

# Messianism and Political Action

## How Utopianism and Nationalism Merge in Contemporary Shi'ite and Jewish Political Theologies

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### Abstract

This paper provides a conceptual framework for understanding the political implications of messianism in both Judaism and Islam, with a focus on Shi'ism. Through a comparative study of the concepts of Jewish Messianism and Shi'ite Mahdism, two major common trends are recognized in both theologies: The first trend is Passive messianism, which disapproves any political action by the believers to hasten the final redemption. For centuries, this perspective was and still is accepted by the mainstream of Jewish and Shi'ite traditionalist and orthodox scholars. The second trend, on the contrary, is called Active messianism – a rather contemporary innovation in Jewish and Shi'ite orthodoxies – which not only finds itself at ease with messianic-oriented political action, but it actually prescribes it as a necessity and a religious task for believers in order to prepare the ground for the coming of the Redeemer. The thesis of this paper is that active messianism, despite proclaiming a universal cause for redemption, has paradoxically embraced nationalism, and it has effectively reinforced and reproduced the idea of nation-state, within both Judaism and Islam. The paper seeks possible reasons for such an unusual marriage of messianism and nationalism, and it concludes that the minority status of both Jewish and Shi'ite people and their long history of suffering and vulnerability can be an explanation for this interesting phenomenon. The paper also recognizes that there is an evolution from more moderate toward more radical messianic nationalism in both Judaism and Shi'ism. While the former only seeks early preparations for final redemption to occur in an unforeseeable future time, the latter is so impatient as to even force the end by blowing into an extremist and xenophobic nationalism.

### Key Words

Active messianism; messianic nationalism; religious Zionism; political Islam.

In the first glance, the terms messianism and nationalism simply sound incompatible. Messianism by nature contains elements of universality, whereas nationalism is defined in the particular borders of nation-state. This paper is an exercise in comparative political theology, examining two different eschatological traditions with their hopes and envisioned scenarios for redemption. As Yehezkel Landau points out, “the common thread linking these two eschatologies is the impact on human spirituality and on the wider society when piety and power politics are intermingled (Landau, 2009).”

The purpose of this research is to study of the concept of messianism and its relation with nationalism by comparing the belief in the *Mahdi* in the Shi'ite Islam, as manifested in post-revolutionary Iran, and the Jewish belief in the Messiah, as understood and interpreted by religious Zionists in Israel.

The Jewish religion bears legal, societal, and national dimensions (Ravitzky, 2006). Before all, Judaism is about *halakhah*, a set of laws that prescribes for its followers a detailed program for life, putting a greater emphasis on their tangible actions than in their declaration of faith. It is also a social religion, as it deals with communal values, trying to regulate the public life as much as it concerns the private. And finally, it is a national religion, since most of its commandments are directed to a particular people, the Israelites, and only a few are meant to address the entire human community at large. Taken together, these elements afford the Jewish religious tradition a definite political character. Consequently, as the contemporary Jewish philosopher Aviezer Ravitzky points out, “such a religio-political tradition can never be indifferent with respect to a state that it regards as the state of the Jewish people. It will strive mightily to influence that state's laws and values and to impose its imprint on its culture and symbols (Ravitzky, 2006: 137).”

The same argument can be made with regard to Shi'ism, though with a few reservations. Like Judaism, Islam (including Shi'ite and Sunni branches alike) is a religion of law (*shari'a*) and it is also a societal religion, with a special attention to the social aspects of life. The only difference comes with the third factor: nationalism. Islam is definitely not a “national” religion in its message and mandate. It has obvious universal claims and it is supposed to be addressed to all human beings in all times. However, Shi'ism is a branch of Islam which might find itself more at ease with the “nation-state.” It is because of the minority and exceptionalist position of Shi'ism within the Muslim world that it can be somehow regarded as a “national” religion, especially in the case

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of Iran (Richard, 1981). Iran is the most populated Shi'ite country in the world, with an absolute majority of Shi'ite Muslims. There is a long history behind how Iranians adopted Shi'ism as their favorite version of Islam.

It goes beyond the scope of this paper to provide a detailed historical review on how Shi'ism became Iran's state religion in the 16<sup>th</sup> century in contrast to the Sunni Ottoman Turks as the main hegemonic rival for the Safavid Empire – the first Iranian dynasty since the Muslim conquest of Persia. What is certainly worth mentioning here is that Shi'ism gradually turned into an Iranian national religion, in which Iranians could find their own destiny and identity. The mythical image of the Shi'ite Imams as righteous and pure people, with tragic fates, perfectly matched the feelings of a proud Iranian nation. These claims focused on the perpetual and historical suffering of the Iranians, who were the victims of several foreign invasions. Moreover, the Iranians always believed that their share in building the Islamic civilization was greater than the other Muslim nations, and therefore, they deserved to be appreciated more than under the Arab rulers. Shi'ism also provided a suitable ground for the reinforcement of this sense of Iranian "exceptionalism" within the Muslim world. The unique role of Shi'ism, as an inspiration and fuel for the Iranian nationalistic cause, has evolved over the centuries into a powerful political institution.

Some of the main questions to be addressed in this paper include: What are the similarities between Jewish and Shi'ite perspectives towards messianism? And how messianism and nationalism have been combined in contemporary Jewish and Shi'ite religious schools of thought over the past century?

In the next few pages, I will try to answer to each of these questions in detail. But before talking about similarities, it would be necessary to clarify what are not similar between Jewish and Shi'ite perspectives of nation-state. For Judaism, two factors are the most important with this regard: Land, and Exile. Jewish nationalism was first and foremost aimed to put an end to Jewish Diaspora all over the world, and to gather Jews in a national home, where they would be immune of any further persecutions at the hands of the gentiles. Although at the beginning of the Jewish nationalist movement the location of such a national home was of no particular importance, Zionism later focused on Palestine – the sacred "Promised Land" for all Jews. As we will see, this emphasis on the Land of Israel could not be divorced from the influence of religious symbols and inspirations. Today, striking to preserve the sacred Land is an inseparable part of Jewish nationalism.

For Shi'ites, however, these two elements have not been as pivotal as for the Jewish people. Although the Shi'ite people have been a minority in the Muslim world often persecuted at the hand of the ruling authorities, they never found themselves living among gentiles like the Jewish people, because the Sunni majority was, at the end of the day, their Muslim fellows. In Iran, where a Shi'ite majority has possessed the territory since the 16<sup>th</sup> century, exile has never been the case. Besides, the "land" of Iran is not sacred by itself according to Shi'ite theology. From the religious perspective, the land of Iran is important as long as a major Shi'ite population lives in there. Therefore, according to Shi'ism, the final redemption goes beyond the two factors of land and exile – it mostly concerns legitimacy and authority. In the following pages, I will further discuss the question of messianism and redemption and its link to nationalism in Judaism and Shi'ism.

## I. Jewish and Muslim Trends to Messianism

In general, a similar concept of redemption determines the attitude toward messianism in Judaism and in Shi'ism. Both Judaism and Shi'ism, in all of their forms and manifestations, have always maintained a concept of redemption as an "event" which takes place publicly, on the stage of history and within the community. It is an occurrence which takes place in the visible world and which cannot be conceived apart from such a visible appearance. Although there is no mentioning of the Messiah in either the Torah or the Koran, messianic teachings in Judaism and Shi'ism have further described the individual personality of the Messiah in detail. According to the Jewish religion, the Messiah shall descend from the King David's generation, whereas for the Shi'ites Mahdi is a direct descendant of the Prophet Mohammad. The Jewish Messiah will be born at the end of time, while the Shi'ite people believe that their Hidden Imam has been physically living in this world since twelve centuries ago and he will continue to stay alive until the right time comes to fulfill his mission. The chain of the Shi'ite Imams came to an end in the late 9<sup>th</sup> century, when the twelfth Imam "Mahdi" disappeared mysteriously under an increasing pressure over the Shi'ite population by the ruling Abbasid caliphs. Imam Mahdi then went into a long concealment until his return at an unknown date in the future, when he would bring justice to the world. Mahdi Bazargan, one of the most famous Iranian contemporary politicians and Islamologues, describes the belief in the Mahdi and in his final victory over the oppressor as the "secret of survival" for Shi'ism throughout all persecutions and sufferings at the hands of the Sunni ruling elite in history (Bazargan, n. d.).

The preeminent scholar of Jewish mysticism, Gershom Scholem, in his valuable work "The Messianic Idea in Judaism," recognizes three forces within rabbinic Judaism – conservative, restorative, and utopian – and he concludes that the messianic idea crystallizes mostly out of the latter two forces together (Scholem, 1970). Indeed, the same explanation can be envisaged with regard to Jewish and Shi'ite messianism alike: "The restorative forces are directed to the return and recreation of a past condition which comes to be felt as ideal. More precisely, they are

directed to a condition pictured by the historical fantasy and the memory of the nation as circumstances of an ideal past. Here hope is turned backwards to the re-establishment of an original state of things and to a 'life with the ancestors.' But there are, in addition, forces which press forward and renew; they are nourished by a vision of the future and receive utopian inspiration (Scholem, 1970: 3)."

A high-ranking Shi'ite scholar, Ayatollah Safi Golpaygani has perfectly expressed the combination of restorative and utopian trends in his description of the Mahdi's future government on earth:

The righteous government and [political] system [in the world] is only one and that would be reliant on God and based on the laws of the Lord. The characteristics [of such a government] are mentioned in the Koran and in the reliable hadiths, and the Prophet Mohammad and Imam Ali have also manifested it in reality (Safi Golpaygani, 1388: 198).

Messianic idea as a living force, in both Judaism and Shi'ism, is closely connected with apocalypticism. As a result, Scholem argues, "the Messianic idea constitutes both a content of religious faith as such and also living, acute anticipation (Scholem, 1970: 4)." In messianic apocalypticism, the old promises and traditions usually come along with new portraits of the future under the two following aspects: the catastrophic and destructive nature of the redemption on the one hand and the utopianism of the content of realized messianism on the other. Scholem describes Jewish Messianism in its origins and by its nature "a theory of catastrophe, which stresses the revolutionary, cataclysmic element in the transition from every historical present to the messianic future (Scholem, 1970: 7)."

Ali Shariati, one of the most famous Iranian contemporary Islamologues, has described the Shi'ite understanding of the coming of the Hidden Imam exactly in the same way – a world revolution which will begin with horror and bloodshed but will result in the establishment of a global government based on justice (Shariati, 1388). Based on several Shi'ite hadiths, Mahdi Bazargan also describes the catastrophic situation of the world which will lead to the coming of the Mahdi:

When the Imam of the Time (Mahdi) will appear the world has been filled with oppression... passion and greed for more money has become like people's religion... people are stuck in injustice, famine, disputes, revolts, and constant stress...(Bazargan, n. d: 8)

A pivotal characteristic of redemption, in Judaism and Shi'ism alike, is the catastrophic nature of it, which is then accompanied by the utopian description of the content of realized redemption. According to Scholem, "apocalyptic thinking always contains the elements of dread and consolation intertwined. The dread and peril of the End form an element of shock which induces extravagance (Scholem, 1970: 10)." The horrors of the real historical experiences of the Jewish/Shi'ite people are coupled with images drawn from the heritage of myth in both traditions.

The paradoxical nature of this conception, as Scholem aptly explains, lies in the fact that there is no causal relationship between redemption and the previous history. The Bible, the Jewish prophets, and the apocalyptic writers have all stressed the lack of progressive transition between history and redemption. The redemption is, thus, "not the product of immanent developments. It is rather transcendence breaking in upon history, an intrusion in which history itself perishes, transformed in its ruins because it is struck by a beam of light shining into it from an outside source. The apocalyptists have always cherished a pessimistic view of the world. Their optimism and hope is not directed to what history will bring forward, but to that which will arise in its ruins, free at last and undisguised (Scholem, 1970: 10)"

Shi'ism, on a similar level, only envisages a "negative" development in history – an intolerable rise in injustice and oppression across the world – that will lead to the coming of the savior. As mentioned in a famous hadith, the Mahdi will fill the world with justice just as it was previously filled with injustice and oppression. According to Mahdi Bazargan, the Shi'ite messianic belief contains both negative and positive aspects: the negative part of the story is that humankind would become completely frustrated and maddened by repressive systems and increasing oppression in the world, but the positive point is that they would eventually and voluntarily find refuge in and welcome the ideal government of the Mahdi based on righteousness and justice (Bazargan, n. d.). On this basis, Bazargan believes in a gradual growth and progress in people's minds which will prepare them for the final redemption. Similarly, Shariati also talks about a "historical necessity," which will bring about redemption and justice at the End of Times. He regards it as a "positive philosophy of history," and a "philosophical optimism," which should encourage the believer to actively remain hopeful and optimistic about the future (Shariati, 1388: 290). But neither Shariati's belief in optimism nor Bazargan's belief in people's mental progress and preparation negate a rather stronger pessimism in their messianic ideology about the current path of history leading toward injustice and oppression. In the Shi'ite perspective, today human society as it is will only end up in a deadlock and failure in all aspects; therefore there will be a need for the savior to come and save the entire humanity. Shariati argues that the Mahdi will come to complete the thread of all those who have fought for justice throughout history (Shariati, 1388). However, one should not forget about the spontaneity of the redemption. As mentioned in most Shi'ite resources, Mahdi's revolution will take place suddenly, unannounced, and precisely when hope has long been abandoned.

Based on what was discussed above, two major factions can be recognized with regard to Messianism in both Judaism and Shi'ism:

1- *Passive Messianism*: This trend is based on traditional orthodoxy, which allows no human action in social and political arenas before the coming of the Messiah (or Mahdi). Redemption will take place only by divine intervention and it's forbidden to hasten it by human actions in society. According to this view, any political movement originated in the messianic tradition would be anti-messianic because it sought to "force the End" prematurely. Sociologists of religion may call this trend "rejectionist," since it adopts a position of rejection vis-à-vis modern national movements. The ultra-orthodox Jewish factions, such as *Haredim*, as well as the *Hasidic* Jews believe in passive messianism.

The majority of Jewish Orthodox leaders condemned Zionism from its very outset as a deviation against Jewish traditional passivity and also because of the secularism of the national idea and the Zionist leaders' and settlers' repudiation of religious practice (Ravitzky, 1996). For example, Rabbi Shalom Dov Baer Schneersohn laid the cornerstone of a principled ultra-Orthodox (*Haredi*) critique of Zionism since the very early years of the Zionist movement in 1899. Schneersohn is a good example of a passivist and traditionalist Jewish leader, who found "the political Zionist awakening – quite apart from the movement's secular character – a denial of messianism, both because of Zionists' arrogance in seeking to bring redemption through human efforts, and because it stopped short of the perfection of the original messianic vision (Ravitzky, 1996: 15)."

In Shi'ism, too, the mainstream of religious orthodoxy has usually supported the passive trend toward the coming of the Mahdi. Among the contemporary Shi'ite scholars, the Grand Ayatollah Hussein Borujerdi, the unarguable leader of the religious mainstream in Iran in the midst of the twentieth century, and more recently, Grand Ayatollah Abolqassem Khu'i were the best examples of those believing in passive messianism. To prove their position, they often referred the path of most Shi'ite Imams (after Imam Hussein) who generally avoid interfering in politics and they even banned their followers from any militant action against the ruling caliphs. These Ayatollahs and many others within religious orthodoxy were harshly opposed to any political action by the Shi'ite believers in order to hasten the coming of the Hidden Imam. He had even publicly banned any political activity by religious scholars, as something opposed to religious orthodoxy.

2- *Active Messianism*: This is a rather contemporary phenomenon in both Judaism and Shi'ism, which approves and even encourages political actions before the coming of the Messiah (or Mahdi) in order to hasten the final redemption. Active messianism has borrowed modern concepts such as nation-state and has widely been influenced by contemporary nationalism.

Below, I will review the evolution of active Messianism within Jewish and Shi'ite worlds, so to explore the similarities among them.

## II. The Evolution of Active Messianism in Judaism and Shi'ism

Under religious activism, two different approaches can be recognized. The first option is both messianic and activist. This approach takes a stance of "expansion," seeking to connect messianism with modern nationalism. But there is also a second option, which separates nationalist movements from messianic expectations, considering the former as ordinary historical achievements. Supporters of this attitude advocate for a total compartmentalization of the realm of nationalism from that of messianism. The difference between this trend and the passive/rejectionist approach is that the latter would totally disapprove any political actions before the coming of the Messiah from a religious perspective, but the former does not find contemporary nationalist movements in Jewish and Muslim worlds to be contradictory to religious faith, but it only removes the element of messianism from them.

The focus of this paper is on the first option of religious activism – the one which is based on messianism.

### 1- The Evolution of Active Messianism in the Jewish World:

In the Jewish world, a few Orthodox scholars began to advocate for a different, more activist and worldly vision of redemption during the nineteenth century. Some even called upon the Jewish people to take a messianic initiative through a gradual process of immigration to the Land of Israel as a necessary and organic step toward full redemption. Among the most well-known ideologues of this new trend were Rabbi Zvi Hirsch Kalischer (Prussia, d. 1874) and Rabbi Judah Alkalai (Serbia, d. 1878) and other "Lovers of Zion." These pioneers of religious Zionism, known as the "Harbingers of Zionism," saw messianic redemption not only as a one-time event but also as a process; not merely as a revolution but rather as an evolution. Unlike the widespread *Haredi* Messianism, the *Harbingers* did not regard partial national reconstruction "as a phenomenon that shatters, uproots, and destroys the whole, but rather as an organic link in the very development of that whole. As such, partial redemption becomes legitimate (Ravitzky, 1996: 28)". Moreover, messianic process as a concrete historical development is distinguished from the messianic goal of achieving a utopia that transcends history. As a result of making such a distinction between the ongoing process and the final goal human activity and voluntary

a distinction between the ongoing process and the final goal, human activity and voluntary communal initiative would be allowed and activism could be justified within the traditional messianic faith. Any human efforts as such, however, should only be completed with a miraculous divine force beyond human or natural capacities (Ravitzky, 1996).

The Harbingers' doctrine of redemption had very limited success at the time, since the rabbinical leadership and the majority of Orthodox Jewry refused to support this vision. Even those religious leaders who supported the Lovers of Zion and the organized settlement movement did not explicitly invoke on messianic motifs and tried to put the emphasis on other elements, such as the unity of the people and the sanctity of the land. The *Mizrachi* movement was the most systemic critical response to the Harbingers of Zionism. However, religious Zionism, as any other dynamic religious movement, required scriptural endorsement. Suddenly, a new generation of religious Zionists, motivated by the pressure of militants who were in search of a more radical theology, started to revise and revitalize the idea of the Harbingers (Viorst, 2002). The Kooks, father and son, have been the most influential characters in reestablishing the expansionist vision with regard to Messianism.

Rabbi Abraham Isaac Kook, the first Ashkenazi Chief Rabbi of Palestine during the 1920s until the mid-1930s, is for no doubt one of the greatest and most influential inspirers of religious Zionism. According to Milton Viorst, "Kook departed significantly not just from conventional Orthodoxy but also from [the] argument that creating a refuge in the Holy Land was a purely political act, religiously neutral (Viorst, 2002: 194)." In 1898, when political Zionism was in its infancy, Kook, a young Latvian rabbi, published his first writing on the question of relation between the Jewish national revival and the laws of Torah. He developed an original, bold approach to the new national undertaking in terms of its religious significance. He tried to defend Zionism against its ultra-Orthodox critics, and simultaneously, he rejected the secular tendencies about Zionism. Unlike the other Zionist rabbis of his time, "he continued to elaborate the dream of the Harbingers of Zionism, endowing the Zionist undertaking with a clearly messianic import. He took an activist, worldly stance on the question of national revival and argued that Jewish people had a *sacred duty* to put an end to their exile by their *own efforts* (Ravitzky, 1996: 87) [*emphasis added.*]" He went further to speak openly of "the generation of the Messiah" and "the roots of the coming of the Messiah" as being symbolized by the historical process of Jewish return to the Holy Land (Ravitzky, 1996: 88).

In following the political philosophy of Maimonides, Kook believed that political freedom for the Jewish people was a necessary precondition for their spiritual freedom and cultural growth. Therefore, returning to the Holy Land would be a prerequisite for the spiritual revival of the Jewish people. On the other hand, he warned against the dangers of nationalism when separated from religion, arguing that the nation's political rebirth must be accompanied with a parallel spiritual force to guide it. The core of Kook's theory is a firm emphasis on an organic interconnection between the "national idea" and the "divine idea" – there can be no revival of the one without revival of the other (Ravitzky, 1996).

Kook saw the secular rebellion as being itself part of the process of religious redemption. He had achieved a dialectical view of progress according to which "destruction for the sake of construction is itself a kind of construction. (Ravitzky, 2006: 105)" As a result, what is religiously sacred could even be built up at the hands of secular forces, and the secular rebellion is itself considered as being part of the process of religious redemption.

In analyzing Kook's political thought, Ravitzky believes that the Rabbi had distinguished carefully between the subjective intentions of the individual acting in history and the objective results of his/her actions: "One may play an effective role in a sequence of events, helping to move matters along and even struggling toward a certain end, without grasping the inner logic of the events, their true meaning or real consequences... This is the convoluted path of what Kook calls "the irony of history" (Ravitzky, 1996: 111)." Therefore, he had no worry about the secular nature of Zionism, since he was convinced that the seculars would eventually be blessed by the truth of faith, and even if they did not become religious people, the outcome of their efforts would be beneficial to the greatest religious goals.

Rabbi Kook did not feel the need to address in detail the question of how *halakhah* should be implemented in the future Jewish state under the secular rule. Moreover, his messianic teachings remained mostly unpracticed until many years after his death in 1935. Nevertheless, these ideas began to play a central role in Israeli politics following the June 1967 War. According to Viorst, many preferred to see Israel's military victory in this war "as supernatural, divinely determined, a giant step toward messianic redemption (Viorst, 2002: 188)." Kook's son, Zvi Yehuda, appeared as a leading figure in advocating and developing his father's teachings among a large group of disciples who had gathered around him since the 1950s. Rabbi Zvi Yehuda Kook and his school transformed the elder Kook's teachings into a concrete program for action and to the most extreme level. According to Rabbi Ya'akov Ariel, one of Rabbi Zvi Yehuda Kook's leading disciples, he translated the aspirations of his father into the language of action: "Though he himself was not a man of action, he was able to bring his father's exalted ideas into focus in such a way that when, at just the right moment, they encountered a public yearning to act, they turned into a powerful movement (Ravitzky, 1996: 123)." Under Zvi Yehuda's interpretation of his father's thoughts, both the territory and the structure of the state of Israel were considered holy (Nur, 2007). He turned his father's universal vision of redemption into a narrow and hard-line nationalism. While Kook, the father, held that the Jewish state would lead the people to redemption, his son came close to regarding the state as redemption itself (Viorst, 2002). He re-created religious Zionism from a well-meaning complement to secular Zionism into a radical

nationalism imbued with faith. From the junior Kook's perspective, "the messianic significance of the modern return to Zion was not confined to the national plane, to the ingathering of the exiles and the recovery of sovereignty over the land; it is part of a cosmic process of universal redemption. Hence, "historical necessity" is intertwined with "cosmic determination," and together they guarantee success. This is quite a new and remarkable version of the elder Kook's idea of progress (Ravitzky, 1996: 125-126)".

Over the past decades, this hard-line messianic theology has had clear influence on politics, settlement activity, and military affairs in Israel. According to Rabbi Zvi Yehuda Kook, "part of this redemption is the conquest and settlement of the land. This is dictated by divine politics, and no earthly politics can supersede it." He goes so far as to identify the "eternal Israel" and its transcendent power explicitly with the political and military power of the State of Israel:

The State of Israel is divine...Not only can/must there be no retreat from [a single] kilometers of the Land of Israel, God forbid, but on the contrary, we shall conquer and liberate more and more, as much in the spiritual [as in the physical] sense...We are stronger than America, stronger than Russia. With all the troubles and delays [we suffer], our position in the world, the world of history, the cosmic world, is stronger and more secure in its timelessness than theirs...In our divine, world-encompassing undertaking, there is no room for retreat (Ravitzky, 2006: 131-132).

The ideology of messianic determinism grew gradually more extreme and radicalized through generations: from Rabbi Abraham Kook to his son, from Rabbi Zvi Yehuda Kook to his disciples, and to a new generation of youngsters. *Gush Emunim* is the best example of a radical messianic-nationalist movement directly inspired and created by the teachings of the junior Kook. Since its establishment in the mid 1970s, *Gush Emunim* has turned out to be very influential in Israeli society and appealing to secular and religious Israelis alike.

## 2- The Evolution of Active Messianism in Shi'ism

In contemporary Iran, several of the ideologues of the Islamic Revolution during the 1960s and 1970s can be compared to the Harbingers of Zionism. One can specifically refer to Mahdi Bazargan, Ayatollah Morteza Motahhari, and Ali Shariati. Many years before the Islamic Revolution, they all provided an "activist" interpretation of Shi'ite messianic ideology. In one of the earliest works on Shi'ite messianism by Iranian contemporary Islamists, Bazargan said in the early 1960s in a speech to a group of Islamist students that expecting the Hidden Imam may not be limited to passively awaiting him, but it required action: "We should not think that Imam Mahdi's action will be a totally unprecedented and self-growing one, without any grounds and prior preparations (Bazargan, n.d.:111)." He added that two opposite streams were presenting themselves throughout all events in the world: oppression and injustice on the one hand and justice-seeking on the other. He suggested that these two fronts should confront each other and the righteous side should prevail (at least partially) in order for the people to find conviction in the truth of the prophets' promises and the road would be paved for the coming of the Mahdi and final redemption. This way, Bazargan approved the necessity of "partial redemption" exactly as the Harbingers did. "It is our task," he said, "to constantly present the righteous word and especially the righteous action against each of the actions of the wicked front (Bazargan, n. d.: 115-116)." According to Bazargan (n. d.), partial redemption and providing an "example" for the victory of justice over oppression was pivotal for preparing the ground for the coming of the Hidden Imam: "We should be hopeful and happy and proud and active and we should turn the Imam's expectation away from silence and passivity and become pioneers of this great jihad and soldiers of the Hidden Imam's army from now (Bazargan, n. d.: 120)"

Ayatollah Morteza Motahhari was one of the most well-known contemporary Shi'ite philosophers and one of the most influential leaders and ideologues of the Islamic Revolution in Iran. Several years before the Revolution, Motahhari wrote a short essay on the Mahdi's "uprising and revolution" from the perspective of the philosophy of history. In this essay, Motahhari also advocated for the idea of "partial redemption" as he said "partial and gradual reform can never be condemned" since not only they do not delay the final redemption but they will contribute to the righteous people's fighting against the wicked people, and it will therefore accelerate and hasten the final victory of righteousness over evil (Motahhari, 1387: 42-43). Motahhari harshly criticizes the passive approaches to messianism, arguing that the only right way of expectation according to the Koran and Hadiths (sayings of the Prophet and Imams) is the activist path, in which the believers would actively "prepare" themselves for welcoming the final redemption (Motahhari, 1387). He describes the Mahdi's movement as the "last step in the chain of conflicts between good and evil which have existed since the emergence of the world (Motahhari, 1387: 59)." He further talks about a Shi'ite belief about "a government run by a group of righteous people" which will continue until the coming of the Mahdi. Without any reference to the Islamic Revolution, he concludes that such a belief by itself means that the righteous front would not and should not be totally abandoned prior to the coming of the final savior (Motahhari, 1387).

Ali Shariati was also a major ideologue of the Islamic Revolution, whose ideas on active messianism sound similar to those of the Harbingers of Zionism. In a public speech which was later published under the title "expectation, the school of protest," Shariati provides a revolutionary and resistant picture of the Shi'ite messianic ideology. Shariati distinguishes two manners for expecting the Hidden Imam: the passive manner, which he strongly denounces, and

models for expecting the Mahdi from the passive model, which he strongly denounces, and the activist approach which he passionately supports. According to Shariati (1388), expecting the Mahdi should not only be a silent aspiration for the believers, but it should work as a social and political force, an engine for actively protesting against the existing status-quo in the world. Like Bazargan and Motahhari, Shariati also sees the coming of the Mahdi not as the first but as the “last” step in the chain of a constant and ongoing confrontation between good and evil,

justice and injustice. This impression of messianism is very similar to the Harbinger’s perspective to consider messianic redemption as a process – an evolution which will however lead towards the final revolution.

In contemporary Shi’ism, Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini is for no doubt the most famous scholar who advocated and practiced a maximalist activist approach to messianism. Ayatollah Khomeini used to harshly attack Shi’ite traditionalist scholars who disapproved the idea of the establishment of an Islamic government prior to the coming of the Mahdi, and accused them for being “irresponsible” and far away from the truth of Islam (Khomeini, 1369). According to Ayatollah Khomeini, it was absolutely necessary for the *shari’a* rules to be implemented in Muslim society even though the Imam of the Time (Mahdi) is absent:

I would like to pose this question: from the Imam’s disappearance up to now it has been more than a thousand years and it possible that some more hundred thousand years would pass and [God’s] expediency would not require the Imam to come. Should the Islamic rules be abandoned during such a long time, and should everybody do whatever they like? Is there supposed to be anarchy? The laws that the Prophet of Islam dedicated breathtaking efforts during twenty-three years to announce, disseminate, and practice, were they only for a limited period of time? Did God restrict His laws only to two hundred years? And did Islam give up all of its [shari’a] after the disappearance [of the Imam]? (Khomeini, 1388: 27)

Ayatollah Khomeini’s answer to all of these questions was negative. He, therefore, came up with a solution which was unprecedented in Shi’ite orthodoxy: to establish a theocracy under clerical rule to govern the society in accordance with religious laws. And in order to establish such an Islamic government, it would be necessary for the Shi’ites to “rise up” for the sake of God and in following the task that the Hidden Imam will eventually complete (Khomeini, 1369). Ayatollah Khomeini repeatedly stressed the need for the Shi’ite people’s “preparation” for meeting and welcoming the Mahdi, and made it clear that such a preparation would not be maintained through passivity and inaction. He described the main task of the Islamic government in Iran to “implement the just divine rule” in society, and also to support all the oppressed in the world in order to prepare the ground for the final movement led by the Mahdi (Khomeini, 1369). He also put much emphasis on the role of the Iranian nation in anticipating the coming of the Hidden Imam:

May God bless, as everything has thus far been going on successfully by His covert help, so this country which is the country of the righteous Imams and the country of the Imam of the Time (Mahdi) would preserve its independence until the latter’s promised appearance. Then it will hopefully lay its power in His Highness’s service to – God willing - bring justice to the world and to put an end to all the oppressions from which the repressed are suffering (Khomeini, 1369, Vol. 14: 195).

The utopian factor was also a pivotal part of Ayatollah Khomeini’s approach to messianism. He considered the redemption under the Mahdi as the final redemption of all the mankind from all corruptions and deviations. The Ayatollah hoped that with the expansion of the Islamic Revolution in the world, the “evil powers” would get isolated and “governments of the oppressed” would be established throughout the globe to “prepare the ground for the world government of the Mahdi of the End of Times (Khomeini, 1369, Vol. 15: 187).” Yet, he never anticipated when this would occur, nor did he claim that such a goal would necessary be achieved in an early future.

In recent years, a more extremist approach to active messianism has appeared in Iran – a phenomenon which is best represented by current President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad. This new faction of Shi’ite millenarians believes that the End of Times has already begun and that the coming of the Savior is imminent. Under these circumstances, the “Iranian nation and government” are assigned to carry out a “special mission” and they will play a crucial role to pave the way for the Hidden Imam to come. (Tabnak news website, 2010). In Ahmadinejad’s perspective, therefore, messianism is regarded in more objective terms and less philosophical. About the imminence of the redemption, Ahmadinejad said:

Some people regard the Islamic Revolution as preparing the ground for the final move [toward redemption], but the Islamic Revolution is itself part of the final move. The final move has already begun and god willing it will soon reach its ultimate victory (Official website of the President of the Islamic Republic of Iran, 2010).

Saying that the Islamic government in Iran has been established precisely to lead the people toward final redemption under the Mahdi, Ahmadinejad argued that the emergence of the Hidden Imam’s government is imminent and much closer than many people might think and that the Iranian Shi’ite people should prepare themselves to take a role and responsibility in Mahdi’s future government (Borna news website: 2010). In Ahmadinejad’s ideology, Iranian nation will play a central role in the messianic events which will lead the whole mankind toward final redemption. According to him:

We must define our mission in the context of the [Mahdi’s] world revolution. Thanks to God’s blessings and thanks to the emergence of the Islamic Republic and to the resistance of the great Iranian nation, the world is

today at the edge of final movement [toward redemption]. As a result, we have two major missions: to construct our own country, and to make the world aware of the [Hidden] Imam's path and authority (Tabnak news website, 2010).

### 3- Conclusion

Messianism/Mahdism as the belief in the heavenly ordained redemption of the Jewish/Shi'ite people and the whole of mankind is a central tenet of Judaism/Shi'ism. The traditional concept of Jewish/Shi'ite messianism represented a passive and a-political attitude, which obliged believers to await patiently the miraculous coming of the Messiah/Mahdi. The novelty of the discussed contemporary political theologies in Judaism and Shi'ism was that they introduced the political dimension into Jewish/Shi'ite messianic tradition, by insisting on the religious right and obligation of the believers in the post-emancipation period to take an active part in the process of God-ordained national redemption.

However, as Eliezer Don-Yehiya (1987) aptly pints out, there is no inherent contradiction between "Messianism" and a pragmatic and realistic approach to the concrete issues of practical politics. He argues that not all the forms of "active Messianism" would necessarily end up in radicalism. While some forms of active messianism may advocate a radical program of political action for the immediate and full-scale realization of the messianic vision, some other interpretations might be more moderate and pragmatic, taking into account the conditions of social and political reality. In the words of Don-Yehiya,

[W]e should draw a distinction between "messianism" as a theory, a principle of historical interpretation, and "messianism" which is also an operative program for political action. While the first may also have practical political implications, in this case it is the nature of the desired goals and purposes which is defined by the messianic vision, and not the political means for their realization, which are to be decided upon and implemented in accordance with practical and rationalistic considerations. By contrast, messianism as a political program means that not only the goals, but also the means for their attainment, are governed by messianic ideas and attitudes. Hence, in this approach radical politics are an integral part of the messianic theology which legitimizes and prescribes this style of politics (Don-Yehiya, 1987: 224).

Therefore, it can be argued that the uniqueness of the extremist active messianism in Shi'ism and Judaism is not about their political radicalism alone or their belief in messianism, but it derives from their transformation of the messianic vision into a radical and comprehensive political agenda that would have an implication in all policy-makings and actions.

The purpose of this paper was not to make any analogy between Iran and Israel as political establishments. For obvious reasons, the "Islamic Republic" and the "Jewish State" are conceptually and structurally very different entities. This research, however, showed the linkage between messianic ideology and nationalism in contemporary Shi'ite and Jewish political theologies. In both cases, religion has been employed to support an innovative and revolutionary national plan (i.e. Jewish and Shi'ite/Iranian political sovereignties). The danger lies when extremists from both sides tend to "force the End" from below, advocating and prescribing violence as a means to "hasten" the coming of the final redeemer.

One may wonder how Shi'ite and Jewish believers can prevent the misuse of their messianic beliefs by political radicalism. How can they counter the actions of those who invoke these sacred traditions in the service of self-serving political purposes? Landau (2009) suggests education as a possible solution: "Learning about each other's faith traditions is one essential and urgent requirement. Religious educators and media professionals need to help educate the wider publics about the people and tradition being negatively caricatured. If they would sponsor honest explorations of the positive and negative elements in each community's religious heritage, such pro-active leadership would help reduce the mutual demonization. Recognized religious authorities need to commit themselves to this process of mutual healing, so that past trauma does not become an excuse for future violence." Therefore, inter-religious studies and dialogue at a large scale will perhaps be the only solution to increase mutual tolerance, reduce the risk of conflict, and to counteract the extremists' enthusiasm for catastrophe.

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