The Islamic State (IS) and the Sudanese “Mahdiyyah”: a Comparative Analysis of Two Apocalyptic Jihadist States

By

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Introduction

The Islamic State of Iraq (ISI) June 2014 formation of a transnational caliphate is an extraordinary event. Driven by a sectarian, takfiri and apocalyptic ideology ISI’s proto Iraqi-Syrian jihadist state presents many regional and global security challenges. Badly damaged by Post 2006 US counterterror operations and a Sunni tribal uprising against ISI progenitor Al Qaeda in Iraq (AQI), the Islamic State of Iraq made a remarkable resurgence. After the 2011 US military withdraw, a Shia dominated government in Baghdad pursued polices repressing the Sunni minority. Its politicians were prosecuted for supporting terrorism, Sunni army officers were demoted, and Anbar based tribal militias were dismembered. Sunni protests against Baghdad’s discriminatory policies were savagely crushed. ISI was able to recover as a protector of Sunni interests.

By 2013 Islamic State of Iraq (ISI) had rebuilt its terror network by securing tribal alliances and replenished its ranks by attacking correction facilities liberating hundreds of jihadist prisoners. The Syrian civil war, moreover, accelerated ISI’s transnational expansion. Supported by its Syrian operations, ISIS conquered the Sunni heartland in Central-Western Iraq. On June 29, 2014 ISI spokesman Abu Muhammad al-Adnani declared a caliphate called The Islamic State (IS). Adnani’s decree was sanctified by IS emir Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi’s Mosul Grand Mosque July 2014 sermon that demanded the loyalty of world’s Muslims and their emigration to the caliphate. By declaring a caliphate Baghdadi’s (now Caliph Ibrahim) IS seeks regional hegemony. IS’ caliphate has support from thirty terror networks including Egypt’s Ansar al Jerusalem and Nigeria Boko Haram. Within one year the caliphate has amassed provinces (wilayats) in Algeria, Libya, Egypt, Yemen, Saudi Arabia, Nigeria, Khorasan (Afghanistan-Pakistan) and the Caucasus.

IS has sent shockwaves across the jihadist world. Al Qaeda’s (AQ) leadership viewed Baghdadi’s quest to for a Syrian-Iraqi transnational state as a bid to dominate the global jihadist movement. Reacting to Baghdadi’s February 2014 creation of the Islamic State of Iraq and al-Sham (ISIS) that unified his Iraqi ISI and Jabhat al Nusra (JN) Syrian operations, AQ emir Ayman al-Zawahiri nullified the union demanding that Baghdadi cede authority over Syrian operations to JN emir Abu Muhammad al-Golani. Baghdadi sharply rebuked Zawahiri’s commands. After Baghdadi’s refusal relations between the two worsened and by January 2014 ISI and AQ affiliated JN fought each other in Syria. Thousands of jihadists died. One month later Zawahiri expelled ISIS from AQ’s network.

IS is the largest, best financed and armed jihadist state in history. As expressed in media operations IS confidence derives from its apocalyptic ideology. The caliphate’s internet posted beheadings, stoning, crucifixion, immolations and drownings have shocked the world. The closest historical precedent we have to IS is the 19th century Mahdist revolt and its creation of a jihadist state. From 1885-98 the Mahdiyyah challenged the Ottoman and British Empires. The 19th century Mahdist revolutionary state has interesting parallels to ISIS caliphate.
Driven by an apocalyptic ideology the Mahdists wanted to build a caliphate to “liberate” Jerusalem and “occupy” Constantinople. Like their modern brethren the Mahdists fought a declining Western power. Khartoum’s fall to Mahdist forces and their butchering of its British commander General “Chinese” Gordon in 1885 have their parallel in the collapse of the American armed and trained Iraqi army. Like the current United States led effort to “degrade” and “defeat” the Islamic State, imperial Britain initially waged a limited military campaign against the Mahdists by assisting local forces. After repeated defeats of Egyptian-Sudanese expeditionary forces by the Mahdiyiyah’s fanatical warriors and a failed decade long limited campaign to overturn the Mahdiyyah, Britain found the will to use its own ground troops against the Mahdiyyah. When the Mahdist state was vanquished, British technological superiority and massive firepower were decisive.

This essay’s compares two millenarian jihadist state movements and the security challenges they posed to the international order. It does so in three parts. First, it provides an overview of the apocalyptic component in Sunni Islam that guided these movements. Second, it assesses their leadership and ideology. Finally, it analyzes the defeat of the Mahdist state and if it offers guidance on how to confront the Islamic State.

I. Sunni Apocalyptic Visions

Like Judaism and Christianity, Islam envisions a cataclysmic end to the world. While a day of final judgement is contained in the Qur’an, its suras (chapters) say nothing about the eschatological events that bring about the world’s end. Vision of the Islamic apocalypse are, however, suggested by the Prophet’s words as recorded by his companions and followers. Hundreds of these hadith exist and some express millenarian visions of the “signs of the hour” and a “final battle”.

These hadith foretell a Muslim world weakened by intra-civilizational conflict [fitnah] and a final battle pitting Muslim armies against diabolical crusader forces. This final battle is, however, a consequence of a complex set of forces. Faced with internal religious decay, the Muslim world is redeemed by a “divinely guided leader” (the Mahdi) who purifies Islamic civilization by restoring Sharia law and defeating Byzantine crusader forces. Within this eschatological tradition Jesus [Issa] descends from heaven to help the Mahdi defeat the anti-Christ’s [Dajall] leading to global Islamic conquest and the creation of an earthly paradise.

These “signs of the hour” foretell internal and external conflict where a resurgent victorious Islam conquers its co-religious and foreign enemies. One hadith speaks of a titanic battle in the Levant near the Syrian town of Dabiq where Muslim forces defeat the Romans. Named after this prophesied battle IS English language magazine Dabiq predicts the caliphate’s annihilation of the West and its Shia [rafidah] proxies. The leader of the Mahdist revolt Muhammad Ahmed “prophetic dreams” fueled his desire for imperial conquest.

Under Islamic millenarianism, the Mahdi is a pivotal figure in Islam’s self-purification and refortification. His rise, however, is predicated upon the emergence of violent fault lines and intra-confessional antagonisms. Within this context, the Mahdist and Islamic State revolts were responses to the “internal rot” of Muslim society created by what they believed was the faith’s “accretion” of foreign...
influences. Like IS leader Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, Muhammad Ahmed wanted to purify Muslim society by eviscerating Ottoman apostasy and restoring Sharia.\textsuperscript{16}

The 1881 Mahdist revolt borrowed from the Shi’ite and Sunni mystic traditions of a “divinely guided” leader who corrects the world’s injustices.\textsuperscript{17} Sudan’s harsh conditions, draught, famine and brutal foreign domination may have fortified a spiritual movement hoping for a divinely anointed agent to relieve mass suffering. Mystical journeys, asceticism, dreams and clairvoyant visions are prominently featured in Sufi traditions. Sufi doctrine in the Sudan evolved out of the teachings of hundreds of religious orders [tariqa] dominated by sheiks who commanded cult like followings.\textsuperscript{18}

Egypt’s 1821 Sudanese conquest clashed with Sufi religious orders that refused to abide by the rulings of Cairo’s ulama. Sufism evolved into a form of religious and political resistance to Turko-Egyptian and later British colonial administration.\textsuperscript{19} Harsh Egyptian taxation and British efforts to abolish the slave trade created Sudanese resentment and economic hardship. Spearheaded by the 18\textsuperscript{th} century Saudi Wahhabi movement, Salafi ideas reached Sudan by the early 19\textsuperscript{th} century spread by revivalist Saudi missionaries.\textsuperscript{20} The Wahhabis believed that that Ottoman deviation from orthodox doctrines and practices had weakened the ummah’s moral fabric. Muhammad Ahmed was a member of the al-Sammaniya order that was originally founded in Medina but spread to the Sudan by the early 1800’s.\textsuperscript{21} Once established in the Sudan Wahhabi inspired religious orders progressively absorbed Sufi influences over time.\textsuperscript{22} Sheiks associated with this order were venerated by their devoted Dervish disciples through shrines consecrating their memory. By integrating Wahhabi ideals with fanatical devotion to religious leaders these cliques created an explosive ideological mix that facilitated the Mahdist revolt.

Having spent decades as a popular ascetic preacher, Muhammad Ahmed’s June 1881 Mahdi self-declaration sent off shockwaves across Sudan.\textsuperscript{23} Egyptian colonial administration efforts to force his capitulation were rebuffed. Emboldened by the Mahdi’s resistance Ahmed’s supporters massed into armed revolutionary movement. The Mahdi’s primitive but fanatical army devastated four Egyptian military expeditions and his Ansars [partisans] threatened to invade Egypt.\textsuperscript{24}

Among modern jihadist movements IS and the Mahdists are anomalies. Contemporary jihadism has been mostly devoid of apocalyptic orientations. Al Qaeda’s ideological doctrine eschews millenarian themes.\textsuperscript{25} Beyond the Sudanese 19\textsuperscript{th} century Mahdiyyah and the Islamic State, only the 1979 Mecca Grand Mosque seizure by an apocalyptic cult led by Juhayan al-Ataybi is notable. Believing it divinely inspired Juhayan’s cult declared one of its leaders the Mahdi hoping its mosque seizure would trigger the apocalypse.\textsuperscript{26} After a tense four week mosque siege, Saudi and French Special Forces put an end to the crisis. During the raid the self-appointed Mahdi and many of his followers were killed. Surviving cult members were subsequently tried and most were executed.

Thomas Hegghammer interpreted the event as an oddity attributable to peculiar group dynamics and personality disorders.\textsuperscript{27} What began as a quietest Salafi movement morphed into a self-destructive millenarian cult. Despite Juhayan’s failure there has been a revival of Islamic apocalyptic ideas. Jean Pierre Filiu argues that political crises and the advent of a new century in the Muslim world historically have been linked to apocalyptic revivalism.\textsuperscript{28} The Iranian Revolution and the Afghan Jihad catalyzed Shi’ite and Sunni millenarian study and speculation.\textsuperscript{29} While many post 1979 apocalyptic theories erroneously interpret hadith and feature diabolic Judeo-centric conspiracy theories, they represent a deep
Islamic millenarian undercurrent. Given the interest in Islamic eschatology, Filiu concludes that apocalyptic jihadist groups have enormous growth potential.30

Often considered a secondary driver of Islamic violence, jihadist ideology is beginning to be taken seriously by scholars.31 The growing academic focus on ideology as a prime catalyst for jihadist groups is being extended to the study of jihadism’s millenarian dimensions. With the rise of ISIS apocalyptic ideology, scholarly analysis of Islamic eschatology has burgeoned.32

Will McCant’s argues that IS’ predecessor Islamic State of Iraq (ISI) viewed one of its leaders as the Mahdi and that its formation of a Sunni jihadist state in 2006 was designed to spark divine intercession.33 ISI’s Post- Zarqawi leaders Abu Hamza-Muhajir and Abu Umar al-Baghdadi emphasized apocalyptic and sectarian orientations. Faced with targeted assassination by US Special Forces and an anti-Al Qaeda rebellion in Anbar Province the group’s delusions may have been a psychological reaction to severe adversity. According to McCants, the ISI’s decline and the killing of its key leaders in 2010 prompted a reformulation of its apocalyptic messaging.

Re-invigorated under Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi ISIS apocalyptic message emphasizes the group’s role in preparing for the Mahdi’s emergence and its media organs prioritizes the caliphate as prophetic mechanism to purify the Muslim world and defeat crusader and Shi’ite apostate forces. This caliphate centric focus was officially proclaimed in July 4, 2014 by ISIS emir Baghdadi. His Mosul Grand Mosque sermon separates the world into competing belief systems pitting virtuous Muslims against their devilish apostates. 34

ISIS”s caliphate is accordingly a transitional stage to unite Muslims against nefarious forces. Dabiq emphasizes Caliph Ibrahim religious authority and his commitment to the “prophetic method”.35 Unlike the Mahdists IS does not claim that Baghdadi is the divinely guided one. His supposed lineage from the Prophet’s tribe and his PhD in Islamic studies give Caliph Ibrahim religious legitimacy.36 Baghdadi like his ISI and AQI predecessors is viewed as part of a prophetic process that will culminate into an apocalyptic encounter with Shia and Crusader enemies. Based upon their reading of hadith ISIS’ victory is preordained.

Muhammad Ahmed and his successor Khalifa Abdullah also employed apocalyptic and prophetic images. There is little debate that the Mahdists were influenced by prophetic methodology and belief in mystical forces. Khalifa Abdullah fateful decision to commit his 50,000 troops in an open field in broad day light against well-armed British-Egyptian forces at the disastrous battle of Omdurman was based on a dream that prophesied victory37. Whether IS’ core leaders apocalyptic beliefs are genuine is debatable. If they are than they are bound to make many of the Mahdiyyah’s mistakes. Like IS’ caliphate the Sudanese jihadist state brutality, fanaticism and conquests created an international uproar and overturned the regional balance of power. It remains an imperfect yet important historical precedent upon which to compare the Islamic State’s evolution. The Mahdiyyah and the Islamic State have strong parallels. It is to this issue that we now turn.
II. The Mahdist State and ISIS: Leadership and Ideology

The Mahdist revolt was symptomatic of a profound crisis in the Muslim world. The Wahhabist movement that sought a return to traditional Islamic orthodoxy had profound ramifications across the world as early as the 18th century. Its effects eventually reached the Sudan. The appeal of this fundamentalist world view across the Muslim world accelerated as a reaction to Ottoman revisionism. The Empire’s weakness by the middle part of the 19th century could no longer be denied. The Golden Age of Islam in the 16th century had been steadily eclipsed by Western powers.

The Ottoman 19th century position in Egypt was one sign of the Empire’s degeneration. As Ottoman proxies Egyptian rulers (Khedives) enjoyed broad autonomy. Largely self-governing the political relationship with the Ottomans was symbolic. As in the Balkans and Central Asia Europeans became increasingly dominant in areas of historic Ottoman influence. Europeans controlled the bureaucracy of the Turko-Egyptian state and were prevalent in commerce. Egyptian armies were British armed and frequently led by retired British officers. France’s 1869 completion of the Suez Canal invited British penetration of the region. Due to infrastructure development and an ambitious colonial policy the Egyptian state became financially overextended. Only British loans helped secure the fiscal solvency of the Khedives. British economic influence over Egyptian finances gave them enormous leverage to dictate policy.

Obligated to pay British banks Egyptian rule in the Sudan between 1821-1885 was cruel and financially predatory. Impelled by British desires to end the lucrative slave trade, the Egyptians colonial authorities complied with London’s orders. Between 1874-1879 Sudan’s British Governor General George “Chinese” Gordon zealously executed slavers and was brutally effective in the performance of his duties. Financially crippled by oppressive Egyptian taxes and the slave trade abolition Sudan was ripe for rebellion. By 1881 political instability in Egypt forced the British to militarily intercede and end a nationalist military rebellion against Khedive Tewfik. Sensing an opportunity Muhammad’s Ahmed’s Mahdi self-declaration was an incendiary moment that cascaded into a jihadist revolt.

Born on an island off the river town of Dagola, Muhammad Ahmed rejected his family’s boat making trade for an ascetic religious life. Studying under religious sheiks he was known for his piety, abstemiousness and religious commitment. Cast off by his mentor Sheik Muhammad Sherif’s for his denunciation of singing and dancing at a circumcision feast Ahmed eventually formed his own religious order. Following his “visitation” by the Prophet the Mahdi at age 40 he would change Sudanese history and he started a movement that would bedevil the British Empire for over almost two decades.

Muhammad Ahmed’s spiritual following was so profound his supporters never doubted his vision. His claimed descent from the Prophet’s tribe and his physical appearance that featured a facial mole and a gap between his teeth were congruent with hadith based prophecies. Like Baghdadi, the Mahdi made repeated calls for Muslims to make hijrah to his movement. Hoping to forge an imperial army the Mahdi made jihad a sixth pillar of Islam.

The Mahdi’s religious authority made him an ideal populist leader. His vilification of Turkish apostasy (echoed today in Dabiq’s fulminations against Shi’ite raﬁdah) aimed to cleanse foreign influence from the Sudan. His narrative of Sufi victimization echoes the Islamic States champion of pious Sunnis.
Sudan’s Governor General Rauf Pasha viewed Muhammad’s Ahmed’s Mahdi declaration as an eccentricity and initially not a serious threat. His efforts to get the sheik to recant his self-declaration were zealously rejected. As the Mahdi’s popularity grew, the Governor General felt impelled to repress the movement. Early military expeditions were poorly led and despite their superior arms Egyptian troops were butchered by the Mahdi’s fanatical supporters. After three failed attempts, the Egyptian Khedive raised a 10,000 man army led by British officers with advanced weapons to end the Mahdist revolt.  

Commanded by a retired British officer William Hicks the Egyptian force doggedly chased the jihadist army. Denied adequate provisions, poorly trained and dehydrated Hick’s forces easily fell in a Mahdist ambush. Some ten thousand Egyptian soldiers and all of their European officers died. Only a few hundred Ansar [partisans] perished. Having beaten four Turko-Egyptian military campaigns the Mahdi implemented his extremist vision. Like IS’ rule in Raqqa and Mosul, he imposed severe punishments for drinking, smoking, dancing, singing, gambling, thievery, swearing, and apostasy. Women were forcibly veiled and denied access if unaccompanied by a male companion to public places. Marital Infidelity was punished by stoning. Thieves had limbs amputated. Sufi religious orders that failed to swear loyalty were proscribed. Like today’s IS militants, the Mahdi’s Ansar swore total allegiance to their leader. War “booty” became the exclusive province of the state.

Driven by messianic fervor the Mahdi wanted to create a 19th century Sudanese version of the Prophet’s community. Impelled by the same fanaticism, IS’ rule in Raqqa is portrayed as the new Medina. Dabiq’s imaging of Syria’s Raqqa’s combines grisly stoning, crucifixion, beheadings, amputations and floggings with tranquil depictions of its charitable programs. The juxtaposition of harsh punishment and mercy is a key IS propaganda motif. The Institute for the Study of War argues the IS has developed governing capacity in Raqqa delivering basic services. Morality police patrol the streets enforcing mandatory prayers and banning alcohol, smoking, and music. Women are forced to wear the veil and must be accompanied by a male companion.

With its conquests in Iraq, Raqqa’s model has been imposed across the caliphate including Mosul’s three million inhabitants. Viewed as shirk (polytheism) by IS militants, Mosul’s Shi’ite mosques, tombs and shrines have been destroyed, Christians have been expelled and infidel Yazidi have been enslaved or killed. Homosexuals are thrown off high buildings and IS’ morality police strictly enforce Islamic norms with stern punishments. Primary, secondary and university education has been reorganized to reflect Islamic values.

Like IS’s summer 2014 Iraq blitzkrieg the Mahdi’s military victories reverberated across the world. Hick’s death and the Egyptian army calamitous defeat put pressure on Prime Minister William Gladstone’s Administration to act decisively. The Mahdist revolt put Gladstone in a difficult position. The Prime Minister spent a career in the Liberal Party campaigning against the financial cost and military follies of the Empire and he wanted to limit overseas military adventures. Initially Gladstone thought the Sudan could be relinquished to Mahdist forces because it was not vital to British interests. Egypt, however, was another matter. The Khedive’s debt to British banks and the strategic value of the Suez Canal were important core interests.
Conservative Party parliamentary protests over the slaughter of Hicks army forced the governments’ hand. Ambivalent about intervention but conscious of the importance of political symbolism, Gladstone chose an English national hero George “Chinese” Gordon to assess the Sudan’s security situation. The Administration tasked Gordon to secure the evacuation of European nationals in Khartoum. Gordon, however, zealously approached his job and he expanded the mission to a securing a British commitment to defend the city.

Defending Khartoum’s 34,000 inhabitants with a force of only 8,000 Egyptian and Sudanese soldiers from the Mahdi’s army was no easy task. The city’s location on the river, however, allowed steamships to deliver needed supplies. Gordon, moreover, made some military incursions outside the city to acquire food. By March 1884 the Mahdi’s army had laid siege dramatizing Gordon’s precarious position. During Gordons 317 day resistance against jihadist forces his exploits were reported by the British press and the Conservatives pleaded with Gladstone to send a military expedition to save the city. Doggedly determined to avoid yet another misguided military adventure Gladstone resisted until public pressure forced him to send a relief force. The decision, however, came too late. General Hook’s army moved slowly across the Sudanese desert and arrived four days after the city fall. Over 30,000 people were killed by the Mahdi’s enraged Ansar warriors. Those lucky to survive the massacre were sold off into slavery. Gordon fell fighting on the Governor’s palace steps run through with an Ansar spear and beheaded.

Emboldened by his “prophetic victories” the Mahdi’s ambitions had few limits. His visions of conquering Constantinople, Jerusalem, Mecca and Medina are eerily reminiscent of Baghdadi’s aspirations to restore the territory of past caliphates. Like IS’ leaders the Mahdists demanded capitulation and repentance of their enemies. Hoping to forge a pan-Islamic movement the Mahdi hoped to secure the bay’ah of prominent sheiks in Morocco, Libya and Nigeria.

Despite the outcry associated with Gordon’s beheading, Gladstone never did take any action against the Mahdi’s forces in the Sudan. Four months after Khartoum’s fall, the Mahdi became ill and died of malaria. Selected to be his successor Khalifa Abdullah Ibn Sayid Muhammad consciously exploited the Mahdi’s memory. For 13 years Abdullah remained faithful to the Mahdi’s fanatical and barbarous vision. Abdullah rose to prominence as a religious student under the future Mahdi who like the Prophet picked four successors (khalifas). Much like today’s Islamic State the Mahdist regime delegated autonomy to regional commanders. Baghdadi’s has bifurcated Iraq and Syria into separate military commands with each nation de-compartmentalized into 10 provinces (wilayats) governed by local emirs. The Mahdi’s demarcated his three khalifas (the fourth candidate rejected his offer) by the color of their army’s flag. Each khalifa exercised rule over their territories provided they were faithful to the Mahdi and their policies were consistent with his religious aims. Conscious of his predecessor “divine authority”, Abdullah intensified the religious foundation of his state consecrating his eschatological role as the Mahdi’s successor. Entombed in Khartoum the Mahdi’s burial shite became a Sufi shrine.

IS similarly sees Abu Bakr al-Baghda’i’s as part of a prophetic trajectory began by Abu Musab al-Zarqawi to fortify the ummah’s capacity to defeat crusader forces. The Jordanian’s mythic status is a predominant eschatological motif in IS’ media operations. Dabiq begins each edition with Zarqawi’s quotation that his campaign in Iraq will inexorably lead to an apocalyptic battle. Islamic State publications intersperse Muhammad’s life with the exploits of AQI and ISI leaders. Muhammad’s hijrah
(emigration) to Medina, his establishment of a devout community, his defeat of the pagans, his crushing of the “traitorous” Jews and his conquest of Mecca are juxtaposed with AQI’s ideological, leadership and organizational trajectory. By linking Zarqawi with the Prophet, IS legitimates its effort to direct the global jihadist struggle and is able to demand bay’ah from all Muslims. Those groups like Al Qaeda and Jabhat al Nusra that refuse to swear bay’ah to Baghdadi are apostates to be fought.

Emulating the Prophet Zarqawi made his hijrah from Jordan to Afghanistan to Iraq, fought against polytheists (the Shia) and infidels (U.S. forces) and the Jordanian wanted to recreate a modern version of the Prophet’s state in Iraq’s Anbar Province. Dabiq presents AQI leaders including Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi as part of divine path of Islamic renewal, purification and conquest.

Islamic State publications criticize Shi’ite and Kurdish apostasy and celebrate their slaughter. They depict a Muslim world plagued by shirk [polytheism] with pious Sunnis repressed by Shi’ite and Alawite tawaghit [despots] and their Zionist-Crusader masters. Based on Qur’anic verses and hadith Dabiq’s first issue The Return of the Khilafah sees the Islamic State as Allah’s prophesied vanguard to rejuvenate Islam by restoring tawid [unity], purging it of shirk [polytheism] and fortifying the true ummah [community] by integrating political and religious authority under Caliph Ibrahim. Report on the Islamic State 4 venerates the slaughter of 1,700 Shi’ite army prisoners after Mosul’s June 2014 fall. IS’ militants proudly stand by mass graves in the edition’s many horrific photos. Western hostages, Syrian soldiers and Christian Copts have been the subjects of grisly beheading internet posted videos.

Syria is a fulcrum point for two rival Islamic millenarian movements. IS’ brutal sectarian cleansing of Shi’ite and Alawite communities have galvanized Shi’ite Mahdist apocalyptic undercurrents. Under the Shi’ite Twelver tradition Muhammad’s 12th successor lay in suspended animation and he will be released by Allah during a period of existential Islamic crisis. Given the Syrian civil war’s sectarian carnage many Iraqi, Afghan, Pakistani and Syrian Shi’ite militias see it a prophetic sign of the Mahdi’s reemergence. Across Syria and Iraq Shi’ite militias fight Islamic State militants in an eschatological struggle to purify the world of diabolical forces.

The Islamic State and Mahdist World Views: Religious Purification and Imperial Expansion

The IS and the Mahdists are part of a Sunni Salafist-Jihadist movement committed to restore Islamic predominance after a period of jahiliyyah decline. Salafists argue that Muslim revisionist rulers wrongfully incorporated European practices in law, art, science, philosophy, warfare and governance in their societies. Assimilation of non-Islamic values expanded under the Ottoman Turks and then accelerated calamitously during colonialism and independence. The spread of Western secularism according to the Salafi worldview shattered the ummah’s foundations by separating religious from political authority. IS’ Dabiq argues this heretical deviation substituted divine practices (Sharia based rule) for the imperfection of manmade institutions. Islamic society, it contends, has been betrayed by a revisionist clergy (ulama) unwilling to defend traditional values and who are acquiescent to Westernized political elites.

IS’ interpretation of jahiliyyah references medieval scholars. Ibn Taymiyyah, for example, argued the Mongol rule after the Abbasid caliphate’s collapse was harmful to Islamic society for Mongol practices were antithetical to the religion’s original principles. Taymiyyah reasoned that Mongol conversion to
Islam did not make them true Muslims for their rule was not Qur’an based. Given this violation of the divine path, Taymiyyah urged rebellion to restore Allah’s true intent and reinvigorate the caliphate.

Islamic State views these alien influences as undermining the divine stitching of Muslim order. Dabiq’s tale the Millah [path] of Ibrahim sees Islam’s historical degeneration as legitimating secular tyrannical rulers.\(^76\) IS believes Muslim society has reverted back to a pre-Islamic state of ignorance or jahiliyyah. This progressive erosion of Quranic values, accordingly, led to the loss of Ottoman dynamism, the caliphate’s 1919 collapse and colonial humiliation. Only by purging these alien elements can the divine stitching of Muslim order be restored and the ummah’s military capacity fortified.

The Mahdists similarly emphasize Ottoman moral corruption and jahiliyyah induced Islamic regression. The term Turk became a Mahdist euphemism for un-Islamic and by 1881 Ottoman Egypt had become so intertwined with British military power and commerce, it was seen as an extension of Imperial Britain.\(^77\) Like IS, the Mahdists bi-furcated the world into a house of belief (Dar al Islam) and the world of the kuffar [Dar al Harb] outsider. The Mahdi’s quest to expunge apostate Turkish rule from the Sudan resulted in Sharia law imposition and the restitution of slavery. Mimicking Muhammad rule in Medina, the Mahdists hoped that such measures would lead to further military victories.

Restoring slavery is also an IS theme. Dabiq defends Yazidi enslavement as consistent with Mohammad’s early rule and slavery’s restitution is represented as a prophetic sign.\(^78\) When ISIS conquered northern Iraq, thousands of Yazidi girls and women were sold into sexual slavery and entire communities were butchered when they refused to covert. Since the Yazidi creed equated with Satan by IS ideologues) as humanity’s protector, IS views the Yazidi as “devil worshipers” to be enslaved or killed.

The caliphate’s implementation of Sharia law features many punishments that the Mahdists instituted over 120 years ago. The Mahdiyyah was especially brutal punishing such libertine enjoyments as smoking (100 lashes) and drinking (80 lashes) and they prohibited music, dancing, feasts, jewelry and abusive language.\(^79\) In adultery and fornication cases the Mahdiyyah beheaded men and stoned women. IS zealously enforces stoning, beheadings, has cast homosexuals off from high buildings and its Sharia courts have executed “witches”. The Islamic State executions feature burnings, drowning, firing squads and slitting of throats. Its internet posted immolation of Jordanian air force pilot was justified by referencing Muhammad’s successor Abu Bakr use of fire against his enemies.\(^80\)

The Mahdists sexual puritanism and misogyny led them to enforce the veil and restrict women’s movements.\(^81\) They prohibited unaccompanied women from entering public places and markets. Failure to adhere to these restrictions resulted in severe punishment. IS’ justifies its imposition of the veil as a means to restore women’s honor and consecrate the rightful place as homemakers, child bears and wives. IS media organs rail against the sexual immorality of the West, its denigration of marriage and its corruption of females.\(^82\) The Islamic State’s female brigade in Raqqa monitors women’s public movements and IS female internet operators lure women to come to the caliphate and marry IS fighters. High profile emigration of British girls and entire families to Syria, have alarmed London that has sought to cut the flow of foreign fighters and its nationals to Baghdad’s caliphate.

The Mahdists were a millenarian anti-colonial movement hoping to overturn a Western dominated regional order. Similarly IS’s challenges Western hegemony. A IS documentary “The End of Sykes-
Picot” announces that its caliphate has ended colonial era borders. The video brazenly abrogates an 1896 accord that divided the Ottoman Empire’s Mideast territorial holdings between the French and the British colonizers.

The Mahdi petitioned emirs and sheiks across the Muslim world to broaden his colonial resistance project. The Ottomans feared that the Mahdi’s Sudanese revolution would spread and the Empire’s troop presence rose appreciably in Medina and Mecca. Unlike Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi’s July 4th, 2014 Mosul sermon for Muslims to emigrate to the newly formed caliphate, outside of Sudan few Muslims made hijrah to the Mahdiyyah. The Mahdiyyah’s imperial incursions into apostate Egypt and Christian Abyssinia were, moreover, beaten back by opposing forces.

**Mahdist Sufism, IS Sectarianism and Globalization**

Despite their Salafi-Jihadist world view the Mahdiyyah and the Islamic State vary in a number of respects. The Mahdist doctrinal evolution from Sufism is a critical divergence and the 19th century context they operated created a very different ideological and imperial trajectory. The Mahdists religious project is devoid of IS’ sectarian brutality. Nor is there any evidence that the Mahdists eviscerated shrines, or burial sites of Muslim saints and the period is notably absent of any desecration of Churches or destruction of pre-Islamic icons. When the Mahdi took Christian prisoners, a premium was put on their conversion and all but decimated pre-Islamic shrines across the Muslim world. The Mahdiyyah lost some of its revolutionary zeal limiting its extremism. Cultural and religious mores, moreover, may have blunted Mahdist Wahhabi tendencies. Consistent with its Sufi origins, the Mahdiyyah revered its fallen leader whose tomb was considered a sacred shrine.

Sufism in the Sudan was an ascetic spiritual quest led by revered sheiks and diverse religious orders. Many of these sheiks were venerated and their capacity to innovate and interpret scripture led to a very decentralized and personalized belief system. Given its reverence for shrines devoted to past sheiks, Sunni Sufi Islam shares much with the Shia branch of Islam. Muhammad Ahmed evolved from this tradition and while he demanded the loyalty of the Sufi orders little actions was taken to destroy them. His movement was not based on a rigid set of beliefs, but on charisma and divine leadership. After the Mahdi’s death, the Mahdiyyah lost some of its revolutionary zeal limiting its extremism. Cultural and religious mores, moreover, may have blunted Mahdist Wahhabi tendencies. Consistent with its Sufi origins, the Mahdiyyah revered its fallen leader whose tomb was considered a sacred shrine.

The Islamic State represents a more austere literal vision of Islam contemptuous of religious minorities and theological icons. The Islamic State’s destruction of Shi’ite, Yazidi, Christian and Alawite communities, its desecration of ornate mosques and burial sites and its raising of pre-Islamic architectural ruins reflect an unrestrained Wahhabi- Salafi literalism. Despite being *People of the Book*, dozens of Christians have been beheaded by enraged IS militants, who from Libya’s shores, swear that IS will conquer Rome. None of this behavior has a precedent during the Mahdiyyah.

The international context ISIS operates within diverges from 19th century Mahdist Sudan. Globalization’s communication network and the rapidity of international travel have allowed ISIS to project its influence and attract foreign fighters. Richard Barrett’s for example argues that half of the 30,000 foreign fighters that have traveled to Syria have entered IS ranks. With proto jihadist state in Iraq and Syria and regional appendages (wilayats) in close to ten countries, IS’ caliphate is a global entity. By some estimates ISIS has over fifty thousand fighters. Dabiq’s savvy Madison Avenue style magazine is complemented by the Hollywood nature of IS’ Al-Hayat English language production company videos, testimonials and
documents. Islamic state social media reaches millions through *You Tube, Twitter* and *Facebook* and it employs a sophisticated team of internet hackers [Cyber Caliphate] to attack its enemy’s web sites. In their 2015 study of ISIS social media use J.M. Berger and Jonathan Morgan estimate that by December 2014 some 46,000 Twitter accounts were devoted to promoting the group’s message.

The organization’s cohesiveness, moreover, contrasts strikingly with the Mahdist experience. Though endemic to many jihadist networks, the Islamic State is notably free of organizational fissures. During Khalifa Abdullah’s 13 year Mahdiyyah he faced internal rebellions including some religious revolts in Western Sudan. Islamic State unity contrasts strikingly with its Al Qaeda progenitor that has fractured badly since the destruction of its Afghan pre 9-11 sanctuary. Despite these differences, the Mahdists and the Islamic State share a common apocalyptic vision consistent with the Sunni eschatological traditions. Table A (below) sketches the evolution of these imagined millenarian futures.

**Table A: Mahdist and Islamic State Apocalyptic Visions**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Apocalyptic Jihadist State</th>
<th>Mahdiyyah</th>
<th>Islamic State</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>&quot;Signs of the Hour&quot; and Fitna</td>
<td>Turkish Conquest of the Sudan and Apostate Rule on behalf of Christian British Infidels. Sufi resistance to Turko-Egyptian apostasy. Spread of jahiliyyah across the Muslim world dividing and weakening the ummah. Spread of Western colonialism across the Muslim world and Ottoman apostate revisionism act synergistically as a battering ram to undermine the divine foundations of the Muslim world.</td>
<td>Sectarian fault lines as devout Sunnis battle Shi’ite apostates who act on behalf of Zionist-Crusader forces. Spread of jahiliyyah as a consequence of Shia apostasy, Western colonial legacy and Sunni apostate regimes embedded in Zionist-Crusader world order. Ferment in the Muslim world leads to a revival of apocalyptic thought.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Islamic Revivalism</td>
<td>Reemergence of fundamentalist currents such as Wahhabism that reaches the Sudan in the 18th century. Combines with Sufi Mahdist tradition leading to growing resistance to Turko-Egyptian apostate colonial rule.</td>
<td>Spread of Wahhabism across the Muslim world financed by Saudi oil wealth and charities combine with the Qutbist Muslim Brotherhood radicalism to challenge jahiliyyah of Sunni and Shi’ite apostates beholden to Western Zionist interest.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Purification and Unity</td>
<td>Mahdi’s June 1881 self-declaration and formation of armed Salafi movement to purify Sudan of apostate Turkish-Egyptian rule. Formation of Mahdiyyah unites Sudanese tribes against apostates. Imposition of Sharia leads to a purified ummah and a fortification of Islamic armed capability leading to a envisioned prophetic conquests.</td>
<td>Emergence of AQI after the 2003 US invasion part of a eschatological chain of events leading to ISIS the formation of the caliphate the projected purification of the Muslim world through a policy of sectarian cleansing of Shi’ite and Alawite rafidah setting the stage for the emergence of the Mahdi and a titanic struggle against a demonic Crusader-Zionist world order.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>External War with Diabolical Enemy</td>
<td>Mahdist state revolt against Imperial Britain and its Turco-Egyptian apostate agents</td>
<td>Emergence of the caliphate leads to a united ummah and confrontation with Western armies</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Imperial Expansion</td>
<td>Mahdist visions of conquest of Cairo, Constantinople, Mecca, Medina and Jerusalem</td>
<td>IS consolidation of jihadist state in its Iraqi-Syrian core and a colonial “remaining and expanding” policy with provinces (wilayats) in 10 different nations. Increasing clashes with crusader interests as the caliphate reconquers lost territories of prior caliphates</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Apocalyptic Battle</td>
<td>Prophetic battle against Crusader forces and the intercession of Jesus to assist the Mahdi to defeat the Anti-Christ</td>
<td>Prophetic battle of Dabiq against Crusader forces and the intercession of Jesus to assist the Mahdi to defeat the Anti-Christ</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Earthly Paradise</td>
<td>Global Islamic Conquest and Imposition of Sharia</td>
<td>Global Islamic Conquest and Imposition of Sharia</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
The Destruction of the Mahdist Jihadist State: Implications for the War against the Islamic State

The Mahdiyyah’s thwarted Britain’s regional interests for 13 years. Its endurance is due to numerous factors. The British led, armed and advised Egyptian-Sudanese army was incapable of sustaining offensive operations into the Sudan. The Egyptian army’s poor leadership, low morale and inadequate arms were exacerbated by British hesitation to decisively confront the Mahdist state. Despite repeated calls to avenge Gordon, Gladstone resisted these pleas. Other factors intervened. Khalifa Abdullah’s suppression of internal revolts and his religious authority as the Mahdi’s successor created enough armed capacity to ward off invading armies. The brutality and fanaticism of his Ansar warriors intimidated many potential opponents.

The parallels to US policy toward ISIS are striking. Exhausted by years of Iraq combat, four thousand fatalities and hundreds of billions spent on advising, training and arming security forces, the Obama administration was eager to disengage from the country. Given Obama’s opposition to the 2003 Iraq war his determination to secure a long-term US security presence in Iraq was less than firm. Having failed to finalize a U.S.-Iraqi security agreement in Iraq, US forces withdrew in 2011. Such a policy was consistent with the Administration’s “realist” pivot to Asia and desire to end the “war on terrorism”.

Like Gladstone, Obama is content to assist regional actors to secure US vital interests and avoid direct decisive American military intervention. With ISIS’ summer 2014 military victories and the collapse of Iraqi army, Obama’s illusive quest to leave the Mideast came to an end. As ISIS forces advanced toward Erbil and endangered Baghdad, Obama reluctantly embarked on a limited campaign of targeted air strikes against ISIS positions and he redoubled training, financing and arming of Iraqi and Kurdish security forces. Content to let Baghdad lead the fight against ISIS, Obama refuses to commit US combat forces. With the caliphate’s one year anniversary, the Administration policy to “degrade” and “destroy” ISIS has proved to be frustratingly illusive. Despite redoubled training efforts by over 3,000 US advisors, the Iraqi army still lacks the capacity to sustain offensive operations. Baghdad is increasingly reliant on Iranian supported Shi’ite militias to defend territory and engage in limited offensive operations.

Britain’s use of Egyptian forces to fight its jihadist enemies was similarly ineffective. The Conservative Party’s 1895 parliamentary victory, however, changed this dynamic. Not encumbered by a hesitancy to use military force to defend British imperial presence, the Conservatives willingness to intervene was also encouraged by Italian colonial designs on Abyssinia. Fearing that if it failed to act in the Sudan, the territory would fall to other European powers, Britain was determined to avenge Gordon at Khartoum.

Within a few years, the British formed a well-armed and trained expeditionary force in Egypt. Composed of 8,000 British soldiers and over 10,000 Egyptian-Sudanese troops, General Horatio Kitchener’s army was assisted by rail network that guaranteed his forces supplies. Confronted by a well-armed professional force the Mahdist state by 1898 found its days numbered. Sudan’s harsh climate and the Khalifa’s need to defend water supplies and markets critical for the Mahdiyyah’s physical and financial survival, prevented him from drawing Kitchener’s force into the hinterlands. Unlike previous military campaigns where expeditionary forces survived off the land, an advanced rail network kept the British-Egyptian army transported, well fed and armed.

With no dense metropolitan populations to hide his Ansar forces Khalifa Abdullah could not practice urban terrorist warfare. Faced with the non-viability of asymmetric warfare, the Ansar were forced to
confront British forces openly on the battlefield. At Omdurman the Khalifa had amassed 50,000 men armed with antiquated rifles, rudimentary cannon and spears. Having the advantage of a larger force Abdullah was moved by a prophetic dream promising victory over crusader forces in an open field similar to Omdurman’s plains. Rejecting a night assault, Abdullah engaged British forces that were armed with machine guns and howitzers. The resulting slaughter was imminently predictable. British forces could not but admire the bravery and determination of the Ansar warriors as their dead bodies amassed on the battlefield. Winston Churchill’s account of the Sudanese campaign effusively praises the bravery of Abdullah’s Ansar warriors. Close to 11,000 jihadist martyrs perished at Omdurman and within a year Abdullah’s retreating army was hunted down. Khalifa Abdullah was killed in battle the victim of yet another prophetic vision promising victory. Not bound by political correctness the British bombed the Mahdi’s tomb and desecrated his burial site throwing his bones into the river. British colonial authorities banned and criminalized Mahdist cults. At Omdurman the savagery and decisiveness of the British military response had vanquished the Mahdiyyah.

What can the Mahdiyyah’s fate tell us about the Islamic State’s future? While differences abound some similarities are striking. Like the Mahdi’s Ansar the Islamic State has fallen prey to strategic impatience on the battlefield engaging in open battle to disastrous effect. Michael Knight has argued that ISIS is the victim of its “cult of the offensive”. IS’s human wave assaults on the Syrian Kurdish enclave of Kobani were met with devastating US air strikes, and the battle has its precedent in the failed Mahdist charges at Obeid and Omdurman. ISIS ideologues put much faith in prophetic visions and dreams. Like the Mahdists and Juhayan’s cult, apocalyptic groups often miscalculate by misreading the “signs of the hour” to devastating effect.

By creating a proto-jihadist state that governs territory IS is vulnerable to massive firepower that can destroy its Sharia institutional and legal foundations. Maintaining its caliphate centric strategy requires that its provincial Shura councils and police be present to dispense Islamic justice and its dawa educational and charitable services delivered. Only then can IS command the loyalty of the world’s Muslim population and demand their emigration. The caliphate’s financial coffers are critically dependent upon oil refining operations in Syria that can be bombed. While IS is adept at asymmetric and hybrid warfare, its main advances have come through conventional assaults against intimidated, weak and divided opponents.

Like the Mahdists the Islamic State will be forced to openly defend its governance project that could be destroyed with sufficient determination, unity of command and firepower. Divided by sectarian and ethnic cleavages IS’ Shia, Kurdish and Sunni enemies can’t effectively coordinate their operations allowing IS to exploit security gaps between these forces. Baghdad’s use of Iranian backed militias to clear Sunni areas of IS influence exacerbates the sectarian fissures in Iraqi society inhibiting a Sunni uprising against Baghdadi’s caliphate. Without outside Western ground forces, the current US assisted campaign to “degrade” and “destroy” will remain dysfunctional feeding further IS growth.

Defeating the Islamic State will not be as easy as Britain’s vanquishing of the Mahdiyyah. With close to 50,000 fighters, modern U.S. arms captured from the Iraqi army, robust, diversified finances and mass following abetted by Twitter accounts and its Al Hayat media production company, IS is a formidable opponent. Even if the US uses decisive force to confront IS the group will likely persist as an underground movement skilled at urban terrorism and guerrilla warfare. What is clear, however, is that
IS’ ability to attract foreign fighters across the globe will be shattered. After the Mahdiyyah’s fall British colonial authorities never experienced a serious challenge to their rule. Given the dysfunctions of local actors only an outside power with sufficient coercive capability and a unified purpose can defeat the Islamic State. This is the major lesson to be learned from Imperial Britain’s 13 year struggle against the Mahdiyyah.

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66 Ibid
67 Islamic State Report 4, ibid.,
68 “The Return of the Khalifah” Dabiq 1. ibid
69 Islamic State Report 4. ibid
71 Filiu, ibid. 24-29
74 “The Extinction of the Grey Zone” in Dabiq 7: From Hypocrisy to Apostasy accessed at http://www.clarionproject.org/news/Islamic-State-ISIS-Isil-propaganda-magazine-dabiq 54-58. This is a clear effort to appeal to all Muslims that there can no longer be a third choice between the West and the Islamic State and that IS will be successful in uniting the umma to destroy the crusader order.
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79 P.M. Holt, ibid. 130-131
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