

Iraq as the Focus for Apocalyptic Scenarios

By David Cook

IRAQ HAS A LONG history of being the center of the Muslim world. Specifically, there are numerous prophecies about the fighting due to take place in Iraq at the end of time—fighting that will herald the revelation of the Muslim messianic figure, the Mahdi. These traditions and their contemporary interpretation, on both a popular level (throughout the Muslim world) and on a more specific level (by radical Sunni and Shi`a groups either fighting or supporting warfare in Iraq), are important for comprehending the conflict and its ramifications. Visualizing the ideological field that is attracting and keeping fighters and “martyrs” is critical for counteracting the dangerous appeal that violent apocalyptic groups, such as Jund al-Sama’, have among the larger population in Iraq.

Iraq in Classical Muslim Apocalyptic Literature and Today

Apocalyptic traditions in Islam occur in both the Sunni and the Shi`a traditions. In general, the Sunni traditions emphasize the fighting with the Byzantine Christians that is to take place in the region of northern Syria and Iraq, culminating in the taking of the Byzantine capital of Constantinople (which historically occurred in 1453 AD). This fighting will then be interrupted by the appearance of the Muslim anti-Christ figure, the Dajjal, who will lead the entire world astray (with the exception of those Muslims known as *al-ta’ifa al-mansura*),¹ and will only be defeated with the aid of Jesus, who will return from the heavens to the city of Jerusalem or to Damascus. At approximately the same time, the messianic figure will arise, and together with Jesus usher in a messianic state with its capital in Jerusalem.

In contrast, the Shi`a traditions do not emphasize fighting against external enemies such as the Byzantines, but against Sunnis. Apocalyptic prophecies for the Shi`a center around the figure of the Twelfth Imam (called either

al-Mahdi or al-Qa’im), who from a historical point of view was occulted from human sight in 874 AD, and will be revealed at the end of the world to usher in a messianic age. His primary enemies are those opponents of the Prophet Muhammad’s family, mainly descendents of Mu`awiyya bin Abi Sufyan,² who fought against `Ali bin Abi Talib, the ancestor of the Mahdi. Mu`awiyya’s descendent is a figure called the Sufyani who for the Muslims of Syria was a messianic figure (because of their veneration for Mu`awiyya), but for Shi`a is the equivalent of the Dajjal. In this way, history will repeat itself, with the Mahdi fighting against the Sufyani in Iraq and defeating him, and then establishing the messianic state with its capital in Kufa (today, south of Najaf).

Both the Sunni and Shi`a have a coherent messianic framework in which to place contemporary events. For Sunnis, this fact has led to a huge growth in popular apocalyptic literature. This type of literature, however, is not useful for radical Muslims because it promotes a sense of fatalism. If God has already foreordained destruction

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for the United States and its allies, then what is the point of going out and fighting them? The most useful form of apocalypse for radicals, therefore, is one in which fighting is portrayed as an open-ended process that will continue until either victory or martyrdom are obtained. Probably the most useful tradition conveying this message is the following: “A group (*ta’ifa*) of my community will continue, fighting for the truth, victorious over those who oppose them, until the last of them face the Dajjal (or in variants: until the Hour of Judgment).” Needless to say, this tradition is featured frequently in

jihadist journals from Iraq.³

With the rise of radical Islam, the most common apocalyptic prophecy was a general one used to emphasize the idea that the entire non-Muslim world is involved in a conspiracy to destroy Islam:

The Messenger of God said: The nations are about to flock against you [the Muslims] from every horizon, just as hungry people flock to a kettle. We said: O Messenger of God, will we be few on that day? He said: No, you will be many as far as your number goes, but you will be scum, like the scum of the flash-flood, since fear will be removed from the hearts of your enemies, and weakness (*wahn*) will be placed in your hearts. We said: O Messenger of God, what does the word *wahn* mean? He said: Love of this world and fear of death.⁴

With such a tradition, any weakness of the Muslim community that occurs in the future is due to the abandonment of jihad. With the added idea of the world falling upon the Muslims like “hungry people,” one has a worldwide conspiracy and a justification to use any method to defend Islam.

Radical Sunni Muslim Development of Apocalyptic Materials

Attitudes of radical Muslims toward the apocalyptic heritage of Islam vary. On the one hand, this material contains many apparent foreshadowing prophecies of current events. These are developed in popular literature sold on the streets in the Arabic and Urdu speaking worlds and translated into other languages (English, French, Indonesian and Uzbek). Although al-Qa`ida and its ideological affiliates made use of apocalyptic language, it is comparatively rare to find any specific

3 For example, see page three of the *al-Fursan* jihadist magazine from November 2005, which can be accessed at www.e-prism.org/images/Fursan_-_mag6.pdf, and page four of the *Dhurwat al-Sanam* jihadist magazine, which can be accessed at www.e-prism.org/images/thurwat_assanam.pdf.

4 Al-Silfi, *al-Fawa'id al-hisan fi hadith Thawban* (Casa-blanca: Dar Ibn `Affan, 2001), pp. 7-14. This was alluded to by Usama bin Ladin in his 1998 *fatwa*, in Bruce Lawrence et al., *Messages to the World* (London: Verso, 2005), p. 59.

1 See, for instance, the *Ansar al-Sunna* magazine from September 2005.

2 Mu`awiyya bin Abi Sufyan was the caliph from 661-80 AD.

prophecies cited by them. In fact, until the end of 2001 major radical Muslim thinkers such as Abu Mus`ab al-Suri ridiculed the use of apocalyptic prophecies on a popular level. Since that time, Usama bin Ladin, Ayman al-Zawahiri and other senior al-Qa`ida leaders have not employed clear-cut apocalyptic prophecies, probably fearing their divisive nature.

With the rise of Abu Mus`ab al-Zarqawi, however, this changed. Through his writings, al-Zarqawi pioneered the identification of U.S. forces with the Byzantines, and positioned himself as one who was fighting on behalf of the entire Muslim community in the apocalyptic wars (for which he used the classical term *malahim*). He made little use of formal apocalyptic traditions until the sieges of Falluja in 2004 and 2005, but for the last two years of his life his attitudes changed.⁵ Apocalyptic traditions for al-Zarqawi supplied the framework for a landscape of warfare enabling him to portray the conflict as an absolute life or death scenario. There is no doubt that this portrayal was controversial and ultimately led to Abu Muhammad al-Maqdisi and al-Zawahiri both remonstrating with him. Nevertheless, with the strategy of demonizing the Shi`a population and employing frequent suicide attacks against both it and its holiest locations, it is difficult to see what else al-Zarqawi could have done.

Use of apocalyptic materials in Iraq represents a sea-change for radical Muslims, and constitutes an as-yet untapped source of energy;⁶ however, it is also a weapon that might be used against them (as it was against al-Zarqawi). On the benefits side for radical Muslims, there is nothing quite like the exhilaration and exaltation that a fighter feels when he is certain he is fulfilling prophecy or is part of the "saved group" (*al-ta'ifa al-mansura*). Among the disadvantages for radical Muslims, however, is the fact that such

material promotes a mindset that is not calculated to win the neutral over, and can alienate even strong supporters of the cause because of its excesses (mass suicide attacks and destruction of society).

Two dangers that al-Zarqawi avoided might yet occur in the future use of apocalyptic materials: one is that some figure might actually proclaim himself to be the Mahdi, and the second is that people or groups might make specific prophecies using dates. Specific proclamations or predictions of this type can lead to divisions within a group or ridicule of it by the larger Muslim world. Both of these problematic issues have not been avoided by other groups (such as the Jund al-Sama' group that proclaimed a Mahdi). One foresees the proclamation of other Mahdis in the Sunni world as the Islamic year 1500 (approximately 2076) approaches.

The Shi`a Respond

Since the Shi`a messianic figure is tied to a historical (or semi-historical) personality, there are few Mahdi appearances documented among them. With the election of President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad in Iran in 2005, however, there has been a heightened profile for the Mahdi, and occasionally attempts to predict his appearance, utilizing the cultic center at Jamkaran (near Qom in Iran) where he is said to be hiding. Yet the conflict in Iraq has provided most of the messianic excitement in contemporary Shi`ism, best illustrated by the Mahdi Army of Muqtada al-Sadr.

Contemporary Shi`a apocalyptic literature outside of Iraq responds to Sunni radicals. While he was alive, al-Zarqawi personified the figure of the Sufyani (ironically, he was even from the area of Jordan from which the Sufyani was supposed to appear) through his activities.⁷ Today, the Shi`a apocalyptic prophecies are more focused against the United States and are closer to mainstream Sunni materials than they were three to four years ago. This

fact has also led to the appearance of apocalyptic groups that bridge the gap between Sunnism and Shi`ism, not easy in the context of Iraq. Jund al-Sama' in southern Iraq (active during January 2007 and January 2008) is an example of such a group, with a specific proclamation of Ahmad al-Hasan as the Mahdi.⁸ The full story of this group has yet to be told, but according to reports in which the Mahdi intended to kill

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the religious leadership of the Shi`a (including Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani) fulfillment of prophecy is clear. Several of the traditions concerning the Mahdi from the classical period say specifically that he will kill the Muslim religious leadership (because of their betrayal of the truth). Other methods used by apocalyptic groups (most probably al-Qa`ida and its associates), such as the destruction of mosques, can also be found in the traditions.⁹

Conflicts and Apocalyptic Prophecies

Wars and apocalyptic upheaval have traditionally been tied together in many world religions.¹⁰ Islam is no exception to this rule. The use of apocalyptic prophecies, however, is a matter that needs to be handled delicately in order for it to successfully hoist a revolutionary group into power. Traditionally, the more common use of apocalyptic prophecies has been made by weak, marginal and even desperate groups who have an exaggerated sense

5 David Cook, "Abu Musa`b al-Suri and Abu Musa`b al-Zarqawi: The Apocalyptic Theorist and the Apocalyptic Practitioner," forthcoming paper.

6 For example, notice how the September 2005 issue of the journal *al-Jami`* linked the Iraq conflict with that of Palestine using the apocalyptic interpretation of Qur'an 17:4-8. A copy of the journal can be downloaded at www.e-prism.org/images/mag01_1.pdf.

7 Abd al-Karim al-Zabidi, *Asr al-Sufyani* (Beirut: Dar al-Hadi, 2006), pp. 222-23; Ibrahim Surur, *al-Mahdi al-muntazar wa-abdath al-zuhur* (Beirut: Dar al-Safwa, 2006), pp. 246-64; Mansur `Abd al-Hakim, *al-Iraq: Ard al-nabu'at wa-l-fitan* (Damascus: Dar al-Kitab al-`Arabi, 2005), pp. 75-76.

8 Other alternative names given in the news sources are Mahmud al-Hasani, or that his original name was Samir Abu Qammar.

9 David Cook, *Studies in Muslim Apocalyptic* (Princeton: Darwin Press, 2002), pp. 17-18, 248-50, 343.

10 Arthur Mendel, *Vision and Violence* (Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press, 1999).

of their divinely ordained position. Such a group is al-Qa`ida, including its ideological affiliates. It has been significantly weakened during the recent past, and could turn once again to the use of apocalypse, not seeing that it has anything to lose. The Shi`a, on the other hand, are in a much more dominant position in Iraq and have a great deal to lose by embracing apocalyptic prophecies. As a result, *fatawa* by al-Sistani do not mention them at all,¹¹ while messianic beliefs are utilized by up-and-coming Shi`a groups such as that of Muqtada al-Sadr, or those entirely outside the power structure such as Jund al-Sama`.

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¹¹ Note his *Abdath al-istifta'at al-`aqa'id'iyya* (Beirut: Dar al-Jawadayn, 2007), p. 97, in which he avoids any answers about the coming of the Mahdi.