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The Relationship between the Syrian War and the Appearance of the Promised Mahdi

Abstract

This qualitative-descriptive research studies the issue of promoting the idea of linking the appearance of Mahdi to the events and changes that have been taking place in the Arab world, especially in Syria, since 2010. Pursuant to the results of the research, most entities - in the studies sample- agree that there is a link between the Syrian crisis and the appearance of Mahdi. Still, there is disagreement about explaining the verbal and non-verbal signs. People gave significations for many signifiers such as analyzing the figures of those who took part in the war, their clothes, flags, colors and the names of the places. There is a strong belief that destruction, war and corruption will inevitably go on until the appearance of Mahdi. *Hadiths* which dealt with the topic of Mahdi were employed by the religious entities in the following contexts: enticing people to take part in the war and intimidating them of not doing so, encouraging them to be patient and to carry on fighting, and boosting their morale.

Key words: the Arab Spring, the Syrian crisis, the promised Mahdi, the traditional and modern media, verbal and non-verbal signs.

العلاقة بين الحرب السورية و ظهور المهدي المنتظر

ملخص

يعالج هذا التحليل النوعي الوصفي موضوع الترويج لفكرة ارتباط ظهور المهدي المنتظر مع الأحداث و التغييرات التي تجري في الوطن العربي، خاصة في سوريا، منذ عام 2010. و توصل البحث إلى جملة من النتائج، من أبرزها: تتفق معظم الشخصيات الواردة في العينة على وجود ارتباط وثيق بين الأزمة السورية و ظهور المهدي لكن هناك اختلافات في تفسير العلامات اللفظية و غير اللفظية. و قد أعطى الأفراد مدلولات لكثير من الدوال كتحليل هينات المشاركين في الحرب، لباسهم، أعلامهم، الألوان و أسماء الأماكن. و قد تبين أن هناك إيمانا بحتمية استمرار تفشي الخراب، الحروب و الفساد حتى ظهور المهدي المنتظر. سخرت الأحاديث الدينية التي تتناول موضوع المهدي من قبل رجال الدين في سياقات تحرض الناس على المشاركة في الحرب و تخوفهم من عدم الانخراط فيها، كما تحثهم على الصبر و مواصلة القتال و ترفع معنوياتهم.

الكلمات المفتاحية: الربيع العربي، الأزمة السورية، المهدي المنتظر، الميديا التقليدية و الحديثة، العلامات اللفظية و غير اللفظية.

Introduction

Since the end of 2010, the Arab world has witnessed a group of protesting movements which spread over several countries of which are: Tunisia, Egypt, Libya, Yemen, Bahrain and Syria. These movements led to the fall of leaders and regimes, and influenced a lot of variables, especially political and military ones. Many names were given to these protests: The Arab Spring, the Arab Awakening, the Islamic Awakening, and the Blessed Revolutions (Vignal, 2012; Harahsha, 2013; Shalash, 2013; Mahmood et al, 2014; Mokannawi, 2015; Janabi, 2016; Al-Baiyoomi, 2017). No sooner did the Arab people rebel against corruption than the hands of the clergymen and some of the “opinion leaders” interfered in order to put the popular movements in metaphysical prophetic frames. The Arab Spring changed into a black melancholic term for some people. It became a symbol of the appearance of the extremist people who raised their *takfiri* slogans and who announced the certainty of the prophecies which – as they say – are being realized day by day. The media power of terrorism and its ability to harness verbal and non-verbal functions in order to attract and recruit people from many parts of the world cannot be underestimated (Souleimanov, 2014; Veilleux-Lepage, 2014; Berbers, 2015; Klausen, 2015; Doucet, 2018; Greg Fealy, 2019).

In this context, some of the traditional mass media and several modern media (internet sites, social media) talked about the issue of the appearance of the promised Mahdi¹ and linked between it and the events taking place in many Arab countries, especially Syria.

The reality induction and projecting religious prophecies on it is not specific of religious men. Rather, many share the process of studying the signifiers of the religious texts. The average man, astronomers or numerologists as some channels call them, clergymen, and historians all of them share studying the relation between “the Arab Spring” and the appearance of Mahdi. Regardless of whether their opinions were true or false, their mere arguing or studying of this relation shows how important this idea is and how strong its effect is on several Arab societies many of which still strongly believe in prophecies refusing any argument stating its invalidity. The inevitability of believing is still dominant, and anyone who refuses it is considered a disbeliever (Veilleux-Lepage, 2014; Gates & Podder, 2015; Klausen, 2015; Zhang & Hellmueller, 2016).

Understanding the political and military events and the other changes in the Arab Homeland is not an easy task sometimes even for specialized people. This is because of the interlacement and complexity. So how with the simple recipients of the media messages. These recipients are certainly involved in the events due to their direct connection to them. However, they often need an “opinion leader” who directs their perceptive processes of the events. They may resort to a clergyman, an astronomer, or any other specialized person so that they can understand what is going on in their surroundings. But what if the opinion leader were an abettor or an owner of a propaganda which had secret purposes? How is the process of understanding reality and dealing

¹ Who was foretold in some *Hadiths* and religious Islamic accounts. He is the Savior who will end corruption from the earth and rule with justice.

with changes carried out through asking help from or believing in clergymen who link everything to Judgment Day or to the appearance of Mahdi? How can the mind which believes in prophecies seek to improve the surrounding environment? Can those, who believe that devastation is a valid prophecy which must inevitably take place and that corruption will go on till Judgment Day, build an intellectually and culturally healthy and sound society? These queries have propelled me to search for some prominent ideas which are promoted by the media and implanted into minds many of which still believe in prophecies and cling to them. The aim of revolutions is achieving a renaissance on many levels, but what if the “revolutionary society” believed that corruption shall remain until the appearance of Mahdi? How can such a society establish a state? How can faith and the inevitability of believing these religious *Hadiths* facilitate the process of mobilizing young people and plunging them into military operations?

This qualitative descriptive analysis aims at highlighting some ideas which link what happens in the Arab Homeland, especially in Syria, to the appearance of Mahdi followed by the Judgment Day. The importance of this research is linked also to how people associate the signs - both natural (elements of nature) and man-made ones - with prophecies in the religious inheritance. In this context, the main question of this research is: What are the signifieds of the natural and human signifiers according to the individuals of the studied sample? The importance of this research also arises from the lack or rarity, if any, of research which deals with this issue.

We are facing a thorny issue. On the one hand, the relationship between the events and the appearance of Mahdi is employed as a propaganda used by some actors in order to serve their purposes. On the other hand, this linkage is a true faith for others. So, it is hard to realize the real purpose of the source of information; is it based on true faith or employed for propaganda?

Research hypotheses are: The process of interpreting signs by the sample individuals is strongly related to their religious affiliations and their socio-political roles. There is a link between natural signs (elements of nature) and objects and events made by humans. Attracting people and trying to convince them to participate in events are done by emphasizing the certainty of the close appearance of Mahdi. The Mahdi case was exploited in order to raise the morale of people, whether loyal or opposed to the government, and in order to make them patient and urge them to accept the scenes of killing and destruction. According to the results of the research, we are now in the time of the appearance. Mahdi will soon rule the world, so everybody should race to take part in supporting him. The signs of Judgment Day are showing one after the other which proves that it will happen soon. Most entities agree that there is a link between the Syrian crisis and the appearance of Mahdi. Still, there is disagreement about explaining the verbal and non-verbal signs. People gave significations for many signifiers such as analyzing the figures of those who took part in the war, their clothes, flags, colors and the names of the places. There is a strong belief that destruction, war and corruption will inevitably go on until the appearance of Mahdi. *Hadiths* which dealt with the topic of Mahdi were employed by the religious entities in the following contexts: enticing people to take part in the war and intimidating them of not doing so, encouraging them to

be patient and to carry on fighting, and boosting their morale. It was noticed that the military events were linked to the concurrent natural events.

Literature review

Concerning the interrelation between religion and politics

The religious system is one of the pillars on which human consciousness is built. It is an important element in the social and political structure of the Islamic Nation. The separation between religion and politics is an oral one that cannot be practiced because religion is not abstract doctrines but it has a socio-political function (يوسعادة, 2013). However, at the same time, religion is subject to politics, most often the political power creates and controls the religious authority and uses it to legitimize its programs and practices (بوراضي, 2017; يوسعادة, 2013). This makes the clergy's control of the people dangerous if the controllers were bearer of destructive agendas of the social consciousness. The main demands of the Arab popular movements in these years are democracy and freedom. However, talking about the relationship between politics and religion is still a difficult problem as it is considered taboo even for people asking for freedom (الشباب, 2011; رمضان و آخرون, 2007). This means that those who demand freedom still subordinate themselves to the authority of religion controlled by politics and to the authority of politics controlled by religion (الشباب, 2011). The extremist movements such as ISIS and Al-Nusra are the result of the extremism in believing that the state and religion are one thing and that society should be governed by the rules of Islamic law whose interpretation is monopolized by a handful of extremists. The exploitation of religion in many Arab countries remains a source of degradation and backwardness (بوراضي, 2017). The inevitability of believing and the imperative obedience of clergy are the most dangerous weapons that harness religious mythology to control people's beliefs and actions. Moreover, the Imam/Sheikh is considered in many Islamic societies as the intellectual reference who imposes what is right and what is prohibited of the different phenomena or life activities or who interprets the identity of all the events that take place in reality on the basis of his religious background (يوسعادة, 2013; بشارة, 1990; بوراضي, 2017; حمدان, 2009).

For a long time, clerics have used communication means in order to implant their desired ideas (Jowett & O'Donnell, 2012; Al-Shirazi, 2006; Chomsky, 2002; Pratkanis, 1992). However, at the time of internet and interactive communication, the "simple" individual, or the formerly passive recipient has become participant in the communication process; that is the sender has become a recipient and the recipient as become a sender who, consequently, participates in the intellectual and cultural implantation (Bernays, 2007; Chomsky 2002; Ellul, 1990). I assume that this is what takes place in the issue of linking the appearance of Mahdi to the events. The simple man promotes these ideas maybe influenced by the views of his opinion leaders, then equivalently influencing another recipient. I argue that the influence of the prominent opinion leaders may not be – in some cases –stronger than that of the average person. The simple recipient may easily accept the opinion of the simple sender for many reasons some of which are the simplicity of the used language, simulation or identification, the simplicity of the content, In addition to the recipient's feeling that

he is taking his information from a sender similar to him in terms of “media standing”. On basis of this, the process of instilling knowledge has become horizontal more than vertical.

Concerning modern media in the context of the Arab protests

Media creates public opinion and awareness because it reformulates reality through mental images that influence the audience’s perception of facts and their reaction and behavior towards these facts (بو معيزة, 2007; Greg, 2016 ; Yaylaci, 2015; Willem, 2015). Emotional enticements are considered one of the most prominent tools employed in the communication content in order to influence the individuals and to motivate them to adopt attitudes that conform with the interest of the propagandist. These enticements can activate countries to make wars as when the USA launches a war on the extremists based on footages of beheading western journalists (Thomas E. Powell et al, 2015).

Social media is more capable of influencing communities than the traditional political discourse. It can motivate the recipient, mobilize the masses, and stimulate them to adopt fast attitudes (بلونيس, 2015). The coverage of the protesting movements in the Arab world changed the mechanism of creating information, especially the visual one (Salaita, 2012; M. Pantti, 2013).

Many international channels such as BBC and Al-Jazeera adopted social media as a main resource for covering the Arab events (Karyotakis et al, 2017). Thinkers, researchers, politicians, activists, and journalists all of them called the protests “Facebook or Twitter revolutions” indicating the importance of these communication means in making the change (Mahmood et al, 2014; O’Callaghan1 et al, 2014). Even governments could no more stay away from social media. The Syrian government, for example, had to use Instagram and other means so that it could confront the opposition’s media success which was able to move countries towards the Syrian crisis (*Doucet, 2018; Shehaba, 2013; Holiday et al, 2015; Gohdes, 2014*).

There is an exaggeration in portraying social media as a savior of peoples and a principal contributor to democratic change. The characteristics of the people who own and consume this media must be studied. ISIS’s use of modern media turned it into an arena for publishing criminality and polarizing extremists from all over the world. Therefore, the moral, scientific, political, and religious background of media users can not be underestimated (Benkirane, 2012; Seo H. & Ebrahim H., 2016; بلونيس, 2015; Gates & Podder, 2015). Dictators, also, availed themselves of the characteristics of modern media after they realized how important and how serious it is in influencing the opinion of people. Most leaders of the world now have accounts in social media (Joseph, 2012; Zeitzoff, 2017).

Gatekeeper Theory

It states that the message, on its trip from the sender to the recipient, is subjected to the censorship of the power holders who manage the gates which control the process of conveying information. The longer the stages of the arrival of the message are, the stronger the power of the gatekeepers

who control the form and the content of information is. Choosing the content is subjected to many variables and effects some of which are the media submission to the ideology of its owner; the journalist's submission to the media policy; the social, cultural, intellectual and dogmatic level of the communicating person; in addition to the social chains and cultural patterns (Shomaker & Vos, 2009).

Media Framing Theory

This theory helps to measure the explicit and implicit content of the message and show the mechanism of the media's formulation of the knowledge and the trends of the masses about the raised issues (عبدہ, 2009; Pippa Norris, 1995; أحمد, 2009). Framing serves ideologies because it is a process of selectivity; it highlights some aspects and neglects others in order to achieve certain aims (*De Vreese, 2001*; R. Entman, 2003, 2007). The frames do not only re-depict reality, but they also create it through their ability to build the knowledge of the recipients, to create their trend concerning the events, and to control their reactions eventually (D. Scheufele, 1999; R. Entman, 1993).

According to Entman (1991), media frames are formed in several ways, some of which are selecting words and concepts, figurative images, verbal and non-verbal symbols, highlighting, marginalizing, exclusion, and repetition. Also, neglecting some of the topic components whether on purpose or not affects the framing process (كمال, 2008). Gamson & Lasch see that the higher the balance between the emotional signifiers such as figurative devices and mental logical ones such as statistics and analysis is, the stronger the effect of the message is (نجم, 2006).

The model of Pan & Kosicki (1993) for analysing the media frames studies a group of components. First, the syntactic structure of the story such as the sequencing of sentences and paragraphs. This part also contains studying resources. Second, the thematic structure; studying the main and secondary-supporting ideas in the text. Third, the rhetorical structure (D'Angelo, 2002).

Cultural Cultivation Theory

The continual exposure to media messages leads to cultivating and reinforcing the beliefs of the recipient audience in addition to their acquiring habits and conducts which affect the social environment. There is a very strong connection between the viewership and the audience's perceptions of social reality. The accumulative and repetitive exposure to media messages influences the development of the individual's personality. The consumption of media products leads to the individual's unconscious acquisition of many contents and to their believing in the validity of what they watch or listen to because repetition causes believing in several situations, which consequently creates a public social trend (Mosharafa, 2015).

Methodology

The descriptive qualitative content analysis is adopted to examine the promoted ideas in the studies sample. The drawn purposive sample contains a group of audio-visual materials and written ones published on the internet. The units of the studied sample are 79 materials. I was careful to include in the sample the viewpoints of sheikhs – clerics – who are influential and known for their noticeable media presence. The sample contains press articles, excerpts from television programs, public online forums of supporters, opponents and neutral people towards the issue of linking the appearance of Mahdi to the events taking place in the Arab countries, especially Syria, and material transmitted by activists on YouTube or other internet sites. The studied material contains the two opinions of Shias and Sunnis about the studied issue. However, I concentrated more on the Sunni doctrine as the majority in the Arab Homeland belongs to the Sunni sect. The sample time limit is from 2011 to 2018. The ideas that dealt with the linking of events and facts to the issue of the emergence of Mahdi were extracted and then linked together by categorizing them into several axes.

1 - The First Axis

Fuzzy Concepts and Signs

The fuzzy expressions of prophecies are characteristics that distinguish a lot of religious *Hadiths*. The interpreting statements of the signs of the appearance of Mahdi are ambiguous and have many possible interpretations. Literary techniques such as figurative language, metaphor and metonymy play a big role in providing different signifieds of the same signifier. This is assured by Sheikh Muhammad Alarifi², who sees that the prophet does not mention any details. He rather gives hints, signs and qualities which people have to understand (47)³. The signs may apply to many times, places and events. This depends on the ways of induction which differ from one person to another. In our research, I try to highlight the seriousness of this as *Hadiths* for many Muslims, if not for all of them, are holy and man must understand them and obey what is desired in them. At the same time, they are interpreted by clerics who belong to different factional roots some of which consider each other disbelievers and totally refuse each other. Then, the seriousness emerges from the linkage of the inevitability of believing to the absence or weakness of enlightened and emancipated thinking of those who try to interpret or those who have metaphysical beliefs (Greg Fealy, 2019; بوراضي, 2017; الشيباب, 2011; بو سعادة, 2013).

In this context, the role of media is to strengthen the rift especially when it is a weapon owned and controlled by dangerous figures.

The Identity of the Promised Mahdi

According to some *Hadiths* and religious accounts, Mahdi is a person who is a descendant of the Prophet Muhammad. He comes at the end of time in order to spread justice on Earth. He takes

² An Islamic preacher, lecturer in universities in and out of KSA, and a counselor of many Islamic authorities.

³ The sample is numbered and exist after the references at the end of the article.

power as a Caliph and reigns as a Prophet's platformer. At his time, abundance and welfare prevail. He rules for seven years. Some of his physical characteristics are: raised forehead and crooked nose (79). For Shias, Mahdi is the twelfth Imam, Muhammad Bin Hasan Alaskari, a descendant of Fatima, the daughter of the Prophet Muhammad. He has disappeared for more than 1200 years in order to protect himself from those who want to eliminate him. However, he will emerge at the appropriate time (79).

Alarifi (47) and Omran Hussein⁴ (75) assure that Mahdi will certainly be Sunni. The people of Mecca will oblige him to accept their allegiance. This will not happen to any Shiite (a significance that the guidance and saving of mankind are exclusive to the Sunni doctrine). Mahdi will be a member of the Household of the Prophet Muhammad - Ahl al-Bayt. In one night, Allah will inspire him and prepare him to carry out his task (47). Pursuant to Alarifi, the sentence "In one night God will inspire him and prepare him to carry out his task" could be a sign that Mahdi might be an ordinary person who will suddenly become Mahdi. It may also mean that God will raise his status by one day only. This message indirectly urges the recipient to continuously be prepared for the emergence of Mahdi, which may occur at any moment. The most important characteristic of Mahdis' is that people will oblige him to accept their allegiance and that he will not promote himself at all (47).

The Time of Appearance According to the Studied Sample

The Mahdi is considered one of the most important signs of the Day of Judgment. He will appear in the end of time or in "the last of the nation of the Prophet Muhammad" (47-28).

I have divided the signs of the appearance of Mahdi in the studied sample into general signs and detailed ones.

The most prominent of the general signs are: the earth becomes full of injustice and *fitna* gets large in number (47-19). Therefore, the main role of Mahdi is to fill earth with justice after corruption prevailed (47-19). The current period is the time when injustice and corruption have spread the most. The most prominent features of injustice are: swearing at God, ridicule of religion, disabling *sharia*, war of *sharia* schools, besieging mosques, killing Muslims and fighting the people of faith, silencing the scholars (i.e. religion scholars), striking those who seek to support Islam, the reluctance of those who enjoin what is right and forbid what is evil, strengthening the negative forces, supporting disbelievers, enabling desertion (returning to disbelieving after believing in Islam), giving freedom to buggery (homosexuality), adultery, and spreading grave moral sins and shameful deeds (19). These signs may be considered a significance of renaissance and intellectual and cultural openness. Eliminating the power of religion which controls all the sectors of life is a constructive revolution in the viewpoint of many societies. The same thing

⁴ Imam, lecturer and writer in the Islamic domain. He belongs to the Sunni doctrine. He has been the manager of many institutes and supervised several conferences for Islamic studies.

applies to allowing homosexuality and considering it a mere human right. In this context, we can see that the mind which believes in the signs of the appearance of Mahdi must be a strong supporter of theocracy and opponent of any form of accepting the intellectual, sexual or other tendencies of the other people if these tendencies contradict the principles of religion.

Some detailed signs of the appearance of Mahdi are: the murder of the previous Iraqi president, Saddam Hussein. Pursuant to some accounts, the Caliph will be hanged in Iraq (11) – the term Caliph was interpreted as a sign of president Saddam. Moqtada al Sadr⁵ will receive power. After murdering the Caliph in Iraq, a medium sized, black-haired man appears and shows Iraq havoc and causes suffering to the people of the country. Then Mahdi appears (11). The Caliphs fight for the treasure by al-Ka'aba (47-20). This is a signifier of disagreements and maybe wars among the princes and kings of the Gulf will burst. Iraq will be besieged by Iran, and Syria by “the Romans”. What is meant by the Romans are the countries of Europe, Russia, and the USA (28).

Since 2011, Omran Hussein has foretold that the appearance of Mahdi is close. He links the appearance to protesting movements which have swept the Arab countries as what has happened since 2010 is considered one of the most prominent signs paving for this event (76, 75). Hussein is waiting for the end of the reign of Al Saud because the reign of Mahdi starts then (75).

Internet seems as an arena of exchanging, interpreting and analyzing the content of dreams individually and in groups. Some clerics like Khaled Almaghribi⁶ read reality and foresee future through analyzing the signs and signals which show in their dreams or those of the people who communicate with them to know the meanings of their dreams. According to him, the end of Israel will take place between 2022 and 2024. However, the appearance of Mahdi will be in 2019. He says that Hezbollah, Iran, KSA, and USA expect the appearance of Mahdi soon; therefore, they condense their secret meetings in order to confront and deter him (22). Convincing the recipient of the imminent emergence of Mahdi is a means of attracting and manipulating minds that are easily affected by the messages of those who are considered opinion leaders. Focusing on the imminent emergence keeps the believer of this idea mobilized, ready and expecting the appearance at any moment and therefore the believer would be strongly ruled by the propagandist. Reading of reality and foreseeing future through interpreting dreams is not exclusive to clerics. There are, rather, other people who do not have an official religious status, but they have a lot of followers. For example, a man foresees the appearance of Mahdi after the death of the previous Egyptian president Hosni Mubarak; shortly after a period of time that does not exceed three months. He depends in this on a dream which one of the common people told him (13).

⁵ A Shiite cleric and the leader of the Sadri Movement which is considered the largest popular Shiite Movement in Iraq. He is also the leader of many military wings which belong to his movement.

⁶ The Sheikh and teacher of Sharia in Al-Aqsa Mosque in Palestine.

For the sake of facilitating linking ideas with each other, I will present the other detailed signs within contexts that serve understanding and perceiving their dimensions.

The Place of Appearance

The emergence of Mahdi will be in the (East). According to Alarifi, the “East” could mean the Arabian Peninsula, Iran, Iraq, Khorasan, China, India, or any region that has the name of east (47). However, his actual start will be in Mecca, where an army will come from Syria to fight him, but he will win. Then, people will know that he is the Mahdi and many countries like Syria and Iraq will declare allegiance to him and many brigades carrying black flags will come from the “east” to support him (47). In this example, Mecca stands out as a blessed icon while Syria appears as an icon of an evil point from which the Mahdi's enemy emerges.

What Would Happen If Mahdi Emerged?

He will establish righteousness and support Muslims, therefore the Muslim nation will become stronger and greater (47). Welfare and comfort will prevail everywhere (47-28). So great will be abundance and boons that twenty people will share eating a pomegranate and share the shade of its peel (47). Nations will announce allegiance to him and fight with him in the cause of Allah; therefore, he will conquer Constantinople and then head forward to Rome and all Europe. Conquests will continue until “Dajjal”– i.e. the false Messiah – comes (51)⁷. Then Jesus - Messiah will descend and kill the Dajjal and pray behind Mahdi in Jerusalem (47, 51). This is an indication that Israel will certainly be eliminated by Mahdi as the prayer would not take place in Jerusalem under occupation.

What Will Be After Mahdi?

According to Alarifi, there will be no good of life after Mahdi (47). Messiah dies before Mahdi and after the death of Mahdi, corruption is back. Mahdi rules for several years which could be seven or eight, then vices and *fitnas* are back (47). Installing and reinforcing these ideas into the mind of the recipient may draw a black image which has no hope; before the emergence of Mahdi, corruption is prevalent, after his death, corruption is prevalent, too. He receives power for very few years when good dominates, but the presence of Dajjal also makes the reign period of Mahdi one of conflict so much as peace will not be clearly prevailing. Can the mind which believes in prophecies which assure the prevalence of corruption until the Judgment Day plan to build a healthy society? How dangerous is reinforcing the idea of the necessity of awaiting Mahdi and

⁷ On basis of many hadiths, Al-Masih Ad-Dajjal or al-Aawar Ad-Dajjal– i.e. the false Messiah or anti-Messiah – is a figure that is considered one of the signs of the Hour – i.e. Day of Judgment. He has abilities which are like those of God’s. For instance, he can give life and cause death, and send rain. Due to his abilities, people will follow him thinking that he is the God.

bearing all the kinds of suffering for hundreds of years only because he will rule with justice for few years?

2 - The Second Axis

The Connection between the War in Syria and Mahdi

Pursuant to Nabil Alawadi⁸ and Muhammad Hassan⁹, everything we see on TV or on news is reported to have been told by the prophet Muhammad (59).

In Syria, there will be a *fitna* which starts with young boys play. No sooner does it calm on one side than it moves on the other; it never ends. When people seek to be saved from it, they can't until a caller cries out from the sky. Every region hears him speaking their language. His voice prevails in every area of earth. The purpose of this cry is referring to Mahdi and introducing him. Even the extremist groups believe in this *Hadith* (52, 20). The aim of these media messages is assuring that we are in the time of appearance as the clerics consider the events which took place in the Syrian governorate of Daraa and paved the way to the anti-government movement as a start of the Syrian *fitna* mentioned in *Hadiths*. According to the account of the opposition, at that time a group of young boys in the governorate of Daraa wrote phrases directed to president Al-Assad on the walls of the schools. These phrases stated that it was his turn and that his end will be like that of a group of Arab rulers: i.e. Mubarak, Bin Ali and Gaddafi (20). This angered the Syrian security personnel and pushed them to punish these boys by imprisoning and torturing them. This, in turn, caused the wrath of the people of Daraa who went out in demonstrations. The Syrian government denied the allegations of the opposition. Regardless of the fact whether this event happened or not, I am here studying the clerics' reading and interpreting events and linking these events to prophecies.

The *fitna* of Syria will never stop even if all the countries of the world interfere to solve it. It will only stop when a voice which refers to Mahdi cries out from the sky. All the international efforts which try to solve the crisis of Syria are being underestimated because the prophet foretold that this crisis will be solved when Mahdi receives power (14, 20, 44). What is meant by the heavenly call are the space channels as all communities of the world can see and hear about Mahdi on screens which transmit in different languages (20). Should Mahdi be grateful to the western inventions which will help him realize his aim? How could he use the media of the disbelievers in order to realize the order of Allah? I raise these questions to refer to the confusion which the believing prophetic thinking most of the time suffers from by charging the "other" of being a disbeliever and a criminal while it needs this "other" to accomplish "God's prescribed orders".

⁸ Kuwaiti, Islamic preacher and a media person in the religious field.

⁹ A preacher, Imam and a professor in the Sharia Faculty at Imam Muhammad bin Masoud Islamic University.

This is the time of the Great Battle (73). There is a close link between the consecutive natural phenomena such as earthquakes and heavy rainfalls in some Arab and Islamic countries on one hand and the Syrian revolution which paves the way to the great battle that precedes the appearance of Mahdi on the other (3, 55). In this context, the sender combines -in his semiotic reading- between natural and human signs, as if the elements of the earth and events were a guide book or a compass.

Clerics and even the public promote the idea that the war in Ghouta is considered a preliminary stage for the appearance of Mahdi who has a headquarter there. The greatest wars happen in Damascus Suburb paving the way to the descent of Messiah and eliminating Al-Aawar Ad-Dajjal and his followers, the Jews. Under the supervision of Mahdi and Messiah the earth will be purged from impurity (10). The internet is an arena for calls which ask people to get ready to take part with Mahdi in his war against Romans and disbelievers (55). This stage is that of preparing for the great battle, so all the Syrians should come back to their country to participate in the great honor (the victory battles) (59, 78).

Muhammad Almuhausani¹⁰ orders the factions to unite in order to confront the enemies of God “Al-Nusairiyeen” and to protect the honor of Muslims. He believes that jihad in the cause of Allah must continue until the time of Doomsday (17, 36). This means that the continuation of the war is a divine desire, and therefore the people must endure the outcomes and even participate voluntarily to achieve this desire. Almuhausani continually calls the Shia as Rafida, i.e. rejecters, and considers that fighting against them is not only legal but also a duty (34, 31, 29). The most prominent media methods he used was supplication to god and praying before starting the battles, continual reference to the immenseness of the battles the combatants head to, and enticing people to join the armed fighters. He prays to Allah “Accomplish Our Conquests, Oh God!” (36). This is a significance of linking the military acts in Syria to the acts of the companions of the prophet Muhammad. The word ‘conquests’ is used to refer to the military acts which the Muslims undertook when they conquered a lot of countries (29).

Since their start, the opponent factions were characterized by Islamist-oriented names such as Al-Nusra Front, the Syrian Islamic Front, the Caucus of Islam Supporters in Damascus and Its Suburb, and the Front of Liberating Damascus. They call for jihad and for eliminating Al-Assad on the way to building an Islamic state (Qabalan, 2013).

A Sunni “Mujahid” – i.e. combatant – who fights in Aleppo stated to Reuters: “if you thought that all these Mujahids came from all over the world in order to fight Al-Assad, you would be mistaken. All of them are here as the prophet told and promised us. It’s the war of which we were promised. It is the great battle.” (50). Another “Mujahid” declared that the crisis in Syria is what the prophet Muhammad talked about when he provoked jihad in the cause of establishing an

¹⁰ A Saudi cleric and businessman. He was characterized by his militant participation with the armed anti-government opponents in Syria. He came to fight out of an Islamic motive in order to bring the time of Caliphates’ reign back as he promotes.

Islamic state. The Mujahids came from everywhere in response to the prophet's promise because the great battle has just started (50). One of the combatants of Jabhat Al-Nusra assures that the prophet's *Hadiths* are the thing that entices Mujahids to come to Syria and fight as they live the days about which the prophet talked and they must take part in fighting till victory (50).

According to Alawadi, Mahdi will meet the Mujahids in Damascus and Syria will be back under the Muslim rule while the Jews will be eliminated. Even trees and stones will speak saying "Oh Muslim! Behind me there is a Jew. Come and kill him." (51). Alarifi is confident that the Islamic Caliphate will be back soon, and links this to what is going on in Syria (59). Tareq Suwaidan¹¹ assures that the prophet foretold that after the enforced rule which controlled the country, Caliphate will return (68). The reason why many western countries were involved on the land of Eastern Ghouta was their knowledge of the story of Mahdi and of the cosmic war which will start from Damascus as many texts of the Old Testament and New Testament talked about this (2). The Battle of Battles is about to happen; Syria will be the pivot of conflicts where the Muslims will gather to fight the disbelievers. This country will be Sunni and it is impossible for it to be Shiite, Russian or American (2, 50, 61).

Commenting on the losses of the anti-government armed opponents in Eastern Ghouta in Damascus suburb, Khaled Almaghribi (1) tries to create hope in the souls of these armed people through promoting the idea that the losses are attributed to the efforts of Ad-Dajjal who knows the prophecies of the prophet Muhammad and tries to eradicate the men of Ghouta. But there will be no loss because these men are the ones who will bring victory to Mahdi and Islam. Russia, USA, KSA, and Iran are pretending that there is disagreement among them but the truth is that they all know the story of Mahdi, so they are uniting their forces in order to eliminate God's prescribed orders. Almaghribi is sending a message to the armed people inviting them to hide, train on fighting, and not to resign themselves to the losses which took place because their role is essential in bringing the victory of Mahdi which is certainly on the way (1).

According to the Sunni clerics in the studied sample, the war in the most of the regions of Syria has a significance. For instance, the Hour will not happen until the Romans go down into Al-Aamaq "i.e. the depths" in Aleppo. What is meant by the Romans are USA, Europe and implicitly Russia. Clerics believe that this thing has already happened (59).

In order to justify the relation of the armed people with the USA and Europe and accepting their support, some of the clerics promote a *Hadith* about an interval of time when the Muslims and Romans get into agreement and fight together. But, nearly after victory, the Romans will betray the Muslims who will keep fighting until victory (59). This letter confirms the character of

¹¹ Islamic researcher, thinker and preacher. He is the founder of the project of Civilized Change. He is a professional trainer in the fields of management and leadership. He is the chairman of the board of Ibdaa group of companies.

treachery among Westerners on the one hand and attempts to raise the morale of the anti-Syrian government fighters on the other.

The Policy of Encouraging Patience, Inciting, and Boosting Morale

As from the start of events in 2011, the declarations of some Imams and clerics gave the Syrian cause a sectarian characteristic. For instance, the announcements of Alawadi (70) who charges the Syrian regime of committing crimes only because the people believe in Allah, The Almighty. This is a signifier that the Alawite sect and all those who work for the Syrian government are disbelievers. He also assures that their interference – as clerics – in the Syrian affair emerges from their interest in Muslims who will return as one nation on basis of the prophet Muhammad’s promise (70). He brings to memory that the prophet in his *Hadiths* preferred Syria to many other countries when he foretold that in the end of time there will be soldiers in Iraq, Syria and Yemen, and when his followers asked him which soldiers should they stand with, he said:”Blessed is the Sham (Syria) because the angels of the Beneficent have spread their wings on them. He was also reported to say “the faith, when the *fitna* gets large in number, is in the Sham” (70). The implicit purpose of exposing these narratives is indirectly enticing the Muslim peoples to join the army existing in Damascus in order to obey the orders of the prophet.

Some clerics adopted the policy of encouraging patience, enticing and boosting the morale of the civilians and armed people who oppose the Syrian government. The most prominent ideas exposed to realize this purpose are:

- 1- The prophet gave glad tidings to the people of Syria and Iraq and God chose them and these countries to be the Godly pivot where holy battles will take place in the end of time (28).
- 2- There should not be any panic; God has judiciously chosen the Syrian people; they are those who will defend Islam. Therefore, God has positioned them in the first line of combat. Good is inevitably coming (28).
- 3- According to Alawadi (74) the Syrians will write with their blood a page of the history of the Islamic nation which will again be cohesive and strong after the events that will take place in Syria as the revolutions are blessed. They are something prescribed by God and has no relation to the secular reasons. They are an order which God willed so that Muslims can regain their glory. The “disbelieving Baathist” regime will be eliminated and the victory of Muslims has inevitably approached. “The God’s Soldiers of the Sham” will keep Damascus as the lighthouse of Islam. The people of Damascus will lead the Islamic nation to civilization, Renaissance and honor. The people of the Sham will not be shaken whatever the rascals do to them. Jesus, the son of Mary, will descend in Damascus and this shows the specialty of the Syrian people. “The criminal regime which lacks Arabism and humanitarianism” destroyed the mosques in Damascus, assaulted women, and arrested Religious Education teachers. All

Muslims should read history and teach their children these stories so that they can learn about “the disbelieving sects”. Alawadi also sees that God humiliated the Arab nation when it chose a ruling system other than Islam (74).

4- The slogan of the Syrian people as from the start of the opposing movement was “We Resort Only to You, Allah!”. All peoples and governments disavowed the Syrian people and did not support them but God will grant the best reward to the Syrians. It is good that the victory is delayed. This delay happens out of a divine wisdom; the blessed land (Syria) is irrigated with blood (70).

5- All Arab revolutions are on a platform of the balance scale and the Syrian revolution is on the other. In other words, the value of the Syrian revolution equals the values of all the other revolutions. This is due to the fact that the battle in Syria is one of survival, after which a great event will take place; the Islamic nation will be retrieved and the vices of many nations will collapse. Syria will change the history of the Islamic nation (70).

6- As for Yusuf Al Qardawi¹², Jihad in Syria is an imperative duty. The young should not request his parents or ask their permission to join the armed people in Syria. Jihad with money is an imperative duty as well. Money should be sent to Syria wherever their source is even if it were “haram” (48).

7- Al Qardawi sees that Syria should not be ruled by Bashar Al-Assad as he is “originless”; that is, he is not Muslim. He rules the state in accordance with the provisions of Al-Baath party and countries should not rule in accordance with the provisions of parties. They should rather rule in accordance with the provisions of the *Sharia* of Allah, which means the necessity consulting the *Fiqh* scholars (77, 39). He assured that the time of tyrants is over and that it is high time to rule in accordance with the provisions of Islamic *Sharia* (77). He drew the attention to the importance of the role Qatar played and plays in revolutions: “Qatar did well; it supported the revolutions and backed them” (39).

The Syrian crisis caused conflicts among the imams and clerics owing to the disagreement in their attitudes. One of them is the attitude of Al Qardawi against Muhammad Al Bouti who supports the Syrian government (77).

The revolution of Bahrain or the revolutionary attempts in the Gulf countries were not taken into consideration by some clerics. They were blacked out and classified as Shiite movements oriented against the Sunnis (70, 62).

Who Represents Each of the Characters Mentioned in the Prophecies?

¹² An Egyptian Islamic scholar. He also serves as the chairman of International Union for Muslim Scholars (IUMS).

The characteristics of the characters mentioned in *Hadiths* sometimes seem contradicting or vague. Each character seems as if it were many characters at the same time. For example, the character of Al Sufyani, Al Yamani¹³ and others. According to the studied sample, the characters mentioned in the prophet's *Hadiths* are represented as follows:

The previous Iraqi president Saddam Hussein is Al Sufyani, and his murder is a significant sign of the ones that indicate the appearance of Mahdi (11).

President Bashar Al-Assad is the Sufyani of the Sham, and he is the character of Al Asshab simultaneously (20, 11). According to Hasan Al Tuhami¹⁴ (20), Al-Assad is responsible for the *fitna* in the Sham, and this applies to the character of Al Asshab whose name is considered one of the names of the lion (assad in Arabic). The number of the letters of Al Asshab and those of his father's should be eight in Arabic. This also applies to the Assads, the father and the son. His most remarkable characteristics are that he is tall, blue-eyed, reddish blonde, kills freedom, murders women and children, and grinds them in pots and saws them (11, 20). For some, Al Sufyani is ISIS, which murders in the same savage and barbaric way mentioned in the religious *Hadiths* (42).

Joy Ayyad¹⁵ sees that Al-Assad is the character of Al Asshab mentioned in Aljafr¹⁶. However, she talked positively about this character (53). According to Ayyad, the president Abdul Fattah el Sisi is also mentioned in Aljafr. He is the terrific combatant who will have Egypt in his hand. He will rule it, and Mahdi will certainly appear in his time. The Akhnas of Egypt¹⁷ is the previous president, Muhammad Mursi, who is a sign of the end of time. The end of Hosni Mubarak's rule means the approach of the appearance of Mahdi; it is the sign of signs. The character of Al Abqaa is represented by the Free Syrian Army, the opponent of the Syrian government. The Character of Al Sufyani is represented by Jabhat Al- Nusra. As from the outburst of the events in the Arab Home, Ayyad sees that the appearance of Mahdi will take place during months or years (53).

People take part in the extrapolation of characters and the projection of prophecies on them. For some, the Egyptian president el Sisi seems to represent the character of Al Abqaa (i.e. the Spotted).

13 They are considered as major signs of the appearance of Mahdi. Al Sufyani seems as a notorious character which practices murder and torture. Al Yamani, whose appearance will be a supporter of Mahdi belongs to Ahl Al Bayt (the members of the House of the prophet).

14 A Yemeni cleric, some of whose followers see that the characteristics of Mahdi are identical to him. He talks very much about the appearance of Mahdi and the special signs of this event.

15 A researcher in the field of Astronomy. She introduces herself as a Sunni. However, pursuant to some people, her tendency is Shiite, as she adopts Aljafr in order to extrapolate the present and foresee the future.

16 It said that the author of this book is Imam Ali, the prophet's cousin. It includes enigmas and symbols the purpose of which is explaining the unseen and future events of many countries and persons.

17 According to Aljafr and some prophet's Hadiths, this character is a descendant of BaniUmayya. He rules Egypt, but another character takes power over. He resorts to the Romans (i.e. the west), and battles start after that.

This is because his attitudes are colored and inconsistent in addition to the spotted color of his military suit. Al Sufyani is the Jordanian king Abdullah, and Al Asshab is president Assad (7).

The members of ISIS assured that the end of time approached and that the army of their organization is the army of Mahdi about which the prophet foretold and which will fight the holy wars with Mahdi against the devil and its followers. Some of the members and leaders of the organization promoted the idea that Abu Baker Al Baghdadi is the Mahdi or the character that the prophet talked about, the person who will lead the Islamic nation and eliminate fitnas by Al Khasf (i.e. by explosives and martyrdom operations as they interpreted the word Khasf) and by slaughtering. The organization of the Islamic State in Syria and Iraq (ISIS) employed the social media like Twitter to promote its ideas. A member of ISIS's tweeted that ISIS will survive until Jesus son of Mary appears and prays behind Al Baghdadi as the Imam (it is mentioned in *Hadiths* that Mahdi will pray as the Imam and Jesus will pray behind him). They have also promoted that Baghdadi is a descendant of Ahl Al Bayt, the members of the house of Muhammad. Al Baghdadi did not announce that he is Mahdi, and this could be a way of assuring that he is; as *Hadiths* mention that Mahdi does not declare his being Mahdi but people go to him and declare allegiance to him as the Mahdi (42).

Hadiths also mentioned that one of the signs of the end of time is the existence of a group of liars and miscreants who present themselves as defenders of Islam, but they are exactly vice versa. A man appears in Iraq and Syria and establishes an army and a state which is allegedly attributed to Islam. His followers give themselves the names of villages such as: Abu Baker Al Baghdadi, attributed to Baghdad and Abu Hamza Al Halabi, attributed to Aleppo. Their hair will be long like that of women. All these characteristics apply to the members of ISIS (42).

The Significances of the Flags

In the religious legacy, whether Sunni or Shiite, there are black and yellow flags that appear in the time of Mahdi.

In the studied sample, it has been noticed that there is disagreement about the interpretation of the signifier of the black flags or about the characteristics of the characters which carry them. Some people consider them in support of Mahdi. Others consider them a symbol of murder in the end of time as their carriers will kill large numbers of Muslims in ways they have not even seen or heard about (47, 20, 19).

“The black flags come out of the east, the yellow ones out of the west”. This led some people to think that the flag of Al Qaeda or ISIS represents the black flags while Hezbollah's represents the yellow ones. These flags will come to “the navel of the Sham”, i.e. the capital, where a major scourge will then take place. This was projected on the events taking place in Syria especially in the area of Al Ghouta in Damascus suburb (19, 47, 20, 44, 52). The black flags are a significance of dignity and prestige; therefore, black was a special color for the prophet Muhammad (47, 19).

When the black flags come out, Mahdi should be pledged of allegiance even if it were through crawling on snow, i.e. under any circumstances. Mahdi should be acknowledged and obeyed (47).

The flag of ISIS's leader, Abu Baker Al Baghdadi, is one of guidance because he is one of the members of God messenger's house. His presence gives way to Mahdi and his flag is the greatest proof of this fact. Although ISIS committed mistakes, it will certainly hand the rule over to Mahdi (11).

The formation of the basic core of ISIS by Abu Musaab Al Zarqawi – who came from Afghanistan – assures that what is meant by the black flags is ISIS's flag (the black flags appear from the east). Some of the most prominent characteristics of fighters under this flag are that they have no compassion, slaughter mercilessly, and kill people in ways which have never been known before (11). In accordance with Osama Al Masri, a Salafi cleric, this flag must overcome the regime of Al-Assad because it is the *jihadi* flag mentioned in the religious legacy (52).

Some see that the ISIS's flag cannot be the black flags which the prophet Muhammad talked about because the fighters did not appear from east. They rather grew in Iraq (6). Moreover, the black flags will not come to an end, and ISIS came to an end. The black flags are trusted and agreed upon by the people, but the Islamic communities disagreed over ISIS and their viewpoints about them varied (6).

Many people, not only clerics, promote the idea of the flags and assure that this sign has been accomplished and that we are in the time of appearance (10).

3 - The Third Axis

The Alleged Mahdis

Pretending to be the Mahdi and believing the pretenders is a phenomenon that has increased in some Arab countries during the period of the movements opposing the ruling regimes. The belief of many Arab communities that the appearance of Mahdi is imperative has made it easy for some people to pretend that they are the promised Mahdi. A group of Arab countries witnessed this phenomenon of which are Egypt, Yemen, Iraq, and KSA. Some examples of the alleged Mahdis are: Egypt's Mahdi, Kamal Ahmad Abdullah, a lawyer who has many supporters some of whom are university professors. Yemen's Mahdi, Muhammad Nasser Al Yamani, who sends through the social media and online messages to Arab and non-Arab rulers asking them to support him. In KSA, a man from Guinea alleged that he was the Mahdi and he was imprisoned and given a penalty of lashing. During investigations he declared that he ascended to Heaven and saw the prophet. In Libya, a man appeared after the eruption of the Libyan revolution. He warned that if he was praised, rain would fall, but if they vilified him, rain would stop. He challenged the people who disbelieved him that he was ready for a public debate (43, 66). The followers of Ahmad Alhasan, in Iraq, are increasing in many parts of the world. He has a special channel for proselytizing, the

World Savior Channel. Tunisia and other countries also witnessed movements calling for supporting certain persons and providing them with money and weapons because they are the Mahdi who should be supported and given allegiance (9, 15, 66). Each pretender has groups which support him. They may even go beyond the boundaries of a country, such as the supporters of Hassan Al Tuhami and Muhammad Al Hodaly, who are supported by groups of people who spread over more than one Arab country (3, 32).

Some Arab channels like the Lebanese channel Al-Jadeed treated the phenomenon of the spread of alleged Mahdism considering it as a problematic one where the pretenders and their supporters increase (32). Many internet surfers are sure that the appearance of Mahdi will be in 2018 or 2019 (8). Nabil Alawadi thinks that the large number of Mahdi pretenders is an evidence that the appearance of the real Mahdi has approached (51). The misty religious discourse concerning the prophecies has allowed the phenomenon of alleged Mahdis to arise since the Omayyad and Abbasside eras. Many pretenders appeared and adopted the prophet's Hadiths as a reference for them (27).

Refusing the Connection between the Events and the Prophecies

Abdul-Aziz Al Fozan¹⁸ opposes the clerics who connect between the events in the Arab World, especially Syria, and the religious prophecies. He thinks that the *Hadiths* which deal with the story of Mahdi are uncertain. He adds that because of these *Hadiths*, many people pretended to be Mahdis in several periods as from the Umayyad Caliphate era. Moreover, the content of these prophecies encourages and entices people to do some actions in order to make events identical to *Hadiths*. He also thinks that awaiting Mahdi causes dependency, and it is certain that the time of Mahdi has not come yet as it is one of the signs of the Great Hour (69).

Saleh Al Maghamsi¹⁹ assures that this is not the time of the battle about which the prophet talked and that the events in Syria are not completely identical to the prophecies (58).

Adnan Ibrahim²⁰ firmly refuses the fact that there is a Mahdi and considers this character absolutely illogical and unreal (71, 72). The same applies to Qardawi, who does not recognize Mahdi because the most prominent books of the Sunni sect did not talk about this (60).

The disagreement among the Sunni clerics went beyond discussion to swearing and bitter criticism. For instance, the attitude of Salah Abu Arafa²¹, who accused Al Qardawi of hypocrisy and collaboration with the Mossad and the western powers due to his calling people to fight against Al-Assad, "the disbeliever" (67). Abu Arafa asked many actors on some TV screens to quarantine Al Qardawi and his likes because they are the reason behind the "bloody spring" or the "Zionist

¹⁸ The professor of Comparative Fiqh at the Higher Judicial Institute at the Islamic Imam Muhammad Bin Masoud University.

¹⁹ Islamic Saudi preacher, lecturer at Taiba University. He presents many Islamic TV programs.

²⁰ An Islamic Palestinian intellectual, researcher and philosopher.

²¹ A cleric who gives classes in Al Aqsa Mosque. Some people think that he practices religious guidance unofficially. He has followers inside and outside Palestine.

spring". They wash the brains of the young people and promise them of the nymphs of Paradise. They send them to death in order to win the ecstasies of the promised Paradise (21). Abu Arafah criticized Al Awadi, who evokes people and send them to Jihad in Syria while he goes to resorts and behaves like women. He wonders and asks the recipient "Why don't they be jihadis and fight?". He criticizes Alawadi's evoking people to fight in Syria while he does not do anything concerning the events in Gaza (49). Abu Arafah also attacked Al-Jazeera channel considering it immoral because it allowed Al Qardawi to transmit his ideas and to provoke people (54).

Muhammad Alarifi retorts to all the clerics and Imams who negate the story of Mahdi commenting that he is one of the signs of the Hour and that there are more than 50 Hadiths about the character. They were all mentioned in reference books which are considered a basis of the Sunni sect (47).

4. The Fourth Axis

Linking between the Appearance of Mahdi and the events in Syria according to the Shiites

Shiite combatants who take part in the war in Syria have declared that they are not fighting for the sake of Al-Assad but for the sake of the appearance of Imam Mahdi. They believe that even if they "martyred", they would be resurrected again to fight with the army of Mahdi. They are fighting because there is nothing more valuable than Imam Mahdi, not even the family. Therefore, fighting is a duty. They have perceived that they were in the time of appearance when USA and UK invaded Iraq in 2003. They thank God because He has chosen them to fight in Syria and to be soldiers of Imam Mahdi (50).

The former Iranian president Ahmadinejad declared that, depending on Allah and getting help from the promised Mahdi, they would never allow the fall of the Syrian regime. Ahmadinejad thinks that the USA invaded Iraq because it knew that Mahdi would soon appear. This country wants to eliminate him before his appearance because it is the greatest obstacle for him (24). The western countries seek to arrest Mahdi and ISIS seeks to disturb him and the Shia (40). All the western countries and USA were many steps ahead of the Shia in looking for the place and the time of the appearance of Imam Mahdi. The research and studies which have been done and written about Mahdi in the American universities is many times larger than those done and written in Qum and Najaf (40).

Reporting Iranian sites based on religious narratives, the western armies will not enter the capital, Damascus, but they will stay in its suburbs. The murder of 100 thousand Syrians in Damascus, knocking down a part of the Umayyad Mosque, and the separation of Kurds from Syria are introductory signs of the appearance of Mahdi (23, 34, 30). Syria will witness what was called in *Hadiths*: the *fitna* of the Sham (23, 34, 30). The greatest divine battle will be in Damascus and its signs which started with the *fitna* in Daraa by boys have shown (33).

Qais Al Khazaali, the leader of Asaib Ahl al-Haq, declared that the forces of Al Hashd Al Shaabi (Popular Mobilization forces) will enter into Syria after the battle of Mosul and will keep fighting the *takfiris* until the appearance of Mahdi (26). Hussein Hamadani, an Iranian military leader, declared the fact that the religious slogans influence the crowd of fighters who come to fight in Syria. He believes that apart from these slogans, they would not be persuaded to fight (4).

The Opinions of Some Shiite Clerics and Leaders about the Connection between the Appearance of Mahdi and the Syrian Crisis

The Shiite discourse of Hezbollah concerning the connection between the appearance of Mahdi and the Events in Syria is not consistent. Sometimes it is direct, other times it is implied. This depends on the nature of the source of information. The information coming from the fighters and their families show their belief in the link of the Syrian cause to the appearance of Mahdi. Whereas the opinions of some religious leaders are mostly characterized by hinting or negating.

The Lebanese journal, Al-Nahar, highlighted the attempt of Hasan Nasrullah, the Secretary General of Hezbollah, to calm the followers who wait for the appearance of Mahdi and who perceive the Syrian case as a preliminary stage of this event. He urged them to persevere and not to be lazy assuring that the appearance of Mahdi has its time and that there must be wisdom of delaying it (44). Reporting BBC Arabic, Hasan Nasrullah assured that the party is not fighting in Syria to give way to the appearance of Mahdi, but to prevent the American, Zionist and *takfiri* hegemony. He also assured that the party does not need a religious justification for fighting in Syria and that it is not fighting to apply the signs of which are said to be introductory to the appearance. The real aim is protecting Lebanon and the region from the *takfiris*, extremists, and all those who want to destroy the country (46).

According to the cleric, Sheikh Saadullah Khalil, Imam Mahdi needs 70 years to announce the just Mahdist state which will continue for 700 years when it is time for the Judgment Day (44). The 70 years does not exactly refer to the true meaning the cleric wants to convey. Where are we concerning these years? Has this stage begun? Are we at its end? Khalil believes that Imam Mahdi will appear in Mecca, where he will hold a press conference in which he will divide the world into 313 states; and that is why the followers of Hezbollah have the badge “313” on their clothes especially on Ashura (44).

Khalil believes that defining the signs of appearance is a difficult task as there are direct and indirect ones. He assures that the Sham will witness a great *fitna* and that Al Sufyani will fight the ruler in Syria. However, he does not use straight expressions that prove the relation of Syria with the prophecies. When the journalist asked him if Bashar Al-Assad was the one meant by the ruler, he said that it was not a must. Nevertheless, he thinks that the Alawites will rule in Syria until the appearance of Mahdi (44). Khalil's declarations and answers reflect a desire of not telling the real ideas. He assures that we are in “the end of time” (44). This is a broad expression which can be interpreted as some months, years or decades in comparison with the period of waiting of Mahdi

which lasted for 1200 years. He mentions one of the signs: the sun will rise in the west. He says that he heard of western reports which assure that the sun will soon do (44).

Al Sayyed Jaafar Fadlullah²² assures that Mahdi will certainly appear and that he is the divine type of leading life, but the search in the signs of his appearance is a complicated task as some of them are not consistent and the others are fabricated. He believes that projecting the signs on the current reality lacks the scientific standards and affects the cause badly. All that is depicted about Mahdi suggests that his role is only a militant one, which is a wrong thing. He is, rather, related to a humanitarian, civilized process and keeps up with the movement of the rise and fall of civilizations as he has been born for hundreds of years and as God keeps him away from death in order to realize the divine plans after getting experience, competence and God's guidance (44).

The discourse of Hezbollah concerning its interference in the Syrian affairs during the crisis is non-consistent. It declares that it is fighting a war against terrorism when it addresses the west and against *takfiris* when it addresses the Arabs and Muslims. Yet, it announces that it is defending the Lebanese borders when it addresses the Lebanese. Defending the Shiite religious shrines is one of the most important reasons of interference as it is promoted in media. The leaders of the party negate their interference in the Syrian affairs on secular basis (12). Hezbollah depended on religious narratives related to the end of time and its signs. It used vocabulary items which serve the religious and social mobilization such as: "Imposed wars", "Iran and its genuine *Muhammadist* orientation" (12).

Hezbollah's Al Manar channel bore the responsibility of portraying the soldiers and presenting their testimonies and sayings after "their martyrdom" (57). The channel employs the influential capacity of the word, the voice and the image in order to charge the sentiments to the favor of the party. For example, describing the character of Mahdi Yaghi, the young man who was "martyred" in Syria, Al Manar employed expressions such as: "An angelic face full of life with a smile like the sun when it rises and like the magic of the full moon". Yaghi's mother says: "I didn't know that my son was a hero until he was martyred. My son was intelligent and he knew where to go" (56). That is, he chose death, but Paradise was waiting for him. Then the journalist comments on the mother's situation: "the tears were in her eyes, but she didn't allow them to flow down on her cheeks because she wanted to keep her promise to her son not to cry" (56). This is a significance of the strength of promise for the members of Hezbollah.

The social media is a space where the soldiers publish the details of their military and non-military activities. The discourse of the soldiers may differ to a large extent from that of the leaders in the party. For instance, in a footage one of the fighters of Hezbollah portrays himself and sends

22 A Lebanese Shiite scholar. A researcher and a lecturer of Fiqh and Its Fundamentals at the Islamic Sharia Institute in Beirut. He has a lot of books and TV programs.

a message to the opponents enticing them saying: “Thank God, the Lord of all creation. What we have done and still do is to Allah. We have finished the task which we were ordered to finish. Not a drop of blood was lost. Thank God! We have trodden on the dead bodies and showed them wonders. And we are going to show them wonders again”. Another one in the same footage supporting the first says: “We are heading towards the bastards, to the last Sunni, dog, and if God ordered us, we would go to Kaaba. Kaaba is not theirs, those homosexuals. It’s ours, the Shiites of Ali.” (16). Internet is also full of footages depicted by fighters who belong to the Sunni sect threatening that they will murder the Shiites. Their confidence suggests that God is on their side and that they were right even if they made mistakes in word or action.

Concerning the Flags Accompanying the Appearance of Mahdi

The Iranian black flags tagged by the name of Al Hussein, the grandson of the prophet Muhammad, are those mentioned in *Hadiths*; the flags coming from the east. The flag of Hezbollah represents the yellow ones which come to support Mahdi. The target of these two powers is establishing an Islamic state which governs the world before disorder and chaos spread everywhere (50, 33, 44).

Mocking the Shiite Mahdi

A lot of media and internet sites made fun of the Shiite Mahdi and the signs of his appearance through conveying the ideas which seem either illogical or criticizable for many people. Here are the most prominent of these ideas:

- Reporting from Iranian sites, the Syrian revolution is a coup d’état by the enemies of Mahdi against Bashar Al-Assad. The great evidence is the emergence of the Putschists in the suburb of Daraa led by Al Sufyani (1, 35, 23). I would remind that the beginning of the opposing events was in Daraa.
- The reason of the delay of the appearance of Mahdi is his displeasure with some people deviating from religion and doctrine and his annoyance of a part of Iranians who cling to the western lifestyle. Mahdi only communicates with the leader Khamenei (1).
- The signs of the appearance of Mahdi promoted by the Shia, especially in Iran, are the spread of devastation, debauchery, poverty, socioeconomic breakdown, and the destruction of cities and civilization; because the task of Mahdi is reforming everything. Iran will face all those who obstruct the realization of the conditions and signs of the appearance of Mahdi. Bleeding and the large number of “martyrs” are of the greatest signs (23). Killing is being linked to religious necessities (16).
- The Iraqi Shiite factions are fighting in order to realize Shiite expansion and to support Mahdi (50). The unity among the hearts of the peoples of Iraq, Syria and Iran is considered an important preliminary task which gives way to the appearance of Mahdi (38).

- Iran sees that the events taking place all over the whole world are preparing to the appearance of Mahdi. The victory of Hezbollah in Lebanon, the resistance in Palestine, and the devastation in Syria are signs of the approach of the appearance (23).
- Al-Arabiya channel mocked the declarations announced by the clerics of Iran who consider that the Khomeini's revolution gave way to the appearance of Mahdi and that there are enemies who deter his appearance (24).
- Iran and its allies such as Hezbollah try to control the Syrian area of Harasta because they anticipate that Mahdi will emerge from a crypt in that area which Mahdi is in, and because they try to confront the attempts of Turkey and KSA which seek to capture Mahdi through spreading their intelligence personnel in the area (33).
- Iran and its allies employ the idea of Mahdi's appearance concurrently with the fidget in the Iranian society due to the increase in Iranian casualty in Syria. Iran and Hezbollah use this idea in order to mobilize the simple people (18).
- Pursuant to Iranian sources, after the great battle of Aleppo, Mahdi will have the time to eliminate the Kurds (33).
- The soldiers of Hezbollah and their supporters use the social media to ask the help of Mahdi and to appeal people to pray for them because of the rise in the number of their casualties (37).
- On the social media, a video footage spread showing one of the highly ranked military Syrian officers, Suheil Al Hasan, nicknamed Al Nimr – i.e. the tiger, assuring that he and his soldiers will not go back to their homes and stop fighting till the right is victorious either by the appearance of Mahdi or by killing Al Sufyani (4, 5). A lot of mass media, such as Orient TV, severely criticized linking prophecies to and projecting them on the current events in Syria, especially by a military officer (4, 5).
- Some sites belittle the idea of Mahdi through labeling some people as Mahdi such as the president Bashar Al-Assad and Hasan Nasrullah (25, 64). "Mahdi and his appearance in the character of Bashar Al-Assad may Allah sanctify his soul" (41). "Nasrullah receives advice from the promised Mahdi" (45). The opponent of the Syrian government, the writer and the human rights activist Randa Kassis was – out of mockery – labeled as Mahdi because she accepted the idea of participating with the president Assad in the transitional process and supported the Russian military participation in Syria (25). It is difficult to tell whether the labeler believes in Mahdi or not, but labeling the Syrian president, Nasrullah or anyone who supports them or agrees to one of their opinions as Mahdi reflects the degree to which this labeler disparages the idea of Mahdism, or at least Shiite idea of Mahdism.

Conclusion

Linking between the appearance of Mahdi and the events in the Arab Home is clear as Clerics and the public take part in the promoting process of this linking. Shias and Sunnis wait for salvation by Mahdi and seek to participate in his victory. They believe that Syria is witnessing the Great Battle that precedes the appearance of Mahdi. Moreover, no country can solve the crisis, especially in Syria, because salvation will take place only when Mahdi receives power. They believe that the

regional and international interference is mentioned in the prophecies; therefore, it is normal that many countries participate militarily on the Syrian land. The alleged Mahdis are increasing with the increase of chaos and lack of intellectual and restorative vision. The most important question is: Where are the will free people heading? Will the belief in the inevitable divine prescription (corruption and devastation until Judgment Day) give way to the minds in order to head towards development and awareness? The traditional and modern media strongly contribute to the plantation and growth of prophetic thought. Semiotic reading is done through senders' analysis of natural signs such as earthquakes, man-made signs such as wars, and the things he uses, such as flags and clothing. The idea of the promised Mahdi is used to incite the people to participate in the war and to be patient, to raise their morale, and to intimidate those who do not participate in the war. According to the majority of the sample individuals, all that is happening in Syria is a key indication of the imminent emergence of Mahdi.

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