

Dueling at the End of Times

Sunni and Shia Narratives and the Potential for Escalation

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Brief Analysis

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Millenarianism, or “end of days” messianic speculation, is thriving and evolving -- and being weaponized by both Sunni and Shia radical movements – as evidenced by the Islamic State on one side, and Hezbollah and other Iranian proxies on the other. While still limited and contained, the potential of such visions to metastasize and explode into conflict is considerable. In both the Sunni and Shia domains, millenarianism is gaining in relevance, substance, and structure. This essay considers the origins and dynamics of this movement and concludes with a brief suggestion about how best to counter it.

There is no Islamic equivalent to the New Testament Book of Revelation. The original Islamic texts have some descriptions of the apocalypse, but lack a comprehensive or consistent narrative on the subject. Early Islamic authorities sometimes referred to prophecies about the end of days, known as eschatology, whether as political predictions or as interpretive insights invoked to understand cataclysmic events. While this recourse to prophecy retreated in Islamic thought over the centuries, its institutions preserved and sought to synthesize these disparate traditions. But they were generally subject to less stringent standards than those applied to basic theology or jurisprudence.

Within this relatively flexible framework, Islamic end-of-existence pursuits covered three overlapping areas: first, the path of the individual from death through hiatus to the afterlife; second, the unfolding of the eschatological sequence as an end to earthly history; and third, the realization of the apocalyptic end, as a meta-historical event opening to the ultimate eternal reality. The Quran expands at length on the first and the third areas, but does not address the second. This gap was, however, filled with ample details gradually recognized as sacred -- and allegedly stemming from Judeo-Christian sources, according to Islamic scholars’ own assessment.

While their origins may be ambiguous, many such traditions have helped shape major formulations in Islam, primarily in the Shiarealm. They have also served as vectors for the rise of independent religious systems beyond Islam, from the Druzism of the tenth century to the Babism and Baha’ism of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. But across time and space, mainstream Islamic eschatology has these recurrent motifs: the cosmic importance of the

real world for the fulfillment of prophecy; the imperative of differentiation and isolation from others; and the necessary tribulations as a prerequisite to ultimate vindication and the millennium. Today's expressions of millenarianism, both Sunni and Shia, continue in conformity with this formula. It is in this context that the duel currently raging between the radical Sunni and radical Shia forms of jihadism can be assessed.

On the Sunni side, the organizational structures developed by the Muslim Brotherhood, combined with the strict, exclusionary interpretations offered by Salafism – notably through the Saudi (Wahhabi) religious establishment – provided much of the substance that coalesced into radical Sunni jihadism. Yet a nuanced assessment of the doctrine and behavior of the Islamic State establishes a direct continuity with the anti-Saudi millenarian movement of Juhayman al-'Utaybi, which occupied the Kaaba shrine in Mecca in 1979, at the dawn of the fifteenth century of the Islamic calendar. Both the Juhayman movement and the Islamic State gave primacy to the uncompromising implementation of the strictures of sharia — as they interpreted it — even if such actions were self-defeating in practice. Today, even upon impending military defeat, Islamic State militants have allocated much of their scarce resources to destroying shrines and punishing or executing the locals for any infringement on their extreme version of sharia.

Adherents of this approach are labeled *manahijah* (from *manhaj*, Arabic for methodology) by their fellow radical Islamist critics. In its challenge to rationalism, millenarianism provides manhajism with an argument for purity and purpose. However, the Islamic State was handicapped in its recourse to millenarian themes by its own adherence to Salafism, which mandated strict uniform standards of Islamic orthodoxy. The available material was thus extremely limited. Yet its approach, judging from the reactions of its intended audience, proved surprisingly successful.

The cornerstone of Islamic State millenarianism is a tradition related to the Prophet Muhammad, and authenticated by Islamic mainstream scholarship, providing a periodization of Islam's history and future. According to this tradition, Muslims, after the passing of the Prophet, will be ruled by a succession of political regimes, just and unjust, culminating in the restoration of the Caliphate “along the methodology of Prophethood”. The thrust of the propaganda operations of the Islamic State was that this tradition predicts its own emergence. To the dismay of other jihadist ideologues, Abu Muhammad al-'Adnani, until his death the most vociferous voice of the Islamic State, cast the territorial expansion of his organization as the clear fulfillment of a millenarian “divine promise” extrapolated from the Quran.

More commonly, though, the Islamic State refrained in its official publications from such claims, while allowing its supporters to engage in them through diverse para-scientific approaches, including numerology, bibliomancy, and dream interpretation. This often tapped into the popular spiritual religious mindset that is anathema to Salafism. The Islamic State provided eschatological markers: its main English publication is *Dabiq*, the name of a place expected to witness an apocalyptic battle; its news agency is *A'maq*, literally “depths,” the name of another location slated for another end-of-times event. The elaboration of millenarian themes was delegated to supporters, sympathizers, and affiliated scholars — tracking the fulfillment of the lesser signs of the apocalypse, and occasionally yielding specific dates for cataclysmic events yet to unfold.

With its ability to hold real-world cities having passed, the Islamic State may yet exercise its full potential in millenarianism. The eventual death of the Islamic State caliph may be followed by the acclamation of another worldly leader, or of an other-worldly figure like the Mahdi or Messiah.

Paradoxically, the restraint that the Islamic State exhibited against openly embracing millenarian traditions has not been matched by some of its critics. The 2014 open letter addressed to Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi and signed by eminent scholars from across the Islamic world highlighted a dubious tradition in an apparent effort to discredit his so-called caliphate. No such discernible result ensued, but it established a precedent for the use of questionable prophecies.

Shia millenarianism, the ideological fuel of many insurgent movements in early Islamic history, was expanded but contained in Twelver Shia theology with an end-of-times divine manifestation: the Shia Mahdi. Belief in the eventual advent of the Mahdi has been central to a quietist, even fatalist, Shia Islam. But twentieth century Shia reconsiderations have challenged this religious abstention from political action. At one end of the spectrum, espousing a Muslim Brothers – like militant approach, Muhammad Baqir al-Sadr and Muhammad Husayn Fadlallah dissociated the long-term expectation of the Mahdi from today’s imperative of social and political action. At the other end, an ecstatic Mahdism, occasionally yielding schismatic movements, has posited that the current era is already that of the Mahdi’s revelation. Ayatollah Khomeini’s “Rulership of the Jurisprudent” combines elements from both ends, by delegating to the Supreme Guide aspects of the authority of the Mahdi.

Mahdism flourished in Shia-majority Iraq even under Saddam Hussein’s despotic Sunni rule. For many Mahdists, the fall of the regime was understood as a confirmation of millenarian expectations. With guidance from Iran, the main Iraqi Shia Islamist forces have navigated a delicate path, capitalizing on Mahdist fervor while striving to consolidate power in more mundane fashion. As the open Iranian proxy in Lebanon, Hezbollah sought to implement a similar process.

The July 2006 war with Israel provided Hezbollah with the means to test and enhance this dual formula. Hezbollah presented its inconclusive confrontation with Israel as a “Divine Victory” (Nasrun min Allah, in an all but explicit reference to the Hezbollah leader Hasan Nasrallah). Nasrallah used charged language of (divine) “promise,” while supporters’ accounts of miraculous events and legions of angels joining the fight were allowed to flourish. While Hezbollah maintained a rational and “moderate” discourse directed outwardly, its inward message to the Shia community was more imbued with sectarianism, and repurposed ecstatic imagery.

Militant Shia millenarianism has been deployed at full throttle as part of Iran’s efforts to rescue the Syrian regime. The primary narrative device is the collapse of history into the sequence of the traumatic martyrdom of Imam Hussein — the seventh century event at the heart of Shiism — and the subsequent battle setting the stage for the return of the Mahdi. Sunni Syrians are thus recast as the spawn of the Umayyad Caliph Yazid. Seemingly innocuous details, such as the town of Daraa witnessing the first episode of anti-Assad unrest, are depicted as ominous signs; one Mahdist tradition seemingly references Daraa as the place from which al-Sufyani, the Mahdi’s arch-enemy, would spark his movement. By many accounts, the Mahdi will have divinely ordained precursors, the most notable being al-Yamani — identified with Hasan Nasrallah in some circles.

But containing and depleting millenarianism may not be served by the invocation of alternative religious views. As exemplified by the 2004 letter to al-Baghdadi, such an approach may in fact validate millenarianism’s basic premise: the relevance of prophecy to contemporary events. Nor is it useful to engage in a “debunking” approach, in which the failure of predictions is exposed — as in the loss of the town of Dabiq by the Islamic State millenarian apologists are always able to point to some details to argue that the elements of prophecy were not completely met, and thus the prophecy remains valid and standing. In the case of Dabiq, Islamic State supporters have underlined that its fall to a Turkish offensive is immaterial to the prophecy that claims that the town will be the stage of a definitive battle between believers and the West.

Responsible parties, including the United States government, are best advised instead to address the concrete issues facing Middle Eastern societies: governance, resource management, reconciliation, and citizens’ empowerment. The millenarian mindset – and the associated potential for sectarian confrontation – thrives on the absence of such concerns from public discourse. ❖

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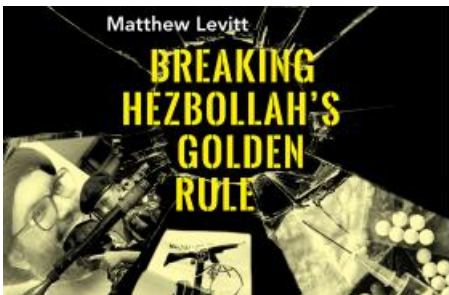
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