The Ideology of the Expected MahdÊ in Muslim History: The Case of the Sudanese Mahdiyya, 1881-1898

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Abstract

Several works have been devoted to the description of the various Mahdist movements in different parts of the Muslim world, but little attention has been paid to the discussion of the MahdÊ ideology in a wider context of Muslim history. The present article attempts to address this ideology from a theological perspective and examine its implementation with particular reference to the set of social and political factors that led to the outbreak of the Mahdist revolution in the Sudan towards the end of the 13th century Hijra (19th century A.D.). The article is divided into three parts. The first part deals with the ideology of the Expected MahdÊ in both Sunni and Shiîte literature; the second examines the case of the Sudanese Mahdiyyah (1881-1898) as the most eminent opposition movement in the 19th century Muslim world that used the ideology of the Expected MahdÊ to mobilize the support of the Sudanese notables and masses, and challenge the yoke of the Ottoman administration in the country; and the third part highlights the distinctive features of the Sudanese Mahdiyya, and investigates its political legacy in the pre- and post-independence Sudan.

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Introduction

The idea of a Mahdī or a saviour of humanity is not only peculiar to the Muslim belief, but it is shared by other religions such as Judaism, Christianity, Buddhism and Zoroastrianism. This abstract idea has been given a political and religious dimension by Muslims who believe that the expected Mahdī will fight the wrong, remedy the evils and establish a new world order based on the Islamic teachings of justice and virtue. The history of the Mahdī-claimants begins with Muḥammad b. al-Ḥanafiyya (d. 81/700), who was proclaimed as a Mahdī by his Kaysīnī followers who denied his death and claimed that he was in hiding at Jabal al-Ra‘wa and he would one day return to champion the cause of his adherents. From 9th century onwards there have been many examples of Mahdī claimants, who led religious movements in their own territories for the revival of Islam and restoration of their power, such as Muḥammad ʿUbayd Allah (d. 323/934), the first Fātimid Caliph, who came to power through manipulation of both Mahdist expectations and Shīi sentiment in North Africa; Muḥammad b. ʿAbdallah b. ʿUmar (d. 525/1130) who guided the Muwaḥḥidīn reform movement against the Mūʾāwiyyīn dynasty1; ʿIṣmāʿīl al-ʿAfarī (d. 931/1524) who carved out for himself a kingdom in Iran and Iraq from which the modern Persian state (Iran) has evolved2 and Muḥammad ʿAlī b. ʿAbdallah (d. 1303/1885) who overthrew the Turco-Egyptian administration (1237-1299/1821-1881) in the Sudan, and established an indigenous territorial state, given the name of the Mahdist State (1299-1316/1881-1898).3

The Ideology of the Expected Mahdī in Muslim History

The term Mahdī (divinely guided one) has come to denote an eschatological figure whose presence will usher in an era of justice

and true belief prior to the end of time. The origin of the word cannot be traced back to the Qur'Än, where in fact it is never mentioned, but rather to a strictly honorific title applied to the Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) and the Rightly Guided Caliphs by the earliest Muslims. 4 The term first appeared in its meaning of the divinely guided one in 66/686 when the ShiÑa revolted in Kufa against the leadership of the Umayyads, and their leader al-MukhtÉr b. ÑUbayd Allah al-ThaqafÊ and his KaysÊnÊ followers proclaimed MuÎammad b. Ïanafiyya as the MahdÊ. 5 This revolt was suppressed by the Umayyads and actually brought to an end by MuÎab b. Zubayr who defeated and eventually killed al-MukhtÉr in 68/687. Before the death of al-MukhtÉr, Ibn al-Ïanafiyya declined the title and the cause, and died in 81/700 without achieving any significant success. But many of his adherents denied his death as reality, and argued that he was in hiding at Jabal al-RawÌa from where he would eventually return and fill the earth with justice and equity, as it had been filled with injustice and oppressions. 6 Similar beliefs arose around Muhammad b. Hanfaiyya’s son, AbË HÉshim (d. 98/716), MuÎammad b. ÑAbdullahi al-Nafs al-Zakiyya (d. 145/762), JaÑfar al-ØÉdiq (d. 148/765) and numerous other ÑAlids. 7

The concern of this article is not to prove who is the right Hidden ImÉm, but to emphasize that the denial of the ImÉm’s death has popularized a number of religious aspects of the ShiÑi theory of the ImÉm, such as the explicit designation of the ImÉm by God’s command and determination (naÎÎ), and the concealment


6  A Hadith with an isnad go back to ÑAbdullahi b. MasÑÈd says: “The Messenger of God said, ‘Even if only a single day of the earth were left, God would send a man from us who will fill it with justice as it had been filled with oppression.’”. See, Sunan AbË Daud, HadÊth no. 3736.

7  See Blichfeldt, Early Mahdism.
The concepts of ghāʾibah and rajaʾīh of the expected Mahdī at the appropriate time became two central beliefs in the Shiʿī doctrines, and helped the Shiites to endure under difficult circumstances and to hope for reform pending till the return of the Mahdī. They looked forward to the promised events accompanying the emergence of the Hidden Imām who would adjust the present unbearable historical circumstances in favour of the oppressed who remained loyal to the Imām. The Imām would be advised by God to conceal himself to avoid the aggression of his enemies. The best example can be presented here is that of the Twelfth Imām, Muḥammad al-Ḥasan al-Askarī, who went into occultation in the year 261/874, and according to his followers, he will continue to live in this state for as long as God deems it necessary; and then He will command him to reappear and take control of the world in order to restore justice and equity. They argue that during this period of concealment the Hidden Imām is not completely cut off from his followers but has spokesmen in the person of jurists who can act on his behalf and guide the Shiites in their religious matters.

This kind of ideological understanding leads us to argue that the idea of the expected Mahdī was developed from a simple notion of a leader who would bring Islamic justice to the oppressed

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8 As Goldziher argues, “the idea of the return did not originate among Shiʿīs. Judaeo-Christian influence probably contributed this belief to Islam. The Prophet Elias, who was carried off to heaven and will at the end of time reappear on earth to establish again the rule of righteousness, is the most likely prototype of the Hidden Imāms who have been taken from earth, live unseen, and will one day reappear as Mahdīs, saviors of the world”. See Ignaz Goldziher, Introduction to Islamic Theology and Law, Eng. trans. Andras and Ruth Hamori, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1981), p. 192.

9 Abdulaziz Abdulhussein Sachedina, Islamic Messianism: The Idea of Mahdi in Twelver Shiism, (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1981), pp.9-11. The term messianism is derived from messiah (anointed), which originally denoted a king whose reign was consecrated by a rite of anointment with oil. In the Hebrew Scriptures (Old Testament), massiṣah is always used in the reference to the actual king of Israel during the intertestamental period. However, the term was applied to restore the future king, who was expected to restore the kingdom of Israel and save the people from all evils. For details see: Helmer Ringgren, "Messianism", in: The Encyclopedia of Religion, Vol. 9, pp.469-72.

10 Blichfeldt, Early Mahdism, pp.1-14.
into complex theories and ideas that were largely institutionalized by Imām Jaṣfār al-Sādiq (148/765) as a way to firmly establish the legitimacy of the Imamate and acknowledge the concealment of the Hidden Imām until his full return at the appropriate time. In their writings, the Twelvers highlight the features of the Hidden Imām as follows: firstly, he is from the descendants of the Prophet Muḥammad (PBUH) and possesses final authority in both the temporal and religious spheres. Secondly, he derives his authority by an explicit designation by the previous Imām and not through an elective system of succession. Thirdly, he has the ability to understand both outer (exoteric) and inner (esoteric) meaning of the Qurʾān by the virtue of the Muḥammadan light which is passed along to each succeeding Imām. Fourthly, he has the authority of interpreting the Qurʾān’s inner meanings because he is divinely inspired, sinless and infallible. To the Shiites, the belief in these features “is not supplementary” but “is an integral part of the profession of faith, inseparable from the highest truths of religion.”¹¹ In other words, the acknowledgment of the expected Mahdē is the fourth cardinal article of the Shiʿī faith, after the affirmation of the unity of God, belief in Prophecy, and belief in the Day of Judgment. To support their belief, the Shiʿī theologians listed a number of traditions attributed to the Prophet Muḥammad (PBUH), such as: the Mahdē will be of the Prophet’s family, he will bear the Prophet’s name, and his father will bear the Prophet’s father’s name;¹² he will appear when the world has reached its worst state of affairs; his reign will be a time of natural abundance¹³; he will spread justice, restore the faith, and defeat

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¹¹ Goldziher, Introduction to Islamic Theology and Law, p.182.
¹² Abū Bakr al-Bazzār published in his Musnad, and at-Ṭabarī in his al-Mu’jam al-Kabīr and al-Awsat from Qurrah ibn Iyas, that he said, “The Messenger of Allah, may Allah bless him and grant him peace, said, ‘The earth will definitely be filled with tyranny and injustice, then when it is full of tyranny and injustice, Allah will send a man from my Ummah whose name is my name and whose father’s name is my father’s name. He will fill it with justice and equity, just as it was filled with tyranny and injustice. The sky will not hold back anything of its rain, and the earth will not store anything of its plants. He will remain among you seven, or eight or nine, ‘meaning years.”
¹³ According to Abū Saʿīd al-Khudarī, he “heard the Messenger of Allah, may Allah bless him and grant him peace, saying, ‘A man from my Ummah will come out speaking by my Sunnah. Allah, mighty and majestic is He, will send down the
enemies of Islam; and he will be generous and divide the wealth; and Jesus, after his descent from Heaven, will pray behind him.

As Kramer argues, this ideology of the expected MahdÊ did not enjoy a similar recognition among Sunni Muslims who believe in consensus of religious scholars for authoritative decision-making. In general, “the Sunni notion of a MahdÊ came to represent more a restorer of faith than the ShiNi incarnation of God, and one would be chosen for office rather than returning from hiding.”

Two of the four fundamental collections of Sunni traditions, those of al-BukharÊ and al-Muslim, make no mention of the MahdÊ; preeminent theologian al-GhazÉlÊ (d. 505/1111) omits any discussion of the expected MahdÊ in his classic IÎyÉ´ NulÊm al-DÊn (Revivification of the Religious Sciences), alluding only to the Qur´Énic signs of the Hour (the Day of Judgment). At the same time, Sunni theologians accept the general belief in a Renewer, or Reformer (mujaddid), who appears every century in some part of the Muslim world and whose function as the reviver of the faith and the strength of the community partly parallels the role awarded to the MahdÊ. This Sunni sympathy seems to have

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14 A ×adÊth with an isnÉd going back to AbË SaÑÊd al-KhudarÊ says: “The Mahdi will come out at the end of my Ummah, and Allah will give him the rain to drink, and the land will produce its plants and he will give wealth free from defect, cattle will be plentiful, and the Ummah will be vast. He will live seven, or eight,”. Ibid.

15 A ×adÊth on the authority of JÉbir al-AnÎÉÊ and Abu Said al-KhudarÊ, spread in Madina probably in early MarwÊnid times, quoted the Prophet (PBUH) as stating that “at the end of my community there be a caliph who will pour the money without counting it”. See Musnad Almad, HadÊth no. 10800.

16 For further details see: SaÑad Mulammad ×asan, Al-Mahdiyya fÊ al-IslÉm mudh Agdam al-NulÊr latÊ al-On, (Cairo: DÊr al-KitÉb al-ÑarahÊ, 1373/1953).


its roots in the message of the Prophet Muḥammad (PBUH) and in his tradition that says: “At the beginning of every century Allah will send to this community who will renew [man yudādīd] the religion.” According to Sunni theologians, the Arabic phrase “man yudādīd” does not mean a certain person, but means either one person or more persons. This enables them to argue that Muslims could have more than one mujaddid in any one age, and the phrase “at the beginning of every century” should not be taken as indicative of a cyclical pattern of taḥdīd on a strict hundred year basis. What the Sunni Ḳulāmī understand from this Ḳathāth is that whenever necessity dictates, Allah inspires a person or persons who, through their lives and works, present the realities of belief and Islam to the people as they were meant to be, presented in a manner that accords with both the true spirit of revelation and the underlying needs of the age. The mujaddid in this sense will accomplish two extremely important things: Firstly, he re-reveals the Qurʾān to the people of his own time just as it was intended to be revealed, and indeed as it was revealed by the Prophet some fourteen hundred years ago; and secondly, he does so in a way that is accessible at the level of mind of the people in his own time, thus uncovering aspects of the Qurʾān that were hidden from the people of Makkah and Madinah in the 1st/7th century.

In contrast to this Sunni version, the Sufi scholars of the 7th/13th century, such as Ibn al-Ḡarbī (638/1240), Ibn al-Qusī (708/1308) and Ibn Wāfīl (697/1298), agreed with the Ḳamāmi doctrine about the identity of the Mahdī and his concealment. It seems that this Sufi consensus had led Ibn Khaldun (808/1406) to argue that “most of our contemporary Sufis refer to the (expected) appearance of a man who will renew the Muslim law and the ordinance of the truth. They assume that his appearance will take place at some time near our own period. Some of them say that he will be one of the descendants of Fāṭimah.”20 For instance, in al-Futūḥī fī Ṭalī-Ṭalīyya, Ibn al-Ḡarbī, described the expected Mahdī as the Seal of the Saints, just as Muḥammad had been the Seal of the Prophets.21 The Mahdī would impose the shariʿa with

20 Ibn Khaldūn, Muqaddimah, p.327.
21 Ibid., p.324.
the sword and Jesus would be one of his wazārs. He would be infallible in his ijtihaḏ (legal opinion) without relying on legal analogy, and the jurists of the schools of thought would be his opponents, while the Sufi saints would be his natural supporters. These views were further elaborated in the Sufi circles dependent on Ibn al-ÑArabī’s thought and influenced by the 7th/13th century Muslims who began to believe that

.... at the end of time a man from the family of the Prophet will strengthen Islam and make justice triumph. Muslims will follow him, and he will gain domination over the Muslim realm. He will be called the Mahdī. Following him, the Antichrist (Dajīl) will appear, together with all the subsequent signs of the Hour (the Day of Judgment), as established in the sound traditions of the Qūʾān (authoritative collections of the Prophet’s sayings recognized by the Sunnites).  

This Sufi consensus gained considerable momentum in the middle of the 7th/13th century, when several Sunni scholars supported the imāmī belief that the Twelfth imām was the expected Mahdī. In 648/1250-1 the Syrian Shafiʿī traditionalist Muḥammad b. Yusūf al-Jandī al-Qurahī composed a book on “al-Bayan fī akhbār ʿIlāb al-zmīn” in which he proved the Mahdīship of the Twelfth imām relying solely on Sunni traditions. In the same year al-Shawkānī (d. 1250/1894) authored a book entitled “al-Tawīl ʿalā Tawīṭara fī al-Muntazar wa al-Dajīl wa al-Masīḥ” in which he discussed the issue of the expected Mahdī, and the appearance of Antichrist and Jesus. 

It seems that this wide spread of the idea of the expected Mahdī came as a result of the rapid deterioration of socio-political and religious situation in the Muslim world, particularly after the destruction of the Abbasid Caliphate in Baghdad by the Mongols in 656/1258, and the transfer of its seat to Cairo in 659/1260 under the patronage of the Mamluk sultans, who removed their Ayyubid masters from power and controlled the political scene in the region. This state of dissatisfaction generated a general tendency among Muslims that the time was ripe for the appearance of the expected Mahdī who would fill the earth with equity and justice,

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as it had been filled with oppression and tyranny. The same state of dissatisfaction repeated itself when the European colonial forces controlled the Muslim world and Muslims began to perceive European colonialism as a sign of the MahdÊ’s appearance. Based on this perception three major jihÊd movements with Mahdist overtones were launched in West Africa, including that of Shehu ÑUthmÊn dan Fodio of Sokoto (1219/1804), Shaykh AlÊmadu BarÊ of Masina (1234/1818) and al-Hajj ŦUmar Tal (1271/1854) of the Tukolor Sultanate.23 Other MahdÊ claimants also rose in Egypt against both French occupation and corrupt Ottoman administration, and called for a return to the pristine purity of Islam, but they were suppressed by ruling authorities and their attempts ended in failure.24

The Fulani jihÊd of ÑUthmÊn dan Fodio is prominent from the other movements mentioned by virtue of its literary output and later influence on the patterns of events in the Sudan. Shehu conveyed an indirect message to the Sudanese about the approaching time of the MahdÊ, and indicated that his followers would be the vanguard of the MahdÊ’s cause. Accordingly, his son MuÎammad Bello wrote:

The Shehu sent me to all his followers in the east among the people of Zanfara, Katsina, Kano, Daura … I conveyed to them his good tidings about the approaching appearance of the MahdÊ, that the Shehu’s followers are his vanguard, and that this jihÊd will not end, by God’s permission, until it gets the MahdÊ. They listened and welcomed the good news.25

This passage leads us to argue that the influence of the Sokoto Sultanate on the rise of the Sudanese Mahdiyya was mainly intellectual due to the fact that the Mahdist beliefs were transmitted from the Fulani-land to the Sudan through the ambitious emigrants who would have liked to take key positions in the administration of

the forthcoming Mahdist state in the Eastern Sudanic Belt. In one of his letters dispatched to followers, Muḥammad Bello instructed the concerned follower to send troops into Wadai and Darfur to seek news of the MahdÊ, since “our Sheikh informed us that his community will emigrate to these regions to meet the MahdÊ and pay homage to him.”26 These good tidings of Shehu and his son Muḥammad Bello encouraged people to emigrate towards the Nile in anticipation of the event. As Kramer argues, the best example is that of ṢNaḥullah al-Taḥkīkh al-Muhaddithin (later the Khalīfah ṢNaḥullah), whose family had emigrated from Wadai to Dīr Taḥkīkh in Darfur, where he settled and married into indigenous dignitaries. Having been spared by al-Zubayr Pasha after falling captive in his hands, ṢNaḥullah wrote to him telling him about a vision in which he had seen that al-Zubayr was al-MahdÊ al-Muntazar.27 Al-Zubayr rebuffed this claim, but this did not apparently drive him to despair. In his first meeting with Muḥammad Aḥmad (al-MahdÊ) he declared that he had seen in him signs of the Expected MahdÊ. Despite the question of accuracy, these accounts reflect “a prevalent mood of expectation that imbued the country”,28 whereupon the people complained bitterly about their grievances and assumed that these grievances would be settled at the hands of the Expected MahdÊ, who would rid the world of all injustice and establish the rule of peace and righteousness.

The Outbreak of the Madhist Revolution in the Sudan

Most Westerners learn about the Mahdist revolution in the Sudan as being staged against the western Christian rulers, probably because of the events leading to the death of a British general, Charles George Gordon, who was killed in Khartoum in 1303/1885 after a year-long siege by the MahdÊ’s forces. It is true that the MahdÊ moved against western influences; but what most people miss is that his movement was originally aimed against the ostensible Ottoman rulers of the time. The MahdÊ’s rationale of

26  Ibid., p.31.
declaring *jihād* against the Ottoman administration in the Sudan was that the country’s leaders were no longer “real” Muslims, and hence no longer had any right to rule. The Westerners were drawn into this conflict partly because they were accused of supporting the “apostate leaders” in their deliberate effort to undermine and eventually destroy the Muslim identity.

Thus the outbreak of the Mahdist revolution in the 19th century Sudan was a result of various internal and external factors that shaped the political landscape in the country, and facilitated the spread of Mahdist tendencies. At the apex of these internal factors one can point out the corrupt administration of the Turkish rulers, who were accused of brutality and injustice, and their religious conviction was seriously contested by the Sudanese. Throughout the sixty years of their administration they took several measures that aroused the opposition of powerful religious and tribal groups against their administration, and later, led them to unite under the banner of the Expected Mahdī, who would release them from Turkish oppression and tyranny. In 1291/1874 for example, the conquest of Darfur by the Turks and their Sudanese clients led to resistance not only from the Kayra ruling family, but more importantly from the Baqqēra nomads of southern Darfur, who realized that they had exchanged the light and intermittent suzerainty of Sultan Ibrāhīm for a detested and tax-collecting bureaucracy. 29

Another internal factor that flamed the opposition against the Turco-Egyptian administration was related to the efforts by Khedive Ismā‘īl to establish an effective administration over the non-Muslim southern Sudan, predominately controlled by the riverian traders. The Khedive’s endeavour to suppress the slave trade also intensified the resistance of these trades, and provoked the opposition of other two main groups. The first group included certain nomadic tribes, such as the Baqqēra of Southern Kordofan-Darfur and the Kabībbēsh, who used to help the slave traders in transporting slave caravans through tribal lands up to the northern Sudanese borders with Egypt. The second group was composed of the riverian farmers who were affected by the suppression of slave

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trade that caused a sharp rise in the prices of domestic and agricultural workers.\(^{30}\)

The third factor was associated with the appointment of religious scholars in the administration of the governmental mosques and judicial institutions at the expense of traditional religious leaders who subsequently voiced their rivalry against the Turco-Egyptians agitating against the loss of a wide range of their judicial, teaching and arbitration functions in the pre-colonial Sudanese kingdoms. The nomination of a large number European Christians in key posts over a vast majority of Muslims also triggered the anger of this group and led it to loose its faith in the Ottoman administration and subscribe to the ideology of the Expected MahdÊ.\(^{31}\)

This edgy political situation encouraged the discontented Sudanese to think loudly about the time of the Expected MahdÊ, who would resolve their grievances. On this issue YusÊf MÊkhÉ´Êl tells us how the people of Kordofan in western Sudan complained bitterly about their grievances and waited for the deliverance at the hands of a MahdÊ. Even the children of al-Ubayyid (capital of Kordofan province) played “Mahdists versus Turks”.\(^{32}\) These accounts reveal how the idea of the Expected MahdÊ had spread widely among the Sudanese and proved to be highly potent ideology in mobilizing and directing their energies against the Turco-Egyptian regime on the one hand and towards constructing a salvation history on the other.

In this context, a Sufi Shaykh with a reputation for piety and integrity, proclaimed himself to be the Expected MahdÊ. This man was Muhammad ibn ÑAbdullahi (1844-1885) who had originally been a disciple in the SammÉniyya Order, following the grandson of al-Shaykh Almad al-Úayyib al-BashÊr, who introduced the SammÉniyya in the Sudan. As John Voll wrote:

\(^{31}\) Ibid., pp.88-89.
Muhammad Ahmad was inspired by a vision of a truly Islamic society and was deeply offended by what he felt was the infidelity of the [Turco-] Egyptian rulers. As he grew older, he became convinced that his mission was to purify the Sudan. He travelled about in the central and western parts of the country, where he won many supporters. This support and the visions confirmed in him the conviction that he was the MahdÊ.  

In MuÍarram 1299/June 1881 he dispatched letters from the Island of AbÉ in the White Nile, informing the notables of the Sudan that he was the Expected MahdÊ. He argued that his MahdÊ-ship was declared in a prophetic assembly attended by the Prophet (PBUH), the four Guided Caliphs, the Prophet al-Khîlîr, and princes of the faith, where the Prophet (PBUH) informed him that he was the Expected MahdÊ. He then supported his claim by quoting Ibn al-ÑArabÊ who says in his commentary on the Qur ÊEn that “the knowledge of the MahdÊ and that Hour none knowth but Allah Most High”, emphasizing that the nomination of the MahdÊ lies outside the scope of human capacity. The previous MahdÊ-claimants were illegitimate due to the assumption of AlÊmad b. IdrÊs that the MahdÊ will come forth from a place that nobody knows and in a condition which the people will refuse to acknowledge. In this sense MuÁammad AlÊmad legitimized his claim and declared jihÉd against the “infidel Turkish rulers” in the Sudan and for the sake of liberating the Muslim world from European colonial hegemony. His call for jihÉd attracted various socio-political and religious groups, which had a common interest in overthrowing the Turco-Egyptian regime. The Sudan itself was divided into two abodes: the abode of Islam (dÊr al-IslÊm) and that of war (dÊr al-Íarb), and the MahdÊ’s followers were urged to cease the payment of taxes and wage jihÉd against their rivals. The responses to the MahdÊ’s call gradually transformed into a nationwide revolution that led to the overthrow of the Turco-Egyptian administration, and the establishment of the Mahdist state in 1303/1885. Khartoum was deserted and branded as the capital of

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the “infidels” and the Mahdists set up the headquarters of their new Mahdist government in Omdurman on the western bank of the Nile.

The MahdÊ, as a head of the state and the sole legitimate successor of the Prophet Muhammad (PBUH), advocated a literal return to the idealist model of the first Islamic State in Madinah. Consequently, he named his senior military officers after the four Rightly Guided Caliphs, appointed a group of judges to hear civil, criminal and personal cases according to the Qur’Én, the Sunna and Mahdist proclamations, and established a treasury, known as bayt al-mÉl, to manage state revenues (i.e., booty, zakÉt, etc.). The measures marked the end of the Turco-Egyptian administration and laid the foundations of the Mahdist social and political order.

The above discussion underlines that the comparative approach of Max Weber’s conceptual model of charismatic leadership can be used as an analytical framework to discuss certain aspects of the Sudanese Mahdiyya. These aspects include the relationship between the MahdÊ’s formative experiences and his subsequent behaviour that proposed him a revolutionary leader; the interaction between his religio-political message and the crisis that was facing the Sudanese society; and the marginality of the MahdÊ’s adherents in the pre-Mahdist process of decision-making and how it motivated them to lead the struggle against their Turkish opponents and their clients. With emphasis on these aspects, one may easily observe the factors that contributed to the MahdÊ’s success during the revolutionary period, and understand how the MahdÊ’s early death had undermined the power of his successor, the KhalÊfa ÑAbdullahi, to comprehensively transform the spiritual and political Mahdist mission into action.

The Global Mission of the Mahdiyya

Before examining the foreign policy of the Mahdist State, it is advisable to first highlight that the Mahdist revolution had occurred in a most crucial era in world history, where the Black Continent (Africa) was about to be divided among European

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imperial forces. Portuguese annexed huge domain of Angola and Mozambique; the Italians took over Somali-land and Eritrea on the Red Sea and later conquered Ethiopia; the German established colonies in East Africa, and in the Cameroon and Togo on the west coast, along with a desert area that came to be known as German Southwest Africa; and the French controlled most of West Africa, from Algeria across the Sahara and the French Sudan (Senegal and Mali) to various points on the Guinea coast. The ultimate plan of the French was to establish a solid French belt across Africa from Dakar to the Gulf of Aden, while their British rivals would like to set up an African-British colony from Cairo to Cape Town.

These imperialist scenarios seem to have been misinterpreted as signs for the appearance of the Expected MahdÊ and the MahdÊ himself directed his attention towards the assurance of his followers that he would pray in Egypt, Damascus, Constantinople and Makkah. After the liberation of Makkah “the world would enter a Mahdist era of complete justice and peaceful harmony, when wolves would play with sheep and children would play with scorpions”.

Warning letters were dispatched to the Khedive TuafÊq of Egypt, Queen Victoria of Great Britain and King Yohannes IV of Ethiopia in order to show their submission to the leadership of the Mahdist State. In his warning letter to King Yohannes, for example, the MahdÊ asserts that Islam had not fulfilled its universal mission because

… religion fell into the hands of the rulers of the earth such the Turks … who replaced it by infidelity (kufr). They annulled the laws of the Merciful and revived the ways of Satan after their own inclinations. When Allah determined to cut short such a state of things, he called me forth as MahdÊ … Allah has manifested His goodness to you in causing you to be present at this age of prophecy in which we have appeared as a successor to our Prophet Muhammad. If you become a Muslim you be get benefit of the two worlds … If not … you will undoubtedly fall into our hands, as we promised the possession of the all earth, and Allah will not change His promise.

The MahdÊ’s unexpected death before achieving these eschatological promises put his successor, the KhalÊfa ŇAbdullah,
in a real political dilemma. Particularly, when he realized that it was mandatory for him to deal with the external threat caused by the clash of European imperialism over his territories, and to translate the eschatological expectations of the Mahdi into action. Influenced by these two factors the Khalif entered a series of wars that had isolated the Sudan, aliened its people and exposed them to a permanent state of wars against Egypt, Ethiopia and finally Britain. These wars undermined the economic and political institutions of the Mahdist state, and eventually paved the way for the European penetration into the region. In 1312/1894 the Italian occupied Kassala in eastern Sudan, strengthening their influence in Ethiopia and Eritrea. As a consequence of the fall of Kassala, the Khalif called for an urgent meeting for his military council in Omdurman. The meeting substantiated him to declare jihad against the Italian in Kassala, and send military reinforcements to his northern borders with Egypt. “At 3 O’clock on the morning of 13 March 1896 Kitchener received a telegram informing him that the British government authorized an advance by the Egyptian army to Naqsha in the Mahdist territory.” 39 By this move the British attempted to give their Italian allies an upper hand in the region and weaken the French influence in Ethiopia and the Red Sea. The French reaction resulted in the support of the Ethiopians in their wars against the Italians, who were terribly defeated at the battle of Adowa in 1314/1896. This success led Menelik of Ethiopia to contact the Khalif in Omdurman, asking for a political alliance against the British and the Italian. The records of the public treasury of the Mahdist State show that in May-June 1897/1315 an Ethiopian delegation landed in Omdurman and was well received by the Mahdist dignitaries.40 Yusuf Mikhel Mikhel said that the head of the Ethiopian mission had provided the Khalif with a French flag and requested him to “raise it on the frontiers of his kingdom for the sake of being an independent king and enjoy the French protection.”41 The Khalif seems to have been

39 Holt, The Mahdist State in the Sudan, p.204.
41 Mikhel, Musakkrat Yusuf Mikhel, pp.193-94.
oblivious of the scale of threat surrounding his state. Therefore, in September 1896/1314 he wrote to his Ethiopian counterpart:

As regards your desire for the conclusion of peace between us and you, be it known unto you that there is no incentive to any European to come to our Islamic territories for the profession of buying and selling or on the pretext of travelling. There is only war between us and them. If you are thus and you forbid all Europeans to enter your country, except in war, so that there is no connection between you and them, as it with us, on this condition peace may be concluded between us and you. 42

This passage illustrates the Khalêfa’s short-sighted policy, and his blurred understanding of how to deal with the scenarios of European imperialism in the region. His rejection to the Ethiopian invitation to some extent facilitated the destruction of the Mahdist forces at the battle of KararÊ (Omdurman) on 2nd September 1898. Sanderson accurately describes the battle of KararÊ as “a triumph of technology over heroism: the AnÎÉr were martyred in thousands as they repeatedly strove, with superb courage and devotion, to pierce Kitchener’s lethal curtain of musketry and fight at close quarters.”43 The MahdÊ’s tomb and grave were later destroyed by the invading forces, and a year later the KhalÊfa was hunted down and killed. The two first decades that followed the overthrow of the Mahdist regime witnessed a series of political and military measures that were carved out to eradicate all the signs of the Mahdiyya in the Sudan.

Conclusion

The above discussion emphasizes that the idea of the Expected MahdÊ had functioned as a potent ideology that directed the energies of the Sudanese Mahdists towards the overthrow of the Turco-Egyptian administration in 1303/1885, and aspired them to establish a territorial Mahdist State. However, the eschatological promises of the Mahdiyya generated a real political challenge to the MahdÊ’s successor, who failed to understand the external pressure caused by the clash of imperialism in the region, and

entered in a series of unsuccessful wars that largely contributed to the breakdown of the Mahdist State in 1316/1898. It is true that the Anlgo-Egyptian invasion forces had succeeded in destroying the Mahdist institutions, but the spirit of the Mahdiyyah remained alive in the hearts and minds of the MahdÊ’s followers. The evident feature of this legacy manifested itself in the establishment of the AnÎÉr religious movement under the leadership of the MahdÊ’s posthumous son, ÑAbd al-Rafîman (1885-1959), and the Umma Party in 1945 under his political and religious patronage. A patron-client relationship was established between the leadership of the AnÎÉr and the Umma Party, where the party derives its chief support from the former Mahdist strongholds in Kordofân, Darfur and the White Nile states, and the AnÎÉr entertain the idea of “the puritanical reestablishment of the Mahdiyya” and regard “themselves as purer and more representative of true Islam” than other socio-political groups in the Sudan. They consider their political struggle as part of their religious commitment, and the political manifesto of their Umma Party as a blueprint for the establishment of a modern Islamic state in the Sudan.44