for scientific progress; personal, social, and regional security; the society's share in economic welfare; spirituality and religious belief; and ritual practice together with *tawassul*, recourse to the Imam (Tabasi, 2001; Mujtahidi Sistani, 2016).

There is already a literature on Mahdism in the leader's statements. One set of studies, Motahhari (2020) among them, stays with the theological, sociological, and epistemological sides, and leaves the matter at the level of concepts. It does not follow the doctrine into programs, or into the parts of governing that can be pointed at. Another set, of which Mollaei (2015) is an instance, takes up the relation between the "theory of awaiting" and the "founding of a new Islamic civilization" in Khamenei's views. That work has shown that, for him, civilization-building is tied to the final purpose of the Occultation and to getting the world ready for the appearance. The gap that remains is narrower than the topic. What is still missing is a thematic network, drawn from the speeches and the official positions,

that would show how Mahdism bears on six dimensions of governing at once: security, knowledge, welfare, hope, spirituality, and ritual.

The argument starts from a simple claim. An Islamic pattern of rule, and any serious talk of a new civilization, will not be understood if the epistemic ground under them is left unexamined. Its own contribution is a connected, text-based account of the tie between Mahdist belief and the concrete components of governance, using the archive of speeches and official messages on the site of the Office for the Preservation and Publication of the Works of Ayatollah Khamenei.

In the scheme used here, Mahdist belief is the independent variable, the one that gives direction. National security, scientific growth, economic welfare, social vitality, and public spirituality are arranged under it, inside what the article calls preparatory governance: rule ordered toward preparing the ground for the appearance. The aim is a qualitative account of how Mahdist belief, and the doctrine of awaiting the relief, have weighed on the positions, the strategies, and the components of governance in the speeches of Ayatollah Sayyid Ali Khamenei over many years. The article tries to show Mahdism operating as a large historical and strategic view, and running through decisions that are, on their face, decisions about security, science, the life of the spirit, and the economy.

Three questions follow from that aim.

First: which themes govern Ayatollah Khamenei's thinking about the relation between Mahdist belief and governance?

Second: what effect have Mahdist belief and the culture of awaiting had on his positions where hope is at issue, where scientific progress is at issue, and where personal, social, and regional security have to be provided?

Third: how do the speeches and the positions present the awaiting of relief as a pattern for raising public welfare, for deepening spirituality, and for strengthening ritual practice?

Methodology: The article sets out to recover and read layers of meaning in the speeches and positions of Ayatollah Sayyid Ali Khamenei that concern the effect of Mahdist belief, and of the culture of awaiting, on the components of governance. It is a qualitative study, of the descriptive-analytical kind.

Thematic analysis suits this material. The speeches are qualitative texts, and they are official ones. The method can put scattered notions into a structure. It can also draw a network that runs from the abstract vocabulary of Mahdism down to components of governing that are concrete enough to name. Both the codes that sit on the surface of a text and the meanings that sit inside a line of policy can be picked out, shortened, and grouped.

Corpus and sampling: The corpus is the whole of Ayatollah Sayyid Ali Khamenei's speeches, addresses, sermons, messages, and official writings from the start of his leadership through recent years, as archived and published on the official site of the Office for the Preservation and Publication of his works.

Sampling was purposive, and it was closed by theoretical saturation. From that site, statements were taken when they carried the inquiry's main terms: Mahdism, the Mahdi (peace be upon him), the awaiting of relief, mid-Shaʿban, Islamic governance, security, knowledge-building, economic welfare, spirituality, and ritual.

Credibility and dependability: Credibility and dependability were tied to a simple rule: direct citation of the speeches as historical evidence, so that the reading would not rest on a private impression or on a claim with no text under it. What follows is the qualitative reading of the statements, positions, and speeches published on the Office's site. The analysis follows the six-stage procedure of thematic analysis.

The thematic network: Reading the themes Taken one by one, the organizing themes show how Mahdist belief, inside this body of thought, becomes something a government can act on.

Overarching theme	Organizing theme	Basic themes and sample codes	Date
Preparatory governance grounded in the Mahdist doctrine	The making of hope, and the refusal of a historical dead-end	A sense of strength and assurance in facing enemies; hope in a bright end to human life	22 October 2002 (30 Mehr 1381)
		Rejection of a historical dead-end for humankind; rejection of political and social impasse	17 August 2008 (27 Mordad 1387)
		The promise of a desirable life and of the straight path; a sense of authority and of heart in the face of hegemonic power	11 June 2014 (21 Khordad 1393)
		Leaving the rough tracks of history for "the highway of Mahdism"	9 April 2020 (21 Farvardin 1399)
Preparatory governance grounded in the Mahdist doctrine	The raising of learning and scientific progress	The flourishing of intellects and of human talents; the opening of every treasury of knowledge in the age of the appearance	5 October 2000 (14 Mehr 1379)
		The need for scientific courage and for the "software movement"; the need for national self-confidence in the scientific struggle	5 October 2006 (13 Mehr 1385)
		Deep, scholar-centered research in the teachings of the religion; the production of knowledge and innovation as a pillar of authority	28 October 2009 (6 Aban 1388)
		Avoiding superficiality in Mahdist research	9 July 2011 (18 Tir 1390)
Preparatory governance grounded in	Personal, social, and regional security	The establishment of general equity and justice; the rule of equity and of justice on a world scale	7 February 1993 (18 Bahman 1371)

the Mahdist doctrine		Security as the infrastructure of every kind of progress; security as a basic need of childbearing and of a society's growth	22 October 2002 (30 Mehr 1381)
		Defensive readiness against those who rule by force; defensive authority, so as to cut short the hand of aggressors	25 June 2013 (4 Tir 1392)
		Personal and social calm under the guardianship (*wilaya*)	5 April 1999 (16 Farvardin 1378)
Preparatory governance grounded in the Mahdist doctrine	Greater welfare and a larger economic share	Drawing on the blessings of the earth without spoiling them; sound use of divine blessings and gifts	14 March 2001 (24 Esfand 1379)
		Untying the knots of livelihood; a race in good works and in public welfare	17 August 2008 (27 Mordad 1387)
		Fair distribution of wealth and the refusal of poverty; distributive justice and the lifting of deprivation	11 June 2014 (21 Khordad 1393)
		Economic flourishing on the basis of Mahdist justice	11 June 2014 (21 Khordad 1393)
Preparatory governance grounded in the Mahdist doctrine	A deeper spirituality and a firmer religious belief	The rule of servanthood to God and of religious ethics; the rule of spirituality and of the Qur'an over the whole of human life	24 June 2012 (4 Tir 1391)
		Taking the Mahdist society as a pattern during the Occultation; building the society's structure on the pattern of *wilaya*	9 April 2020 (21 Farvardin 1399)
		Strengthening Islamic identity among the young; deepening the faith, and the clean conduct, of officials and of the people	9 July 2011 (18 Tir 1390)

		Fighting moral corruption and the stripping away of religious identity	23 January 2002 (3 Bahman 1380)
Preparatory governance grounded in the Mahdist doctrine	Ritual practice and recourse to the Imam	Spiritual intimacy and continued recourse to the Imam of the Age; remembrance of the Imam as a remedy for spiritual pain	12 November 2000 (22 Aban 1379)
		Honoring Mahdist rites and emblems on a world scale; a conscious, clear-eyed observance of mid-Shaʿban	17 August 2008 (27 Mordad 1387)
		Self-formation and a permanent state of readiness; moral self-formation and righteous action, for the Imam's satisfaction	9 July 2011 (18 Tir 1390)
		Awaiting taken as a state of standing ready, in the manner of struggle	10 May 2017 (20 Ordibehesht 1396)

1. The making of hope, and the refusal of a historical dead-end

Hope is the feature of Mahdist belief that sits closest to the center. The Qurʾan is blunt about despair of God's mercy — a mercy the verse presents as something to be met with everywhere in the world. Despair of that mercy is set beside unbelief (Qurʾan 12:87). The reports go further on the hope this belief is supposed to give. Sunni and Shiʿi collections alike press the point that those who believe in the Mahdi must hold it as certain that, even if one day of the world's life remained, the Imam of the Age would appear on that day, and even in its last hours (Ibn Hanbal, 1409 AH, p. 62; al-Saffar, 1404 AH, p. 488; al-Kulayni, 1407 AH, vol. 1, p. 179).

Read as a theme, Mahdism in these speeches has moved out of theology and become a psychological and political fact: hope made at the scale of a nation. Human history, in the leader's telling, has been a movement along rough tracks, through rises and falls, toward "the awaiting of the appearance of the Mahdi," toward "the summit of what

humankind hopes for, and of what Muslims and believers have hoped for across the whole of history," and at last onto the open road of a desirable life (11 June 2014). That picture refuses the claim that the country's management has run into a wall. It is also how a willingness to stand under international pressure gets into the political language (17 August 2008; 9 April 2020).

One further point is easily flattened. The force of Ayatollah Sayyid Ali Khamenei's hope for the future ran well ahead of the people around him and of the rooms he addressed. One of the plainest records is his conversation with Ali Khoshlafz, a veteran disabled in the eight-year war with Iraq. The exchange shows Mahdist belief and hope as they were lived, in private and in public (5 January 2017).

2. The raising of learning and scientific progress

Among the events placed after the appearance of the Imam of the Age is a scientific leap with no precedent in the reports. On the usual reading of the text, knowledge in the world rises by a factor of thirteen and a half (al-Kulayni, 1407 AH, vol. 1, p. 25). Writers generally file this under the features that belong only to the age of the appearance. The codes gathered here point somewhere else in Ayatollah Sayyid Ali Khamenei's thinking. Scientific progress is not, for him, a worldly gain and nothing more. It is a duty, discharged in the direction of making a society that can stand as a pattern of the Mahdist one. He holds that the age of the appearance is the age in which the scientific capacities of human intellects are set fully to work (2 December 2000). Government during the Imam's absence is therefore obliged to open what he called the "software movement" — his name for a drive to produce knowledge at home rather than import its intellectual tools — and, leaning on the scientific capacity of the young and of specialists, to bring the country to a position others have to reckon with in science (5 October 2006; 28 October 2009). The movement, and the work of raising the country's learning, were in his view among the duties of Islamic government in the time of the Occultation.

3. Personal, social, and regional security

West Asia has, for a long list of historical, geographical, and cultural reasons, been a region of insecurity, war, and repeated fighting. In

recent centuries, and especially from the time oil began to be taken out in quantity, that has not let up. European states, and the United States in particular, have not let the region settle. When the reports want to say how complete security will be after the appearance of the Imam of the Age, they use a picture: a woman will be able to travel alone from what is now Syria to Iraq — the two countries that later became a home ground of ISIS — and on from there to Arabia, and no one will touch her or the property with her (al-Muqaddasi al-Shafiʿi, 1428 AH, p. 202; al-Suyuti, 1385 SH, p. 148). This too is counted among the things that belong to the period after the appearance. In the network drawn from the speeches, though, security is named as the infrastructure of life and the base on which the country's progress sits (26 June 2013). Belief that the Mahdist society is a society full of equity, justice, and an unbroken calm (7 February 1993) obliges those who govern in the Occultation to build defensive power and deterrence, and to provide personal, social, and regional security against the threats of hegemonic power (22 October 2002; 3 October 2022).

4. Greater welfare and a larger economic share

The reports describe the time of the Imam's appearance as a time in which human beings will know a material and economic welfare with no precedent, to the point that no poor person will be found anywhere on earth, and people will have trouble finding someone to whom they can give their alms and their zakat. That welfare is said to show itself in housing, in wealth, and in other respects as well (al-Nuʿmani, 1397 AH, p. 237; Ibn Hanbal, p. 61; al-Muqaddasi, p. 221). In the material analyzed here, public welfare and economic justice are themes in their own right. The martyred leader, appealing to the traits of a Mahdist society in which divine blessings and natural capacities are taken out without damage (14 March 2001; 11 June 2014), sets the country's economic line on the removal of deprivation, the fair distribution of wealth, and a rise in material welfare kept alongside spiritual growth (17 August 2008).

5. A deeper spirituality and a firmer religious belief

The main frame of Mahdist governance, in the reports and then in the speeches, is the rule of spirituality and of ethics. In the age of the

appearance, human beings rise in their morals; their understanding rises in a serious way; and religious belief, in theory and in practice, reaches its highest point (Tabarsi, 1361 SH, vol. 2, p. 291; al-Nili, 1420 AH, p. 356). The initial codes say that an Islamic government has to arrange the space of society so that faith, clean hands, obedience, and acting on the Qurʾan spread (13 March 1990; 9 April 2020). Spirituality, on this account, is the main point at which Islamic governance parts company with the material patterns of the West (5 October 2006; 9 July 2011).

6. Ritual practice and recourse to the Imam

Ritual is the outer shell of religious knowledge and of sticking to the religion. A person, or a society, cannot be counted religious and believing if commitment to ritual is simply not there. Reports that describe the age of the appearance give examples rather than a full list: the mosque of Kufa grown to a size with no precedent, because of how firmly people hold to congregational prayer behind the Imam of the Age, and the holding of Qurʾan circles in the mosques. The reports are not trying to name every case (al-Nuʿmani, pp. 239 and 318; al-Saffar, p. 155). The codes tied to ritual show that the honoring of Mahdist emblems — some of them standing alone, such as the mid-Shaʿban celebrations, and some of them carried inside other rites, such as the Arbaʿin visitation and the night vigil of Qadr — together with personal and collective recourse to the Imam of the Age, is not treated as custom and nothing more. It is taken as a means of forming the self, of keeping a collective identity, and of holding Islamic society in what the speeches call a state of "standing ready, and of constant movement" (12 November 2000; 17 August 2008; 10 May 2017).

Conclusion

The article set out to read, by thematic analysis, the effect of Mahdist belief and of the culture of awaiting on the principles, the positions, and the components of governance in the thought and the speeches of Ayatollah Sayyid Ali Khamenei. The texts published by the Office for the Preservation and Publication of his works do not leave Mahdism as a theological doctrine, an abstraction, or a belief aimed at a future

too distant to act on. In this body of thought it is a teaching meant to change things, a working pattern for the engineering of a society, and a way of steering an Islamic order during the Occultation.

The network yields one overarching theme — the impact of Mahdist belief on the political thought of the martyred Ayatollah Sayyid Ali Khamenei — carried by six organizing themes. Between them they cover the main dimensions on which a society is run.

The first, and the one that shows itself most clearly, is the making of hope and the refusal of a historical dead-end. Awaiting the relief works there as an answer to despair, to passivity, and to giving way before a dominating order. The second theme places scientific progress and the building of knowledge among the structural requirements of preparatory governance. If the age of the appearance is the age in which intellects come fully into flower, and in which every treasury of knowledge and understanding is opened to human beings, then an Islamic authority is obliged to found the software movement, to strengthen national self-confidence, to support specialists, and to bring the country to a scientific authority of its own. The third theme treats personal, social, and regional security as the vital infrastructure of a Mahdist society. For the leader of the Revolution, the establishment of justice and of security in all its dimensions is the principal reason the prophets were sent, and the principal reason for the rising of the promised Mahdi. Public security, regional stability, and a defensive deterrence strong enough to cut short the hand of aggressors are, on this view, conditions of scientific progress, of economic growth, and of the psychological calm of ordinary people.

The fourth theme runs from belief in the Mahdist society straight into policy on welfare and on the economic share of the public. A society fitted to the Mahdist ideal is, in this thinking, a society kept far from poverty, discrimination, and deprivation, a society in which natural wealth is taken out in the best way, without damage, and then distributed. The fifth and sixth themes are the spiritual and the ritual sides of the same pattern. Deepening spirituality and religious belief, and strengthening ritual practice and recourse to the Imam, are presented as the two wings of forming the self and of forming the society. An Islamic government is obliged to make a space in which ethics, servanthood to God, and the authority of the Qurʾan lie over

personal and social relations alike. A conscious keeping of the rites — mid-Shaʿban among them — and a continued spiritual intimacy with the Imam of the Age are, from the other side, means of holding a collective identity, of moral purification, and of keeping the society permanently ready.

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