REGARDING THE ORIGIN OF MAHDI UNDERSTANDING IN SUNNI ISLAMIC THOUGHT

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Mahdi is a term in the Arabic language which means "finding the true path, guiding and leading" and is an adjective derived from "Huda", which literally means "someone who has been shown the right path and has seen the light". However, the common usage of "Mahdi" is different in Islamic literature. In Islamic literature, Mahdi is the person who will descend from Mohammad during the last days of the world which will be marked by political and economic instability, injustice and persecution, and the demise of religion in everyday life. This person – Mahdi - will be adopted by Muslims, bring justice and fruitfulness to the world, take all the Islamic states under his sovereignty, and strengthen Islam. This is followed by the descent of Jesus from heaven, who will kill the antichrist, or help Mahdi to kill him, and obey Mahdi in the prayer. These are also signs of doomsday. The majority of Muslims in Islamic society believe in the coming of Mahdi. In Shia Islamic thought, this is a faith problem. Among Sunni Muslims, the coming of Mahdi is not a faith problem. Rather, this belief has an important place in Sunni Islam, and many Sunnis wait for Mahdi. Because of this expectation, throughout history many people from the Shia and Sunni sects of Islam claimed that they are Mahdi.

Waiting for a redeemer at the end of the world or in a period in which quality of life is poor is a common pattern for almost all religious traditions. This common thought makes it easy to understand the roots of a future redeemer figure – Mahdi. This figure has different meanings in the various branches of Islam, and particular religious references make this concept more complex. In this article, some Quran verses and words of Prophet Mohammad (hadith) that deal with the existence of this understanding will be read in the frame of religious and political events of early Islamic period.

Among Shia Muslims, "Mahdi" has been used to describe Ali's son Muhammad b. Hanefiyya in the early period of Islam. Afterwards, it was turned into one of the creeds of Shia. Even though this understanding has been kept alive in Sunni Islamic thought during history, this issue has never been viewed as a faith matter. A reason supporting this is the absence of this issue in the Quran, and of its lack of direct reference in Bukhari and Muslim, which are the most reliable books containing sayings of Prophet Mohammad for Muslims. Nonetheless, Mahdi understanding is vital and dynamic in Sunni tradition because the unseen information is attractive to people and there are many narratives that exist from Prophet Mohammad about Mahdi and Mahdiness in Ebu Davud, Tirmizi, Ibn Mace and Nesai's books. But Bukhari and Muslim did not narrate any hadith that contains the name of Mahdi regarding a redeemer who will emerge in the future. However, some of their narratives were seen to have traces of Mahdi and Mahdiness, although they were recorded without using the name of Mahdi. Those who reject the concept of Mahdi do not accept the relation of these narratives with Prophet Mohammad because they connect these narratives to the political events of Umayyad-Abbasid period.[2]

Confirmation of the relation of mentioned narratives to Prophet Mohammad is extremely important. If Prophet Mohammad himself had mentioned a forthcoming redeemer, a Muslim believer would be unable to ignore these narratives. However, in the Quran there is no mention of Mahdi in terms of a forthcoming redeemer. Those who claim a Mahdi in Islam do so by considering hadiths that are related to the concept of Mahdi, and support themselves by Quran verses, such as: "He whom Allah leadeth, he indeed is led aright" (Al-Araf 178; Al-Isra 97; Al-Kahf 17) and "for every folk there is a guide" (Al-Rad 7). On the other hand, in Bukhari and Muslim there are not any direct narratives relating to the Mahdi issue. At this stage, how can we evaluate the narratives in other hadith books?

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[2] Even though this kind of comments was not from early period, it is not difficult to see some critical expressions about the accuracy of these narratives. For example Ebu Hanife, Maturidi, Bakıllani, Cuveyni, el-Icli and Gazali are from those who do not respect to Mahdi narratives.

First of all, the issue of the relation of these narratives to Prophet Mohammad must be clarified. If these narratives had not been related to Prophet Mohammad, we could easily say that there is no such belief in the essence of Islam. But in this case, touching upon the source of the existing narratives and determining the reason of their creation will be necessary. This effort is important in terms of putting forth the relation of this concept of Mahdi with Islam.

Hadiths related to Mahdi have been narrated by Tirmizi, Ebu Davud, Ibn Mace, Bezzar, Hakim, Taberani and Ebu Yala Mavsili. They attributed these narratives to some sahabes such as Ali, Ibn Abbas, Ibn Omer, Talha, Ibn Mesud, Ebu Hureyre, Enes, Ebu Said Hudri, Ummu Habibe, Ummu Seleme, Sevban, Kurra b. Iyas, Ali Hilali and Abdullah b. Haris b. Cez with different "report chains". The main objections of those who oppose the concept of Mahdi are to the reporter chain of narrators or to the meaning of text that they narrated. As a rule, in the method of hadith, which deals with the sayings of Prophet Mohammad and determines methods on this issue of report chains, disaffirmation (jerh) precedes justice (tadil). Jerh is to criticise the narrator because of his deficiency in justice and memory; tadil is to regard the narrator as dependable in terms of justice and memory. As a result, determination of a negative feature such as falling into heedlessness, having poor memory, frailty and having bad ideas in a narrator from the reporter chain makes the report of the narrator faulty. In hadith science, this case is certain.

The fact that Mahdi does not exist in hadith in Bukhari and Muslim is very important information for those who oppose Mahdi understanding and reject his coming. Despite this, some people understand the two narratives of these scholars as evidence for Mahdi. In hadith books, other than Bukhari and Muslim, there are about fifty narratives together with repetitions. Consider the following popular examples:

"Even though the world does not have life more than one day, Allah extends that day and in that day sends a person whose name is the same as my name and his father's name is the same as my fathers name and from me or (in another narrative) from my family as a Mahdi." (Ebu Davud, 4282).

"Unless one from my family acceded..." (Tirmizi, Sünen, Fiten, 2231).

"Mahdi is from sons of Fatima" (Ebu Davud, 4284).

"Mahdi is from me (will come from my ancestry). His forehead is wide, front side of his nose is high and middle is rather low. He will fill the world, which is full of persecution and injustice, with justice and equality and he will accede seven years." (Ebu Davud, 4285).

In the books that contain narratives related to the coming of Mahdi, there are twenty-four hadiths that deal with this subject. But, with alternative reports, the number of these narratives reaches fifty. Ten of these narratives do not mention the name of "Mahdi". Just as the Mahdi narrative does not clearly exist in Bukhari and Muslim, early kalam (apology) books, first Shia Sufis and also Gazali did not mention Mahdi. Additionally, many hadith authorities such as Ibn Hacer Askalani, Shemsuddin Sehavi and Abdurrahman Yeman state that none of the hadiths related to the concept of Mahdi are reliable. Scholars of hadith generally criticised narrators in reporter chains, and find their narratives faulty. Reporters of these hadiths such as Asım, Kutn b. Halife, Ibn Ebi Kays, Ibn Nüfeyl, Imran el Kuttan, Yezid b. Ebi Ziyad, Yasin El-Acli, Ibn Lühey, Yunus b. Ebi Ishak, Ammar ez-Zehebi, Ikrime b. Ammar, Muhammed b. Mervan el-Acli ve Davud b. El-Muhbir have been criticised by hadith authorities because of their crassness, dotage, weak memory, being mudelles (skipping one or a few of reporters in the reporter chain).[3] Most of narrators that reported these hadith also give a strong impression of being Shia followers, as evidenced by their reported narratives.

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[3] See Izmirli Ismail Hakki, "Mehdi Meselesi", abbreviated by Ali Duman, *Hikmet Yurdu*, year 3, V:3, P.6, 2010, p. 341-145.

Scholar Ibn Khaldun, who is widely respected in the Islamic world, gave importance to the issue of Mahdi by dedicating a chapter to this topic in his well-known work Mukaddima. Dutch scholar Gerlof Van Vloten (1866-1903), expresses that Ibn Khaldun is the only eastern historian that understands the importance of futuristic knowledge.[4] Ibn Khaldun handled and analysed 24 hadith narratives in Mukaddima. To accomplish this, he based largely on the method and opinion of hadith authorities and recounted their thought on these narratives. He concluded that in the eyes of hadith authorities, at least one of the reporters of these narratives has a weakness.[5]

A redeemer called Mahdi is not mentioned by name in the Quran, or in Bukhari or Muslim. The only way to explain narratives related to Mahdi is to understand the intellectual structure of early period of Islam. The Mahdi problem is one of knowledge of the future. It is important to touch upon the place and importance of futuristic information in early Islamic society in order to make a correct analysis of narratives related to Mahdi. When this period is examined, it is seen that information and narratives about future have an important place. This information deals with the death of important people or central events. For example, historic Jewish figure Re'sul-Calut had reported in advance that a son of/the prophet (Huseyin) will die close to Kerbela. There were common books called "Kutubun" which dealt with futuristic news among Arabs. There were also futuristic narratives within a well-known book called "Jifr" which was attributed to the family of Prophet Mohammad. We also need to remember the common books of poems called "Melahim" which contain similar information from this period. It is remarkable that the reporters of these narratives are converts from Judaism or Christianity to Islam such as Vehb b. Munebbih, Temimu'd-Dari and Ka'bu'l-Ahbar. Although they wanted to make their names famous, they sometimes got into strange situations. For example Makrizi narrates a story about Kab: Kab was sailing with Mohammad b. Huzayfa. Ibn Ebi Huzayfa asks Kab sarcastically: "Is there a chapter in your Torah about this journey?" Kab answers by putting on a bold face: "In my Torah I find a hairy youth, he will be defeated and killed like a donkey. I am afraid he might not be you.[6]

There are different reasons for the spread of futuristic thought, including Mahdi thought. The impact of sociopolitical and economic situations of that period is a probable explanation. In the periods in which nations economically and morally in trouble, people worry that the life will worsen for them, anticipate the end of the world. At this point people expect a Mahdi who will make true faith and justice dominant, to redeem them. This kind of belief can be seen in many religious traditions.

In the history of Islam after the death of Ali, his son and successor, Hasan, left the hilafah for Muaviye bin Ebi Sufyan on condition of willing hilafah to him (41/661). But Muaviya broke the agreement and left the hilafah to his son Yazid. This event irritated the ancestry of Ali.

Meanwhile, Ali's son Muhammed b. al-Hanefiyye (d. 700) obeyed both Muaviya and Yazid because of the alliance of ummah (Islamic nations). But Muslims from Kufe chose Huseyin and obeyed him instead of Yazid. Then, soldiers of Yazid killed Huseyin and his friends in Kerbela (680). Varied groups that wanted to take advantage of the situation made this event political. This caused the creation of factions and more bloodshed. Mohammad b. Hanefiyya, died when he was 65 years old in the year 700. He was abused after his death, as he was in his life, but rumors that he did not die and that he would come back spread quickly. According to Muhtar es-Sakafi, Mohammad b. Hanefiyya was the expected Mahdi. Mohammad b. el-Hanefiyya and Ebu Hashim played prominent roles in the collapse of Umayyad sovereignty and the acceding of the Abbasids.[7]

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[4] Gerlof Van Vloten, *Emevi Devrinde Arap Hakimiyeti, Şia ve Mesih Akideleri Üzerine Araştırmalar*, translated by Mehmed S. Hatipoglu, Ankara Üniversitesi İlahiyat Fakültesi Press, Nu: 172, Ankara, 1986, p.65.

[5] Ibn Haldun, *Mukaddimah*, V. I, p.582-583.

[6] See Vloten, *ibid*, p.66-69.

[7] See Figlali, *ibid*, p.205; Sayın Dalkıran, "Muhammed b. El-Hanefiyye ve Adına Oluşan Fırkalar", *Dini Araştırmalar*, V. 7, p.19, 145-149, 155.

Within this process, the Umayyads created their redeemer as "Sufyani"; Yemenites as "Kahtani"; Muzaris as "Temimi"; and Shia as "Mahdi". Each of them called their main opponents the Antichrist (Dajjal).[8] Because of their desire for authority, fame, and benefits, many people throughout history claimed to be Mahdi. Muhtar es-Sakafi claimed, for his benefit, that Ali's younger son Mohammad b. Hanefiyya did not die and would one day come and make justice dominant in the world. However, Mohammad b. Hanefiyya did in fact die in the year 81 and his funeral prayer was performed by the governor of Madinah Eban who is the son of Osman. When Abdurrahman b. Eshas rioted in 700, he also present himself as Kahtani whom Yemenites are waiting for. Soon after, Haris b. Sureyc proclaimed his Mahdiness and created the following hadith: "A redeemer named Haris will emerge," Haris spoke this hadith in order to convince people, but he was not able to convince anyone. Four years after this, Yazid's grandchild Abu Mohammad proclaimed that he was expected Mahdi and rioted against the Abbasids. When Abdollah b. Yazid b. Muaviye rioted in Halep, he was presenting himself as Sufyani who would re-establish the Umayyad state.[9]

The nationalist policies of Umayyads included oppressive attitudes against Ali's ancestry. This caused uneasiness among Ali's ancestry and caused the emergence of the concept of a redeemer. As a result, these policies caused to collapse Umayyad sovereignty. Ali's ancestry supported the collapse of the Umayyads, and had been given promises of support from Abbasids if they acceded. But when they acceded, the Abbasids forgot the promises that they made and acted in a similar, oppressive manner like Umayyads against the sons of Ali. This time, Ali's ancestry had to deal with Abbasids. The collapse of the Umayyads did not end Mahdi understanding, because the Abbasids did not bring the justice that they promised to the people, nor did they end persecution and oppression against the Ali's ancestry. Some supporters of the sons of Ali, who were oppressed by the Umayyads and Abbasids, put forth the idea of a redeemer from the Prophet Mohammad's ancestry and then started to wait and console themselves. The concept of Mahdi emerged shortly after the death of Huseyin, and has been defended passionately; it even caused rebellions in many places against the Abbasids.[10] So, the Abbasids reported some narratives about Mahdiness in order to take this privilege from Ali's ancestry, the opponents of the Abbasids. For example, Caliph Mansur referred to his son, his successor, as Mahdi, rather than Mohammad b. Abdullah.[11]

As is also understood from this situation, those who waited for Mahdi stated that he was from Hashimi ancestry, from Ali and his son Hasan's descent, from Huseyin's descent or from Abbas' generation, according to their own tribes. When Ali' sons perspective is considered, their expectation about a redeemer and savior is reasonable, because in that period, futuristic news held a prominent place among Arabs. These people were psychologically ready to accept this news. Additionally, Muslims saw these kind of beliefs among the Jews and Christians around them. For converted Jews and Christians to accept this kind of saviour was also easy. The emergence of an Antichrist (Dajjal), tribulation, rapture, and the second coming of the Messiah, and other religious patterns in Christian eschatology established a ground for such a concept. Similar beliefs can be seen in the Jewish tradition. At this point, the primary goal of Ali' sons was to remove the oppressive Umayyads and Abbasids from power.

Both the Umayyads and Abbasids made every effort to maintain their sovereignty. When needed, they took up arms like their opponents. For example, the "black flag" narrative which is remembered when Mahdiness emerged, set forth the politicization of religion. The black flagged man, who would come from the East, would collapse Umayyad dynasty. As it is known, the flag of Prophet Mohammad was black, while the Umayyads adopted the white flag. Those who wanted to see the collapse of the Umayyads adopted a black flag in order to exploit the authority of Prophet Mohammad. For this reason, the Abbasids adopted a black flag. The black colour also represented mourning for the death of Mohammad's family, namely those who were killed under the persecution of the government. Consequently, political themes in Mahdi narratives shed light on an understanding of the narratives related to Mahdi.

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[8] Vloten, *ibid,* p.72-73.

[9] Abdulaziz ed-Duri, *Abbasi Propagandası Sürecinde ve Abbasiler'in İlk Asrında Mehdi Tasavvuru*, translated by M. Bahauddin Varol, *İstem*, Year: 2, N. 3, 2004, p.221-122.

[10] See Figlali, *ibid*, p.80.

[11] See Cemil Hakyemez, "Mehdî Düşüncesinin İtikadîleşmesi Üzerine", *Gazi Üniversitesi Çorum İlahiyat Fakültesi Dergisi*, 2004/1, V. III, Nu: 5, p.134.

As a result, claiming that in Islamic thought the idea of a future saviour is solely based on external factors or influence from the Judeo-Christian tradition would be a reductive approach. Aforementioned religious traditions may make contributions to Islamic tradition on the emergence or development of this thought; but the reasons of this understanding must be analyzed within in Islam, not outside of it. Oppressed mass psychology and the sociopolitical situation of that time period of early Islamic history was effective on the emergence and development of this thought. The Umayyad government took negative approaches, such as the oppression and treatment of outside groups as second class citizens. In this environment, oppressed people sheltered known futuristic knowledge, namely the idea of a future redeemer, and they held on to it tightly. Similar patterns of religious traditions in their area were propellant powers for them. Scholar Ahmed Emin sees the Shia sect as the source of Mahdi understanding in Islamic thought and states that narratives related to this issue were invented because of the fight for the throne in the Umayyad and Abbasid periods. About this issue, Emin says: "For me its source is Shia. They are the first creators (of Mahdi). They despaired when the caliphate was off their hands and went to Muaviya. Their foreseeing leaders heralded that they will re-reach their sovereignty through Mahdi."[12] The approach of Mavdudi to this issue is similar.[13]

The issue of Mahdi is important in terms of the internal dynamics of Muslim society. Even with its different names, a future saviour who will come and save people from their wicked situation is actually a common phenomenon in many world religions. As in other religions, likewise in Islamic thought, Mahdi, who will emerge with extraordinary power and will establish a new order, is a political character as much as a religious one. Because of this, since the Umayyads' sovereignty this term always has been kept in mind and has been used as a political tool under religious identity. Although it is an easy way to bind the future of humanity to a future person, it is unacceptable to be waiting lazily for true and sensible understanding. It can not be said that Islam accepts such an idea. Moreover, throughout history, many calculations have been made for Mahdi's coming day, but none have been accurate. Many exploiters have shown themselves, but are remembered as liars.

After considering the views of experts in the field of hadith narratives related this topic and certain political patterns in narratives and sociopolitical events of that period, it is evident that aforementioned narratives can not be claimed as accurate. The belief of Mahdi emerged during the very early period of Islamic history, so to find the real theological ground of Mahdi in the Islamic religion is impossible.

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[12] Ahmed Emin, *Duha'l-Islam*, III, Beyrut, ts., p. 241.
[13] See Mevdudi, *Meseleler ve Çözümleri* (translated by Yusuf Karaca), Istanbul, 1990, p.48, 51.