The Mahdī Tradition in Islam: A Social-Cognitive Approach

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Muslims believe that the Mahdī is the restorer who will come at the end of time to establish the reign of justice and righteousness. At the time of Prophet Muhammad (peace be on him) many messianic ideas were found among the Arabs; even the rise of Islam could have been perceived by some as the fulfilment of a messianic expectation. Those who were expecting a messiah were in fact looking for a guide who would lead them effectively to a superior way of religious and social life.

The expectation for the advent of the Mahdī among Muslims reflects a deep-rooted desire for a future-oriented ideal — the establishment of a just social order and a moral system of governance. The idea also has eschatological implications. This is in reference to the end of time, when humanity will need direction from a divine figure, it is being understood that the Mahdī will emerge at the end of time. This article attempts to show how the idea of the Mahdī springs from the universal idea of hope in Islam. In this paper we shall attempt to discuss the Mahdī in the early Sunnī tradition by focusing on the relevant ahādīth and some of their interpretations. Next, we will examine the major figures in history who were believed to be Mahdīs. Moreover, we will explore the cultural environment's influences throughout the course of Islamic history on the idea of the Mahdī, and finally, attempt to show how the Mahdī embodies the idea of hope, that enduring force that drives humans to overcome life's challenges in expectation of a just future.

What is the Mahdī?

Almost all Muslims believe that a great personality called the Mahdī will appear at the end of time. Etymologically, the term “Mahdī” or “the rightly guided one” is derived from the Arabic root “b-d-y”. This root is originally mentioned in the first verse of the second sūrah of the Qur'ān: “This Book [i.e., the Qur'ān], no doubt, is guidance (bundan) for the pious ones” (2: 1). Both
the Qur’an and the Prophetic traditions (ahādīth), in our view, provide strong grounds to expect the appearance of someone who, both in his thought and deed, represents this “guidance” and turns it into a vibrant reality. The word Mahdi as the title of a person is not mentioned in the Qur’an. Many verses, however, refer to the muḥtaḍīn (“the people who are rightly guided”).¹ The Mahdi and the muḥtaḍīn both share the same meaning as they emanate from a common root “ḥ-d-y”, or “guidance”. According to the Arabic lexicon, “Mahdi” means “the person who is guided by God to the truth”.² Thus, anyone who follows the true path could theoretically be called “mahdi”, but without necessarily signifying that nūsbulī who will come at the end of time. To indicate this distinction between Mahdi in the above sense and the other rightly guided persons who follow the right guidance is indicated by addix ‘al-’ before the word Mahdi. The use of the word with this prefix indicates that the person signified is the Mahdi of the former category.

Since the Qur’an, the primary source of Islam, does not explicitly use the term “Mahdi” even though it uses words derived from the root b-d-y, the issue becomes somewhat complicated. Many questions arise regarding the person of the Mahdi, the number of the Mahdis, and the time of his/her appearance.

In traditions from the Prophet (peace be on him) the plural form of the term has been used, it has been suggested that mahdis have spiritual levels of progress, as indicated in the ḥadīth. When the Prophet (peace be on him) prayed for one of his Companions, he asked God to raise him to the level of the mahdis, without using the prefix al; instead, he used the word in its plural form.³ Since the Prophet (peace be on him) uses the plural form, it is understood that here reference has not been made to the Mahdi who will appear at the end of time. In some instances, the Prophet (peace be on him) used the word mandiyūn, the plural form of mahdi, for his four caliphs: Abū Bakr (d. 13/634), ‘Umar (d. 23/644), ‘Uthmān (d. 35/656) and ‘Alī (d. 40/661). In the tradition narrated by ‘Irāb ibn Sāriyāh, the Prophet (peace be on him) says: “Surely, if you live, you will see many differences of opinion. I am warning you about bi‘āth (innovation) in religion. Surely, it is an error.

¹ See Qur’an 3: 51-56, 90; 6: 52 and 4: 175.
² Abū ‘l-Fadl ibn Mašāfūr, Lisān al-‘Arab (Beirut: Dār Sūdūr & Dār Bayyūt, 1956), 15: 354. Ibn Mašāfūr says that the word Mahdi becomes a common personal name. Thus, the person whose coming at the end of time has been prophesied by the Prophet Muḥammad (peace be on him) has been called al-Mahdi.
³ See for the full text of this ḥadīth, Muslim ibn al-Ḥajjaj, Sahīh Muslim, Kitāb al-Jamī‘iz, Bāb fi Ighmā‘ al-Ma‘yyīr wa ‘l-Du‘a‘ I‘lu inā Ḥadār; Abū Dāwūd Sulaymān ibn Asḥāṣ al-Suṣi‘īn, Sunan Abī Dāwūd, Kitāb al-Jamī‘iz, Bāb Tağmā‘ al-Ma‘yyīr; ‘Abd b. Muḥammad ibn Ḥanbal, Mustad Abnā‘ ibn ‘Anṣār, Bā‘ Ḥadīth umm Salamah Zawī al-Nabīyyī. It is to note that the Prophet (peace be on him) used the word ‘al-Mahdiyyīn’. Ed.
Therefore, follow my path and the path of my rightly guided successors (mabdiyyin)\textsuperscript{4}. Presumably, because the Prophet (peace be on him) used the term “mahdi” for his successors, in the minds of most Muslims the term became associated with a powerful figure who was going to rule and bring justice to people. If the four rightly guided caliphs of Islam were mabdi Disconnect ("rightly guided"), as many Muslims believe them to be, then the Mahdi is not merely one person, although the majority of Muslims expect him to be one such person. Therefore, one can see how the concept of the Mahdi has been quite complex from the very early period of Islam, and even the traditions on the subject have lent themselves to a variety of interpretations.

In the second half of the seventh century, according to W. Madelung, the Mahdi was first given messianic connotations after the death of the Umayyad caliph Mu‘awiyyah (d. 60/680).\textsuperscript{5} This was probably because people were looking forward to someone who could bring justice in that disturbed time, and this expectation translated itself into the conception of the Mahdi.

As a distinctive eschatological theme, the Mahdi is very similar to the Davidic Messiah of Judaism and to the Christian Jesus, whose second coming is awaited.\textsuperscript{6} Traditionally speaking, in Islam the Mahdi is conceived as the leader of the believers; his opponents are mostly unbelievers, specifically the Dajjāl, the anti-Christ, and his followers, whom the Mahdi will fight and defeat with God’s support. The eschatological struggle, or Armageddon, will occur between the anti-Christ and his followers on one side, and Jesus (peace be on him), the Mahdi, and their followers on the other. The united forces of the Mahdi and Jesus (peace be on him) will “easily” defeat the anti-Christ.\textsuperscript{7}


\textsuperscript{6} Especially in the Shi‘ite tradition, the Davidic Messiah bears a certain similarity to the notion of the Mahdi entertained by the Shi‘ites, one who will be a descendant of ‘Alī. ‘Alī plays a role parallel to David, and ‘Alī’s offspring, Mahdi, is similar to David’s offspring, the Messiah. I owe this to Maria Dakeke, Professor of Islamic Studies at George Mason University, Fairfax, Virginia, USA who provided this information during a discussion with this writer on the topic of Mahdi.

\textsuperscript{7} Anti-Christ will be as easily defeated by the Mahdi and Jesus as salt melts in water, according to a tradition. See Muslim, Saḥīḥ Muslim, Kitāb al-Fitan wa Ashrūr al-Sā‘ah, Bāb fi Fath Quṣṭānīyyah wa Khurūj al-Dajjāl wa Nuzūl ‘Īsā ibn Maryam.
Early Sunni sources record several traditions from the Prophet (peace be on him), about the appearance and attributes of the Mahdi: he will be from the Prophet Muḥammad’s family; he will appear at the end of time; he will be an imām; he will be a caliph. Even though there is no reference to the Mahdi in Abū Hurayrah’s famous hadīth which mentions the ten signs of the Final Hour, in another tradition recorded by Ibn Mājah the Mahdi is mentioned with the title, “Caliph of God”. Perhaps because some traditions associate the Mahdi with caliphs, the Mahdi came to be seen as a great Muslim leader at the end of time. Therefore, the Mahdi was associated with such historical leaders of the early Islamic period as ‘Abd Allāh ibn al-Zubayr (d. 72/691) (who fought against the oppression of Ḥajjāj (d. 95/714), the governor of ‘Iraq, and with ‘Umar ibn ‘Abd al-‘Azīz (d. 101/720). In the traditions about the trials that will be encountered at the end of time (the malākīm traditions), the Mahdi is described as the political leader of the entire world. Among Muslims, however, the Mahdi is generally conceived as a person who will govern an Islamic state. Based on this notion, the Mahdi became the focus of attention as a messianic political figure.

Muslims perceive the Mahdi almost as a supernatural personality, and one can see many traditions purporting this quality of the Mahdi. He is represented as being so extraordinary that, he will be able to establish justice on earth with his sword in a very short period of time. The various interpretations of the extraordinary personality of the Mahdi mentioned in some later interpretations of early traditions, is problematic. For this reason, some modern scholars tend to deny the very idea of the Mahdi, claiming that it is mythical, that there is no reliable basis for it in the primary Islamic sources. They believe that even the Prophet Muḥammad (peace be on him),

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8 See for the full text, Muslim, Ṣaḥīḥ Muslim, Kitāb al-Fitan wa Asbāḥ al-Sā‘ah, Bāb ḫa taqūm al-Sī‘ah Ḫattā yamūru al-Rajjāl.
10 See for the full text, Muslim, Ṣaḥīḥ Muslim, Kitāb al-Fitan wa Asbāḥ al-Sī‘ah, Bāb al-‘Āyāt alaṣṣī‘at Qabla al-Sī‘ah.
12 Hasan al-Basīrī (d. 110/728), an earlier theologian and Sufī opposed the belief in the coming of the Mahdi, but contended that, if there were one, it would be ‘Umar ibn ‘Abd al-‘Azīz. (See Madelung, “al-Mahdī”, EF, V: 1234).
who had attained the highest religious level, did not claim to be ‘supernatural’, and obviously it cannot be claimed that the Mahdi’s status could be any higher than the Prophet Muḥammad’s (peace be on him). Thus, the supernatural character of the Mahdi was rejected by these modern scholars. Among those who deny the idea of the coming of the Mahdi are some modern Muslim scholars such as ‘Abd al-Karīm al-Khaṭīb, and ‘Abd Allāh al-Sanmān. They claim that this is a supernatural idea which originally came from Christianity and Judaism and thus should not be regarded as an authentic Islamic notion.

According to the Shi’ite creed, belief in the appearance of the Mahdi is one of the fundamental principles of faith. Although the Sunnīs do not

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14 In the very early period in the history of Islam, a minor group of Muslim scholars, especially Ḥanafī scholars, denied also the appearance of the Mahdi and claimed that only Jesus (peace be on him) would come because the Mahdi and Jesus (peace be on him) share similar roles in Islamic eschatology. Therefore, according to them, there is no Mahdi but Jesus (Lā Mahdī illā ‘Īsā). [See Ibn Mājah, Sunan Ibn Mājah, Kitāb al-Fitan, Bāb Shiddat al-Zamān.] Responding to this, Ibn Sīrīn (d. 159/778), a prominent religious scholar of Bāṣrah, maintained that there would be the Mahdi and there would also be Jesus (peace be on him). After descending from heaven, Jesus (peace be on him) would pray behind the Mahdi and would support his leadership. Perhaps this explains why the founder of the Ḥanafī school of law, Abū Ḥanīfah (d. 150/767), has not mentioned the appearance of the Mahdi in his famous book, al-Fiqh al-ʿAbbar, when he listed the contents of the Islamic creed. [See Arens J. Wensinck, The Muslim Creed: Its Genesis and Historical Development (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1932), 244.] A later theologian, Sa’d al-Dīn al-Tafrāzīnī (d. 792/1389) argued that, according to the sounder view, the Mahdi will pray behind Jesus (peace be on him), for the latter, as a prophet, surpasses the former in religious rank. This view was rejected by Abū ‘l-Abbās ʿAbd Allāh bin Ḥajār al-Haythami (d. 972/1565) in favour of the view that the initial prayer of Jesus (peace be on him) behind the Mahdi was meant to signify the former’s submission to the rule of Islam, rather than the superiority of the Mahdi. [See, ʿAbd Allāh ʿAbd Allāh bin Ḥajār al-Haythami, al-Qawālīn al-Mukhtāṣar fī l-ʿĀlāmīn al-Mahdī al-Munṭazār, ed., Muhammad Zaynabūn Muhammad ʿArab (Cairo: Dār al-Salāḥīyah, 1467/1986), 30–43.] Ibn Khaḍīlūn (d. 868/1466) seems to entertain some reservations about the traditions pertaining to the appearance of the Mahdi. He says: “They have been critically discussed by those who disapprove of the matter and have often been refuted by means of certain other traditions”. One might conclude from this statement that at least some traditions concerning the Mahdi are not refuted, as he does not say that all of the traditions have been refuted. Therefore, despite the weaknesses of the traditions, the idea of the Mahdi is not something that was transplanted into Islam. Ibn Khaḍīlūn also discusses the issue of leadership in the prayer and the killing of the anti-Christ when Jesus (peace be on him) and the Mahdi meet. In fact, he is not definite about who would kill the anti-Christ. He implies this by using "or" in saying: "... or Jesus (peace be on him) will descend together with the Mahdi and help him to kill the anti-Christ and have him as the leader in his prayers". [See Ibn Khaḍīlūn, al-Muqaddimah, ed. ʿAbd al-Wahḥīd al-Wāṣī (Cairo: Lajn al-Bayn al-ʿArabî, 1965), 2: 900, 788. See also Ahmad Amin, al-Mahdī wa al-Maʿrūdawīyāt (Cairo: Dār al-Maʿārif, 1954), 39.] Here Amin asserts that the notion of Mahdi originally entered among the ranks of the Sunnīs from the Shi’ite traditions.

consider it to be a fundamental principle of faith, they believe that the Mahdi will certainly come at the end of time to redeem the world and fill it with justice, as the Prophet Muḥammad (peace be on him) once did. It can be argued that this expectation of justice was inspired by some Qur'ānic verses on the subject of hope as well as some traditions from the Prophet (peace be on him). There is little doubt that one can find roots of the Mahdi idea in the Qur'ānic verses relating to the hope for a better social order in the future for the actualization of justice and for the flowering of a perfect life of the Hereafter.

Because of the persistence of the idea of hope throughout the history of Islam, many notable persons were promoted as Mahdis. This is because the Mahdi is envisioned as a very significant figure who will bring about religious restoration. Consequently, various social and religious movements have tried to identify themselves with him. As a result, we encounter the Mahdi phenomenon from time to time in one Muslim land or the other. Several movements in Africa and India began under the leadership of Mahdi figures such as Muḥammad Ahmad, the Mahdi of Sūdān (d. 1302/1885), and Mīrāž Ghlām Ahmad of India (d. 1326/1908), who before making his more ambitious claims to prophethood, etc., declared himself to be the Mahdi.

The Concept of the Mahdi in Early Islam

Islamic concepts, as we know, are basically derived from two sources: the Qur'ān and the traditions (ahādīth). To pursue the idea of the Mahdi, both sources would need to be explored. As previously stated, the Mahdi has not been explicitly mentioned in the Qur'ān, but possibly it has been mentioned implicitly. As for traditions from the Prophet, the case is different: the Mahdi has been mentioned in several ahādīth, both sound and weak. The most authoritative sources in the corpus of Ḥadīth, the collections of al-Bukhārī and Muslim, do not mention the Mahdi by name. In Abū Dāwūd’s Sunan, however, we find the following as the title of a chapter: “Kitāb al-Mahdi” (The Book Concerning the Mahdi). The Mahdi, the caliph and īmām, despite some variations in matters of detail, have the same essential role — to overcome injustice.

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17 See Qurʾān 58: 21 and 43: 25, 28, 83.
19 For the īmām see al-Bukhārī, Ṣaḥīḥ al-Bukhārī, Kitāb al-Anbiyā’. Bāb Nuzūl ’Īsā ibn Maryam. Al-Taftāzānī interprets the īmām mentioned here as the Mahdi. See Sa’d al-Dīn al-Taftāzānī,
Other compilers of Hadīth have specifically recorded several traditions about the Mahdī in their collections. In the early period of Islam, especially in the era of civil war, there are many traditions. Some ideas about the appearance of the Mahdī are recorded in reliable Hadīth sources; others are found in less reliable sources. The persecution of the family of the Prophet led to the inflation of ṣaḥīḥ on the subject. After this period, there are not many references, in particular, devoted to the concept of Mahdī. Until the 14th century, there are some references in Ibn Khaldūn. Ibn Khaldūn, the famous historian and sociologist, claimed that the idea of the Mahdī was generally accepted by Muslims in every epoch. The essence of the idea was that at the end of time, a man from the family of the Prophet (peace be on him) will appear and will strengthen the true faith and make justice triumphant. Muslims will follow him and he will gain dominion over the world. Thereafter the Dajjal, the anti-Christ, will appear, and so will appear the other signs of the Final Hour as mentioned in the Sahīḥ collections of Hadīth, namely al-Bukhari and Muslim’s chapters on the Fītān. After the appearance of the Mahdī, Jesus (peace be on him) will descend and will kill the anti-Christ.

The later interpretations of the ṣaḥīḥ further clarify the idea of the Mahdī. They indicate the time and even the location of his appearance as well as the socio-political situation obtaining at the time of his appearance, namely, that there will be moral degeneracy and social and political disorder. Similarly, the physical appearance of the Mahdī has been described in detail. He will have brown eyes, teeth of extreme whiteness, a beauty mark on his cheek, and will be born in Madīnah of a slave-girl. There has been some controversy as regards the place of his appearance, but Morocco, Kūfah, and Damascus are mentioned among the possible places.

The Mahdī in the Corpus of Hadīth

A famous tradition going back to Ibn Mas‘ūd explicitly emphasizes the


20 See for instance the collections of Ahmad b. Ḥanbal (d. 241/857), Ibn Mājah (d. 273/887), al-Tirmidhī (d. 279/892), Abū Dāwūd al-Ṣaḥīḥī (d. 275/889), Ahmad al-Bazzār (d. 292/904), Abū Yūsuf al-Mawṣīlī (d. 307/919), al-Ṭabarānī (d. 360/971), Ḥākim al-Nisabūrī (d. 431/1040).

21 ‘Abd al-Rahmān ibn Khaldūn, Al-Muqaddimah, 2: 591–92. For these traditions, see Muslim, Sahīḥ Muslim, Kitāb al-Fītan wa Ashrāṭ al-Sā‘ah, Bāb Fathi Qutṣanṭiniyyah wa Khurūj al-Dajjal wa Nuzūl Ijā’ ibn Maryam.

similarity between the Mahdi and the Prophet Muhammad (peace be on him). According to this tradition, the Prophet said: “If the world had no more than one day remaining, God would make that day last in order to send a man from my family, whose name will be the same as my name, and the name of his father will be the same as the name of my father”. While in another version of the same tradition, the establishment of justice has been emphasized. The emphasis in the present hadith is on the Mahdi as being one of the offspring of the Prophet (peace be on him). It is also narrated that ‘Ali, referring to his son, Hasan (d. 61/68C), once said:

This son of mine is a sayyid, as he was called by the Messenger of God. From his offspring, there will come forth a man who will be called by the name of the Prophet (Muhammad), one who will not resemble him physically, but will resemble him in character. ‘Ali then mentioned the prophesy: “He will fill the earth with justice”.

In another hadith, the Prophet (peace be on him) specifically mentions the Mahdi as a member of his family. “The Mahdi is from us (minnā ahl al-bayt). God will give him success in one night.”

While in these traditions the Prophet (peace be on him) emphasizes that the Mahdi would be one of his descendants, in other traditions one finds emphasis on the physical attributes of the Mahdi and the span of his reign. He reportedly said: “The Mahdi has a bald forehead and an aquiline nose; he will fill the earth with equity and justice as it had been filled with injustice and oppression. He will rule for seven years.”

According to a tradition on the same subject, the expectation of the Mahdi’s coming is “good news” for Muslims. It is reported that some Companions of the Prophet (peace be on him) became afraid of the trouble that might ensue after the latter’s demise. As they asked him about the coming trials, the promise of the Mahdi was a reassuring answer. The Prophet (peace be on him) said: “At the end of my community, there will be a caliph who will not count money, but will distribute it without counting.”

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23 Abu Dawud al-Sajistani, Sunan Abu Dawud, Kitab al-Mahdi, hadith no. 3.
24 Ibid., hadith no. 9. Rosenthal has, in my opinion, given an erroneous translation of this passage, perhaps confusing the word khalgan, which means physically, with khulugan, which means morally and spiritually. See the Arabic edition of Al-Muqaddimah, 2: 900. For the English translation see 2: 163-4.
26 Abu Dawud al-Sajistani, Sunan Abu Dawud, Kitab al-Mahdi, hadith no. 6.
27 Muslim, Sahih Muslim, Kitab al-Fitan wa Ashrata al-Sa’ah, Bab la taqum al-Sa’ah Hattah yamurr al-Rajul. See also Ibn Majah, Sunan Ibn Majah, Kitab al-Fitan, Bab Khurtaj al-Mahdi. Ahmad b.
It is generally believed that the Mahdi will appear at a time of anarchy and chaos that will precede the end of the world. One of the most exhaustive traditions about the Mahdi is narrated by 'Ali, who states the following:

The Mahdi is the one who will appear at the end of time when people will be afraid to mention the name of God. God will bring people who are scattered like stray clouds together to follow the Mahdi, who will unite them. They will be neither sad nor happy over anyone who joins them. Their number will be like the number of the fighters in the Battle of Badr. They will also be like the number of the companions of Saul, who crossed the river with him.

A tradition about a group that will keep to the path of righteousness is considered to refer to the community of the Mahdi. The Prophet explains: “There will be a community, following the way of truth, until the Day of Judgment. (Lā tāzāḥu ta' ḥatūn ṭābirīna ‘alā l-ḥaqq ḥattā ya'iti ‘l-lāb bi amrīhi).”

Interpretation of the Mahdi by Ibn al-'Arabi

Some Sufis, such as Ibn al-'Arabi (d. 637/1240), go further by asserting that one Qur'anic verse refers to the emergence of the Mahdi in messianic terms by presenting him as one of the signs of al-Qiyāmah. Like some earlier Sufis, Ibn al-'Arabi accepted the concept of the Mahdi. However, his opinion about the Mahdi is completely different from the classical-traditionalist belief. According to Ibn al-'Arabi, the Mahdi is a very powerful spiritual person. The mystery of the Mahdi's power lies in his faith and sincerity. The Mahdi, as a follower of the Prophet (peace be on him), will not be defeated, for the prophets have never been defeated. Ibn al-'Arabi thought that there could not be any weakness in the hearts of the Mahdi's followers. Since the Mahdi would know this, he would be the most sincere person among the people of his time. He would use the most holy and beautiful names of God in his prayers; and with

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1 Hanbal, Musnad Ahmad, Kitāb Bāqī Musnad al-Mukthirīn, Bāb Musnad Abī Sa'id al-Khudrī and Bāb Musnad Jābir ibn 'Abd Allāh.
4 Mudīm, Sāḥib Mudīm, Kitāb al-Imārah, Bāb lā tāzāḥu Ṭā'īfātun min Ummati. This hadith has been quoted and interpreted by Bediuzzaman Said Nursi (d. 1379/1960) in his writings called Risale-i Nur. See Bediuzzaman Said Nursi, Risale-i Nur Kulliyatı (Istanbul: Nesil Yayınları, 1999), 2: 1381.
the names of God, he and his followers would be able to achieve many
things.\(^\text{32}\)

Ibn al-'Arabi focused not only on the person of the Mahdi, but also on his
followers and helpers. He described the would-be Mahdi as a descendant of
Hasan, the grandson of the Prophet Muhammad (peace be on him), and as the
“seal of the saints” (\(khāṯam al-awliyā\)), just as the Prophet Muhammad (peace
be on him) was the “seal of the prophets” (\(khāṯam al-anbiyā\)). The coming of
the Mahdi, in Ibn al-'Arabi’s opinion, would be one of the signs preceding
Doomsday. Also, certain historical events would occur during the time of the
Mahdi, including the conquest of Rome and Constantinople and the biggest
ever war. But Ibn al-'Arabi, however, does not mention many specific details
about this war. It seems that he had a vision regarding the length of the
expected Mahdi’s rule and the number of his helpers, but he failed to reveal
them due to what he terms as a covenant with God. The Mahdi, furthermore,
does not become angry except for God’s sake. Even when he is angry, he
never transgresses justice. He is infallible in his intellectual legal endeavour
(\(ijtiḥād\)) for which he need not have recourse to analogical reasoning (\(qiyās\)),
and the jurists (\(fuqahā\)) are his opponents. He represents and brings the mercy
of God to humankind just as the Prophet Muhammad (peace be on him) did.\(^\text{33}\)

Thus, Ibn al-'Arabi’s explanation of the coming of the Mahdi, differs
from the general Sunnī view. Most Muslims believe that the Mahdi will
establish justice by means of his physical prowess and military strength,
whereas Ibn al-'Arabi believes that the power of the Mahdi lies in a strong
faith in God and honesty. In the opinion of Ibn al-'Arabi, the Mahdi would
not be a political ruler, although the majority of Muslims perceive him to be
so. Also, Ibn al-'Arabi foretells a period of peace and tranquility within the
hearts of the believers at the time of the Mahdi. Therefore, Ibn al-'Arabi
believes that the Mahdi can be a figure outside the political arena.

As the more traditional, mainstream Sunnī view, there persists a
significant controversy regarding the origin of the idea of the Mahdi. To
encompass these controversies is, however, beyond the scope of this paper.
Instead, we shall now turn to a study of the common features of the notion of
the Mahdi in Sunnī Islam.

The Mahdī Figures in Muslim History

Some outstanding persons is the course of Islam’s history were conceived from
time to time as Mahdīs. Some of them, of their own accord, to be Mahdis,
whereas others were promoted as such by their followers and admirers. Perhaps the first claim came from Mukhtār al-Thaqafī (d. 67/687), who proclaimed that Ibn al-Ḥanafiyyah (d. 80/799), the third son of ‘Ali b. Abī Ṭālib, was the Mahdi. Mukhtār claimed that he himself was a prophet and, by implication, that he was the real Mahdi. Some even considered him to be a false prophet. Mukhtār also maintained that he was the expected messiah, but when he saw that no one followed him, he tried to change his position by claiming that Ibn al-Ḥanafiyyah was the expected Mahdi on account of his descent from the Prophet Muḥammad (peace be on him). He also claimed that the nature of his relationship with Ibn al-Ḥanafiyyah was that of Aaron’s relationship with Moses. In this regard he cited the following verse about him in the Qur’ān: “We gave Moses the book [the Torah] and appointed Aaron together with him as his helper” (25: 30).

In the eighth century, ‘Umar ibn ‘Abd al-‘Azīz was held by some to be the expected Mahdi. During his reign (98-101/717-720), he was famous for his tolerance toward the Shi‘ites and his just policies toward non-Muslims (dhimmis). People saw the attributes of the expected Mahdi as a religious and political ruler in the personage of this pious caliph. Some went as far as to fabricate traditions to support their claim of being Mahdi. For example, in the year 129/747, Ḥārīth b. al-Shurayḥ claimed that he was the Mahdi. He fabricated a tradition about himself: “A believer [mu‘min] will appear and his name will be Ḥārīth.”

In the same century, during the early ‘Abbāsid period, the expectations about the appearance of the expected Mahdi were quite widespread and it was common to address the ruler as “Mahdi.” For example, the first ‘Abbāsid caliph, Abū ʿAbd Allāh al-Saffāh (r. 131-136/749-754), was addressed as the Mahdi of the Ḥāshimites. The second ‘Abbāsid caliph, Abū Ja‘far al-Manṣūr (136-158/754-775), was also called the Mahdi. He named his son Muḥammad al-Mahdī, hoping that he would be accepted by people as the expected Mahdi.

Coming to the twelfth century, in North Africa the Berber religious and military leader, ‘Abd Allāh ibn Tūmart (d. 524/1130), was promoted as the expected Mahdi. He established his movement on the principle of

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34 Sa‘d Muḥammad Ḥasan, al-Maḥdiyyah fī ʿIslām, 179.
35 Ibid.
36 On this question see Goitein, Studies in Islamic History and Institutions (Leiden: Brill, 1968), 194-6. See also al-Baghūdī, al-Fārsī Bayn al-Fārsī (Cairo: Maktābat Maṣbīḥ, n.d.), 38-41.
37 See for example, Bediuzzaman Sa‘d Nūrsī, Risāla-i Nur, 1: 393.
"commanding the good and prohibiting the evil (al-amūr ʿl al-maʿrīf wa al-nahi ʿan al-munkar).\textsuperscript{39}

In India, the arrival of the second millennium of the Islamic era triggered popular expectations of the coming of a mahdī or nījādīd who would establish justice, revive the faith, and lead the people according to God's guidance. One such figure was Sayyid Muhammad Jaunpūrī (846-909/1443-1504), who had a number of influential disciples during the reign of Akbar (963-1013/1556-1605).\textsuperscript{40} There were also Mahdī movements — Maḥdawīyyah and Raṣhānīyyah — each claiming that its respective leader was the Mahdī. The Maḥdawīyyah was founded by the above-mentioned Sayyid Muḥammad, who became influential as Mahdī by the end of the fifteenth century CE. He declared his claim to be the Mahdī in (900/1495) during his journey to Makkah for pilgrimage. Upon his return to Ahmadabad in India in 1499, he reasserted this claim and incurred the hostility of religious scholars. Ali al-Muttaqī al-Hindi's (975/1567) book about the signs of the Mahdī was written specifically to debunk the claims of Sayyid Muḥammad.\textsuperscript{41} The other movement, Raṣhānīyyah, was started in the sixteenth century by Bayāzīd ibn ʿAbd Allāh Anṣārī (d. 979/1572), who was associated in his early life with Hindu yogis and claimed to be a Mahdī.\textsuperscript{42} These Indian Mahdīst movements differed, however, from those in Africa. For the most part, the former did not believe in using power to bring about justice, although that is often perceived to be one of the tasks that would be performed by the Mahdī.

Important Mahdīst movements emerged in the mid-nineteenth century in different parts of the Islamic world. Perhaps the anti-colonial movements wanted to be perceived as guided by a messianic saviour or reformer. 'Uthmān dan Fodio (d. 1232/1817) in West Africa, the Bāb Mīrzā 'Ali Muḥammad (d. 1266/1849) in Persia, and the Muḥammad Ahmad in the Sudan, were all very powerful leaders who were promoted by their followers as Mahdīs.\textsuperscript{43}

\textsuperscript{43} There is no doubt that the most influential person to promote himself as the Mahdī was the Mahdī of Sudan. He formed an army against the British and became the head of the state for a dozen years. In the year 1881, he proclaimed himself to be the expected Mahdī. During his fight against the British army, General Charles George Gordon was captured and killed in Khartoum, the capital city of the Sudan. The movement of the Sudanese Mahdī was also directed against Muslim rulers and even the scholars ('ulāmā) of al-Azhar, who were generally against the Sūfīs.
In Punjab, towards the end of the nineteenth century, a new group (which was quite different than the previous mahdist movement, in so far as the claim not only asserted that he was the Mahdi, but his claim was to be a prophet, and even an incarnation of Jesus. The group) flourished under the leadership of Mīrzā Ghulām Ahmad Qādiyānī, the founder of the Ahmadiyyah Movement. Although at first Ghulām Ahmad opposed the British, in the early part of his life, he later reconciled with them. In 1889, Ghulām Ahmad claimed to be both al-Masih (Jesus, the Messiah) and Mahdi. In 1904, he claimed to be an incarnation of the Hindu god Krishna, as well as Jesus (peace be on him), returned to earth, and at the same time a re-manifestation of Muhammad (peace be on him). Not surprisingly, he claimed that God sent revelation directly to him.44

Mahdis have continued to pose problems well into the twentieth century. Even some Muslim political leaders of the century came to be considered as Mahdis. One of the scholars of al-Azhar University in Egypt claimed that Jamāl ‘Abd al-Nāṣir (d. 1972) was the expected Mahdi. Addressing him, he is quoted as follows: “In your reign, government is by consultation. Wealth is common. Human beings are equal. You are sent to us by God as the Mahdi to fight against oppression and to bring about justice on Earth”.45

In 1979, an important event occurred in the Muslim world — the occupation of the Ka‘bah. It was an attempt made by the an influential Najdi religious personality, Juhaymān al-Utaybi. Juhaymān, along with some of his followers, used the Ka‘bah as the staging-ground to proclaim his Mahdīship in expectation of a messianic war. He did not claim mahdīship for himself but for another person. As reported by Le Monde, some students at the University of Riyadh wrote on the wall of their university: “Our martyr, Juhaymān, why did you not destroy the palaces? The war is beginning”.46 Seeing the appearance of this example, one cannot help but predict new figures arising in the future, each claiming to be the expected Mahdi.

He asserted that the Prophet Muhammad (peace be on him) had appeared to him in a vision and had appointed him as a leader of jihād against the non-believers. He also claimed direct descent from the Prophet on both sides of his family and maintained that he received revelation directly from God as to the prohibition of alcohol and cigarettes. See Ahmad Amin, al-Mahdi wa al-Mahdawīyyah, 78–9.

46 Ibid., 183.
The Intellectual Environment of the Mahdi Discussion

Certain factors have played a vital role in shaping the conceptions about the Mahdi's personality. The debate on theological and ideological problems in early Islamic history had split up people into different groups in different cities such as Baghdad and Damascus. These two cities in particular were rivals, perhaps because of the struggle between two important figures — 'Ali and Mu'awiyyah. Damascus was the headquarters of Mu'awiyyah, while Kūfah and indirectly Baghdad was the headquarters of 'Ali and his supporters. In early Islamic history, one could always find a person from any religious or sectarian position with whom to argue. The society was culturally very rich. Individuals could be found to discuss practically any religious sect, including Hinduism, Zoroastrianism, Manichaeism, Christianity, etc. There were also many themes which were discussed, including the concept of the Mahdi. This idea was not strange to many Christians who were part of this society. The ideological and theological trends of the leaders and intellectuals had doubtlessly already impacted the ideas about the expected Mahdi. In some cases, each group of people may have thought of its own leader as the Mahdi and may have applied to him the attributes mentioned in the Prophetic traditions. Alternatively, they may have made up traditions and then applied them to their own leaders. The social and cultural environment also influenced the different conceptions regarding the physical attributes of the Mahdi.

It would be inaccurate to say that the idea of the Mahdi has no relation with any religion other than Islam. The messianic ideas of both Judaism and Christianity possibly influenced the Muslims' ideas of the Mahdi. An important figure in this regard was Ka'b al-Aḥbār (d. 10/632), a Jewish scholar who converted to Islam and lived in Madīnah. He is said to have narrated some traditions bearing on eschatological events with reference to the Mahdi. Even in regard to Islam's inception, Ka'b is reported to have said that Muḥammad b. al-Ḥanāfīyyah was the Mahdi. This reference gives us some clue as to the historical roots of Mahdism and the influence of Ka'b and other pre-Islamic scholars. As the famous scholar and interpreter of the Qur'ān, Muḥammad ibn Aḥmad al-Qurṭūbī (d. 671/1273) has stated, there was a theological competition between Muslims and non-Muslims in the early centuries of Islam. Imām al-Bāṣir, the prominent Shi'ite imām (d. 117/736) is reported to have said to the People of the Book: “For our Mahdi's appearance, there are two signs that have never existed since God created the heavens and

the earth. One of them is the solar eclipse in the middle of Ramaḍān, and the second is the lunar eclipse at the beginning of Ramaḍān.⁴⁸

Here, the term, “our Mahdi” presupposes the existence of other Mahdis and implies the idea of the existence of “their Mahdis”. Therefore, it seems evident that there must have been some discussion between Muslims and the People of the Book on the identity of the messianic figure. Most likely, each group was proud of the role and qualities of its own Mahdi.

A tradition in al-Bukhārī’s al-Jāmiʿ al-Ṣaḥīḥ also reflects the influence of Jews and Christians on Muslim society. This tradition is narrated by Abū Hurayrah, a famous Companion of the Prophet, who expresses his grievance with the People of the Book: “The People of the Book were reading the Torah in Hebrew and interpreting it in Arabic for Muslims”.⁴⁹ Although the five books of Moses in the Torah do not explicitly discuss the Messiah, it is possible to say that the Talmudic interpretation of the messianic figure, the saviour of the Jewish people in the Hebrew Bible, was translated into Arabic by scholars who had converted to Islam. This idea was thereafter transmitted further on by Muslim narrators without there being any objection from other Muslims, out of respect for their scholarly position. They were respectful because of their knowledge. Their knowledge was not refined by the Islamic tradition and the Qur’anic teachings. Different ideas and some strange beliefs came via these convert scholars to the teachings of Islam, at least as far as messianics are concerned. This seems to be borne out by the following complaint of ‘Abd Allāh ibn al-‘Abbās, (d. 68/687), a famous Companion and cousin of the Prophet:

Why do you ask the People of the Book about some issues despite the fact that the Book that was sent to your messenger [the Prophet Muhammad] is the most recent? The Book that we read will never become old. Your Book [the Qur’ān], tells you that the People of the Book have changed the Book of God. They wrote the book by their own hands and said: This is, from God.⁵⁰

On the one hand, the debate about the expected saviour began to take place, and on the other the persecution of the family of the Prophet (peace be on him) continued. In both the Umayyad and ‘Abbāsid periods, members of

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⁴⁹ Al-Bukhārī, Ṣaḥīḥ al-Bukhārī, Kitāb Tafsīr al-Qur’ān, Bāb qulū Ḥumayd bi Allāh wa mā unzila ilaynā; Kitāb al-ʾaṣām bi ‘l-ʾKitāb wa al-Sunnah, Bāb Qawl al-Nabiyya la taš’alū Ahl al-Kitāb ‘an Shayh; Kitāb al-Tawḥīd, Bāb mā yajūz min Tafsīr al-Tawrah wa Ghayrīh min Kurūb Allāh.
the Prophet's family and their followers were persecuted by the rulers, causing
them considerable suffering. At its height, Ḥusayn ibn 'Ali, the youngest
grandson of the Prophet, was put to the sword. There is no doubt that this
persecution nurtured the idea of the expected Mahdi in the Islamic community
to bring justice to the society, as traditions regarding such incidents were
widely spread among the Muslims, especially among those who suffered
persecution. These circumstances also led to the creation of some fabricated
traditions as well. Therefore, we have both kinds of traditions, in some
instances, traditions even got mixed. In a tradition attributed to the
Companion 'Abd Allāh b. Mas'ūd (d. 31/652), the Prophet (peace be on him)
is stated to be perturbed by the future suffering of his family:

While we were with the Messenger of God, there came some youth of the Banū
Hāshim. When he saw them, his eyes flowed with tears and his complexion
changed. We said, "O Messenger of God, we have for some time seen in your face
that something has happened that you disliked". He said, "God has chosen for us,
the people of my house, the hereafter in preference to this world. The people of
my house shall meet misfortune, punishment, and persecution until people come
from the east with black banners. They will ask for charity, but it will not be
given. Then they will fight and be victorious. Now they will be given what they
had asked for, yet they will not accept it, but will finally hand the earth over to a
man of my family. He will fill it with justice as they had filled it with injustice.
Whoever of you lives to witness that, let him go there even if by crawling his
way over the snow".

The suffering of the Prophet's family in early Islam caused much pain to a
very large number of Muslims. As a result, they were psychologically prepared
to welcome the rise of the person who would rescue them from persecution.
They believed that a strong ruler, the Mahdi, would come to their rescue, and
they applied what they found in the traditions as regards the physical features
of the person, while adding details according to their own preferences. They
added to the traditions the attributes of their leader, making the newer
traditions longer than the earlier ones.

The Mahdi as an Expression of Communal Social Hope

The expectations of the appearance of the Mahdi developed in the 18th and
19th centuries, when Muslim countries were occupied by Western Colonial
powers. The invasion of Egypt was a cornerstone in this development. The
fervour of Islamic thinkers in this direction was aroused as a result of

Napoleon's invasion of Egypt in 1798. This resulted in the French occupation of Egypt that lasted only three years, but which nevertheless left an indelible mark upon the Islamic intelligentsia. This was because Cairo, which then rivalled both Baghdad and Istanbul, was one of the key centres of Islamic civilization. Egypt's occupation by Napoleon had the force of a catalytic earthquake in the world of Islam. As Seyyed Hossein Nasr states: "It was the cosmic crisis in Muslims' mind," which triggered different eschatological views and concerns among Muslims. Its end-analysis was a result of three possible logical conclusions: First, that it was the end of the world. Several books about the signs of the Final Hour were written by an assortment of scholars. The *ahadîth* about the end of the world were also brought together and published. Second, some scholars claimed that the fall of Egypt showed that while Islam had been relevant in the seventh century, it was no longer suited to the eighteenth century in which they lived. Third, another group referred to the early Muslims and emphasised how strongly God had supported them. Had the Muslims of the time been good Muslims, they contended, God would have supported them as well. They claimed that Egypt had fallen because of the Muslims' failure to duly practice Islam.

Each of these three trends manifested itself in the fourteenth century of Islamic history/twentieth century of the Gregorian calendar. The first possibility led to the expectation of the Mahdi. The proponents of this attitude believed that it was the time for the Mahdi's advent and that he would necessarily come and restore justice and righteousness in the world. The second idea led to both modernism and liberalism in the Islamic world. The proponents of this trend blamed Islam for what had happened and invited people to free themselves from religion's hold and to embrace a modern and secular philosophy of life. The third idea led to the rise of radical movements like that of Muhammed ibn 'Abd al-Wahhab (d. 1206/1792), the leader of a puritanical group that originated in central Arabia.

It was ultimately in the backdrop of these social conditions following Egypt's foreign invasion that the Prophet's traditions on eschatological

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53 S.H. Nasr, in his lecture "Introduction to Islam" at George Washington University, 24 June, 1997. The three categories of derived eschatological and modernist views resulting from Egypt's fall mentioned here also come from this lecture.
matters were emphatically put forth and variously interpreted. It was a time that resembled the turbulent times of the early period of Islam in which the Muslim society was convulsed. A similar situation was breaking on the shores of the second half of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, the thirteenth century of the Islamic calendar.

It is evident that social and psychological factors contributed to people's expectations about the Mahdi and to the envisioning and characterizing of his personage. It is evident that socio-economic factors affected the various interpretations of the Mahdi's physical characteristics and personality. People were waiting for a person who could restore the power of the Muslims and reconquer Egypt. Such expectations instilled in Muslims the hope for a better future. Regardless of the authenticity or otherwise of the traditions cited on the question, the idea of the Mahdi doubtless had a significant impact on Muslims: It raised and sustained their morale. It generated among them the confidence that eventually the wrongdoers and tyrants (such as Napoleon) would be punished, and justice would ultimately prevail.

In such crisis-ridden historical times, the idea of the Mahdi had the potential to sustain a people overwhelmed with despair, a people who felt helpless and were morally perplexed and emotionally distressed. Let us imagine for a moment that the Muslim society was devoid of the idea of Mahdi, and then consider what might have happened? Thanks to the Mahdi idea, people felt sure that God would work through a rescuer to protect and redeem them. This served to raise their hopes, and encouraged them to act. In our view, human morality and spirituality would have been crushed out under the dead weight of hopelessness. In other words, hope lifts the spirit and morale of humankind. The spread of hopelessness is dangerous to the health of all kinds of societies, including the Muslim society.

Hopelessness is considered to be one of the most socially dangerous illnesses, and it cannot be treated except by injecting a strong feeling of hope. There is a vital relationship between hope and religion. As we have mentioned earlier, hope is just one aspect of the religious phenomenon. If one looks at history, one will see that humankind cannot survive without hope, for life without hope is utterly unbearable. The hope inspired by religion is especially an antidote in circumstances when everything around seems gloomy, when grief and hardships disturb the equilibrium of people's lives; in fact, and they ravage them physically, psychologically and morally. In such circumstances, hope intertwined with faith, offers the necessary strength both to individuals and collectivities to survive the crises they encounter. As a contemporary
Islamic scholar has said: “Faith is power; the person who has real faith can challenge the whole universe”.55

Indeed, hope is one of the most significant virtues embedded in the Islamic paradigm. Both the Qur’an and the Hadith set forth hope as an indispensably desirable attribute. This means that to continue to look forward to the eternal world, or to think about a better life, is not a form of escape or wishful thinking. Were we to study history, we would find that the people who entertain such ideas are able to have impact on history. They were precisely those who were animated with hope for a better life in this world and in the hereafter.

In several verses of the Qur’an as well as in ahādīth we find that a great stress has been placed on the idea of hope. For instance, in a tradition recorded by Ibn Hānbal, the Prophet (peace be on him) states that the appearance of the Mahdi is an announcement of good news: “I give good tidings of the Mahdi”.56 There is also a hadith about the mujiyaddid “renewer”,57 who will appear at the advent of every century, embodying the hope expressed by the Prophet (peace be on him) that God will never leave the community of believers without guidance; that He will support it with distinguished religious figures possessed of extraordinary moral and spiritual strength.

According to the Qur’an, God certainly puts people to different tests of fear, hunger and loss of property, but they must remain full of hope and be patient: “… and give good news to those who patiently endure” (Qur’an 2: 155). On the whole, the Qur’an teaches Muslims that they should not succumb to the illusion that they would not be faced with difficult times. For this is the nature of life: ease and hardship go hand in hand.58 But the faithful should remain optimistic about a good end even in the most difficult times, because of their trust in God’s promise to them. In this regard, the Qur’an makes mention of the experience of the prophets who came before the time of the Prophet Muhammad (peace be on him). “Rejected were the prophets before you with patience and constancy they bore their rejection and their persecution until Our aid did reach them” (Qur’an 6: 34). These prophets were always hopeful about God’s aid and God never abandoned them. God never leaves His people who struggle against evil in a state of despair. The Qur’an mentions the story of the struggle between Ţalūt (Saul), the leader of the

56 Ahmad Ibn Hānbal, Musnad Ahmad, Kitāb Bāq Musnad al-Mukhthirin, Bāb Musnad Abī Sa’īd al-Khudri.
57 Abū Dāwūd al-Sajdrānī, Sunan Abī Dāwūd, Kitāb al-Malāḥim, Bāb mā yu’dhkar fi Qara al-Mi’āh.
58 See Qur’an 94: 6.
believers, and Jālūt (Goliath), the leader of the non-believers. The followers of Tālūt complained that they had no power against Jālūt and his army. According to the Qurʿān: “Those who were certain that they would meet their Lord said: ‘How often has a small party vanquished a numerous host by Allah’s permission? And Allah is with those who patiently endure!’”. They were full of hope when they asked God to grant them patience against non-believers: “Our Lord! Pour down upon us patience, and make our steps firm and assist us against the unbelieving people” (Qurʾān 2: 50). The story ends with the believers defeating Jālūt and his army despite the believers’ apparent lack of power.

The Qurʾān also narrates the story of the prophet Yaʿqūb (Jacob) when he had lost his son, Yūsuf (Joseph). According to the Qurʾān, Yaʿqūb tells his sons: “O my sons! Go and inquire about Yūsuf and his brother, and never give up hope of Allah’s mercy. Certainly none despairs of Allah’s mercy, except those who disbelieve” (Qurʾān 12: 87). Here the Qurʾān clearly indicates that hopelessness is a characteristic of non-believers. Despair is one of the major sins against God in Islam (as it is in Christianity), for it is anathetical to trust in God. Hopelessness, as we have just noted, is one of the attributes of non-believers, and as the Qurʾān states elsewhere: “And who despairs of the Mercy of his Lord except those who are astray”? (Qurʾān 15: 56; 41: 49).

Hopefulness, on the contrary, is one of the attributes of believers and one of the principles of true faith. The Qurʾān mentions the people who trust in God’s infinite power: “They are those who, on being told: ‘Your enemies have mustered a great force against you: fear them,’ grew more tenacious in their faith and replied: ‘God’s help is sufficient for us. He is the best protector!’” (Qurʾān 3: 173). God’s power is more than enough to protect the faithful against difficulties. Furthermore, God mentions the ultimate end of the believers who have been persecuted in the way of God:

Those who fled and were turned out of their homes and persecuted for following My way and who fought and were slain, I will most certainly bring them into gardens beneath which rivers flow; a reward from God, and with God is yet a better reward (Qurʾān 3: 195).

The Qurʾān mentions that natural disasters like droughts and earthquakes, which cause hopelessness, can also be remedied by hope provided by God: “And it is He Who sends down the rain after they have despaired” (Qurʾān 42: 28) Another verse says: “O My servants who have acted extravagantly against their own souls, do not despair of the mercy of Allah” (Qurʾān 39: 53). For the faithful, therefore, there should be no reason to lose hope: “We gave you good news with truth, therefore be not despairing”
(Qur'an 39: 33). When the Prophet (peace be on him) was in a difficult state on account of his people's denial of and hostility to him and his message, God gave him hope by mentioning the story of prophets before him: "... and indeed many messengers were mocked at before you but I granted respite to those who disbelieved, and finally I punished them. Then how terrible was My punishment!" (Qur'an 15: 55). For it is God's plan to make the faithful ultimately overcome the non-believers.

The story of the Prophet's entry into Makkah also illustrates the nature and importance the idea of hope in Islam. The Prophet (peace be on him) had a dream in which he saw that he had entered the Sacred Mosque in Makkah, his birthplace, the city from which he had been forced to emigrate to Madinah. Most likely it was for this reason — God's promise conveyed to him through dreams and visions — that the Prophet (peace be on him) always remained full of hope. When he was in Madinah he saw in his dream that he would enter Makkah in the state of peace. The Qur'an mentions this event, confirming that God fulfilled the Prophet's dream:

Truly did God fulfill the vision for His messenger: You shall enter the Sacred Mosque, if Allah wills, with minds secure, heads shaved, hair cut short, and without fear. For He knows what you know not, and He granted, besides this, a speedy victory (Qur'an 12: 32).

This good news was given at to the Prophet (peace be on him) at a time when he and his Companions were considerably few, at the time before the Truce of Hudaybiyyah. For this reason the Prophet accepted the conditions that the Makkkan idol worshippers imposed on him. He was hopeful that eventually the Makkkan idol worshippers would embrace the truth. Despite all indications to the contrary the God strengthened the Prophet (peace be on him) and his followers with at the time hope and promised them that they would enter Makkah as victors (Qur'an 48: 27). Though the Prophet's Companions were not very optimistic, the Prophet (peace be on him) himself was quite hopeful because of his total trust in God's promise.

The Qur'an commands people to contemplate the ultimate end met by the nations that opposed God and followed evil ways. They should do so because the example of those nation shows that the ultimate victory belongs to God and to the faithful. The Qur'an also brings to our attention the state of helplessness of the prophets which had resulted from the fact that their people rejected them, called them liars, and fiercely opposed them. All this lasted until the help of God arrived: "And when at length Our apostles despair and thought they were denied. Our help came down to them, delivering whom We pleased" (Qur'an 12: 115).
In fact, sociologists agree about the importance of hope both for an individual and a society. Hope in individual or social life is like a sound set of reflexes in organisms. As the French social scientist Émile Durkheim (d. 1917) explains, a society without hope would be a monster incapable of living. According to Durkheim an actual society can no more do without this collective ideation than an organism can do without reflexes. It would be no exaggeration to claim that the idea of hope is planted in human nature. As the religious and mystic poet Angelus Silesius (d. 1677) says: “Hope is a rope which rescues people.” The idea of the holy rope, which is the “rope of God”, in the Qur’anic terms, is an important theme in the Qur’an. Holding fast to this rope would lead the believers to their triumph. God enjoins people to “hold fast to the rope of God (habb Allah) and be not divided” (Qur’an 3: 103). It seems evident that the idea of paradise and a happy future also provides hope. This strong hope gives people ease of heart in their individual and social life. This idea is accepted as a sociological fact: “Periodically humanity marches toward an ideal world with infinite tentative efforts.” The idea of the expected Mahdi could then be considered a collective social hope within Islamic history.

Some psychologists believe that “hope is a dream of an awakened man.” They claim, however, that dreaming is absolutely essential for the health of the individual and a decrease in dreaming is the sign of serious illness. Hopeful people suffer fewer illnesses such as stress and heart attacks. Since hope is the dream of the awakened, any society without a dream of better life and without any hope for a better future is seriously ill. In his commentary on Durkheim’s work, Desroche offers a crucial point as regards finding hope (in the general sense of the word) through religion:

Religion is not only a system of ideas, it is above all a system of forces. Religious life implies the existence of very specific forces. Recalling a well-known phrase, I will restrict myself to saying that they are the forces that can move mountains. By that, I mean that when man lives a religious life, he believes he is participating in a force that dominates him, but which at the same time supports him and raises him above himself.

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60 Ibid.
62 Ibid., 9.
63 Ibid., 15.
64 Ibid., 16.
This understanding of the power of hope helps us to comprehend the importance of the idea of the Mahdi in the early period of Islamic history. The Mahdi debates and discussions that happened after the civil war, in the early period of Islam, promoted ideals about the Mahdi. Muslims of the third century of Islam were looking for an alternative social environment more in tune with the ideals propounded by their faith. This search for a better society or government has sustained Muslims in the past, continues to sustain them at the present, and is likely to do so in the future as well. Islam never accepted the idea of fatalism as a social reality. People attempted, instead, to change their social environment, and when they could not achieve the desired change, they looked forward to a messianic figure, the Mahdi, to make the dream of an ideal social order come true. A society based on justice is one of the objectives of the Qur’ān, with or without a messianic figure. Therefore, quite naturally the Muslims’ belief in the expected Mahdi was influenced, at least in part, by the Qur’ānic teachings. Future hope is aimed at “changing the present” and it does so by pointing to a “past model ideal”. Therefore, when a “Mahdi” comes forward and proclaims that the preponderance of justice is around the corner, he is really saying that the future is now the present, and the ideal past will become the future. Therefore, one can conclude that the essential model and basis for the Mahdi is actually the Prophet (peace be on him) himself. All Caliphs imitated the Prophet (peace be on him). He represented a model for the rescuer. This messianic figure has been known as the Mahdi, and has also been identified with the Prophet (peace be on him), with regard to the similarity of names between the Mahdi and the Prophet’s father. Perhaps for this reason many claimants of the Mahdi status generally proclaimed themselves to be Mahdis after returning from Makkah.

It is impossible to claim that all traditions attributed to the Prophet Muhammad (peace be on him) in this regard are indeed from him. This is primarily because the transmitters who narrate the ṣaḥāḥah do so mostly in general terms. The traditions in question, therefore, are not the exact words of the Prophet (peace be on him). From this we may understand that the narrators most likely described what they understood from a ḥadīth, rather than that they attempted a verbatim narration of the sayings of the Prophet (peace be on him). As a result, the narrator’s personal inclinations could have become mixed with the Prophet’s words. Therefore, the soundness of the traditions concerning the Mahdi is not on the level of the traditions pertaining to such matters as daily prayers or other rituals. As far as the Shi’ite creed is concerned, belief in Mahdi is central to it. Even though the Mahdi idea among

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the Sunnis is not as strong as among the Shi'ites, it is still a part of the Sunni creed and is supported by Prophetic traditions. On the other hand, there is no clear conception of the Mahdi among the Sunni Muslims. Sunni Muslims expect the advent of the Mahdi, but there is no specific frame for his picture.

Even though the Sunnis and Shi'is are not in complete agreement, I would argue that because of the Qur'an confirms the ultimate triumph of good over evil, this provides the basis for the continuing expectation of the Mahdi. The universal idea of hope in Islam is inherent in the Qur'an and is embodied in the figure of the Mahdi. The expectation of the Mahdi has provided solace and strength to believers in the past and will perhaps continue to do so in the future as well.