International Journal of Islamic Thought and Research
https://e-journal.stai-ydi.ac.id/index.php/ijiter

THE RELEVANCE OF THE CONCEPT OF MAHDIISM (IMAM MAHDI) IN SHI'I ESCHATOLOGY AND ITS INFLUENCE ON SOCIAL HOPE

Silvani Auzulkha[1], Laras Safira[1], Yuli Andriani [1]
[1]STAI YDI Lubuk Sikaping, Indonesia
auzulkha@gmail.com*

Article Information:
Received August 15, 2026
Revised September 28, 2026
Accepted October 28, 2026

Keywords: *Syiah eschatology; social hope; active Intizar; social justice; Mahdiism*

Abstract

Discourse on Mahdiism in Twelver Shi'i theology is often confined to an exclusively eschatological narrative about the speculative end times. This study aims to examine the theological construction of the occultation of Imam Mahdi and analyze its impact on social hope and the behavior of adherents today. Using a descriptive-analytical qualitative research method and an interdisciplinary theological-sociological approach, this article explores classical and contemporary literature related to the concepts of Ghaibah (Occultation) and Intizar (Expectation). The findings indicate that the doctrine of Mahdiism is not merely an escapist dogma, but a transformative philosophy of history. The principal finding emphasizes that Intizar (waiting) has shifted from passive, fatalistic waiting toward "active expectation," which serves as a driving force for moral improvement and social activism. In the context of Muslim communities in Indonesia, this belief is manifested in community resilience and the strengthening of educational institutions as a means of intellectual preparation. The study concludes that Mahdiism provides a framework of cosmological optimism capable of mitigating modern nihilism through a vision of measurable universal justice.

INTRODUCTION

Comparative Religion, as discussed by 'Abbas al-'Aqqad, shows that belief in the coming of a Savior and the birth of a future Messenger is an almost universal phenomenon. Such beliefs are not found only in a particular religious tradition; they are widespread among many peoples and cultures (Ikhsan, 2013). Humanity's desire to witness the establishment of true justice is a universal longing that transcends primordial, ethnic, and geographical boundaries. Throughout the history of civilization, especially when societies have been afflicted by moral inequality, political tyranny, and acute humanitarian crises, the dream of an ideal world order has repeatedly produced the image of a savior (Sachedina, 2014).

How to cite: Auzulkha. S., Safira. L., Andriani. Y. (2026). The Relevance Of The Concept Of Mahdiism (Imam Mahdi) In Shi'I Eschatology And Its Influence On Social Hope. *International Journal of Islamic Thought and Research*, *2*(2), 71-79.

E-ISSN: 3110-2662
Published by: The Institute for Research and Community Service

In Islam, this longing finds expression in the doctrine of Al-Mahdi. Within Twelver Shi'i theology, however, the savior narrative takes a theological and philosophical form that differs significantly from that of other schools. Whereas most Muslims regard Al-Mahdi as someone who "will be born" or emerge as a future figure, Shi'a believe that he is a historical reality who already exists (al-Imam al-Hayy). He is believed to be the son of Imam Hasan al-Askari, born in the middle of the third century AH (255 AH), and to remain alive to this day behind the veil of occultation, or Ghaibah (Hussain, 2018).

Shi'i eschatology, therefore, should not be understood merely as a collection of prophecies about end-time disasters or frightening events surrounding the Day of Judgment. Rather, the eschatology of Mahdiism is a form of "living theodicy" that continually addresses human suffering and historical injustice (Mavani, 2013). Imam Mahdi is regarded as a metaphysical guarantee that the suffering of the oppressed (mustad'afin) will not continue forever and will certainly come to an end within history. The existence of an Imam who is alive but not physically visible (Ghaib) creates a distinctive spiritual and intellectual tension between "what is" (being) and "what ought to come into being" (becoming). This makes Mahdiism central to Shi'i philosophy of history, which views time not as an endless cycle but as a linear and progressive movement toward ethical, intellectual, and social perfection (Thabathaba'i, 1975).

The emergence of this doctrine is also inseparable from the sociopolitical conditions of the Muslim community following the tragedy of Karbala and the contentious succession of the Imamate. For centuries, Shi'i adherents lived under political repression, prompting them to develop mechanisms of psychological resilience (Zulkifli, 2013). Mahdiism emerged as a psychological anchor that offered hope amid systemic despair. It affirms that divinely legitimate authority has never been entirely severed from the human world; rather, it has shifted from an outward manifestation to an inward presence. The Imam's occultation is therefore not understood as God's indifference, but as a period of education in which the community is expected to develop moral and intellectual independence in managing the world before the dawn of promised justice (Amir-Moezzi, 2016).

Research Significance and Originality. A fundamental question in religious studies concerns how a metaphysical dogma can influence people's practical behavior. In modern times, nihilism and materialism often undermine the foundations of social hope. In Mahdiism, interpretations diverge. On the one hand, the Imam's occultation is sometimes misunderstood as a reason to withdraw from worldly realities (uzlah) while waiting for a miracle. On the other hand, modern theological thinkers emphasize that precisely because the leader is "occulted," the responsibility for maintaining the moral order falls fully upon the community (Muthahhari, 2003). This study seeks to explain how the doctrine of the "Waiting Imam" in fact calls for a "Community that Prepares." Its originality lies in connecting eschatological theology with practical sociological implementation in Muslim communities in Indonesia.

METHODS

This study employs a descriptive-analytical qualitative approach using library research. The authors examine primary and secondary sources relevant to Mahdiism and the sociology of hope. Data were collected through a literature review encompassing primary sources classical Shi'i theological works discussing Ghaibah (occultation) and Imamah, as well as works by contemporary thinkers such as Ali Shariati, Murtada Mutahhari, and Allameh Tabataba'I and secondary sources, including international scholarly journals, textbooks on the sociology of religion, and research reports on the social dynamics of Shi'i communities in Indonesia and

globally published over the last ten years. The analysis is interdisciplinary and combines theological analysis (Kalam) to examine arguments concerning the existence and occultation of Imam Mahdi; sociological analysis using the theory of social hope to investigate the relationship between eschatological belief and social mobilization; and critical content analysis to identify the transformative values underlying the concept of Intizar.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Mahdiism from the Perspective of Comparative Islamic Eschatology

Within Islamic eschatological thought, the concept of Al-Mahdi is not the exclusive property of one school; rather, it appears in several interpretive forms. In Sunni tradition, the Mahdi is understood as a figure who will be born and emerge at the end of time, without being associated with the prolonged occultation doctrine found in Twelver Shi'ism. This fundamental difference shows that Shi'i Mahdiism is not merely an eschatological belief, but a theological system of history integrated with the concept of Imamah and the continuity of divine authority (Sachedina, 2014). While Sunni approaches tend to position the Mahdi as a restorative figure at the end of history, Shi'ism understands Imam Mahdi as a transhistorical agent whose presence, though unseen, continues to shape the community's consciousness. Shi'i Mahdiism therefore develops a more systematic ethical dimension, particularly concerning the community's social responsibilities during the period of occultation. This distinction is important to avoid the mistaken generalization that all forms of Mahdiism are passive or apocalyptic (Amanat, 2012).

Theological Construction: Occultation as a Process of Communal Education

Shi'i theology divides the period of occultation into two main phases: Ghaibah al-Sughra (the Minor Occultation) and Ghaibah al-Kubra (the Major Occultation). Philosophically, this division is not merely a historical periodization, but a strategy for psychological transition (Hussain, 2018). During the first phase, the community could still communicate through special intermediaries (Sufara), whereas the second phase requires the community to become independent under the guidance of just and knowledgeable religious scholars. During the Major Occultation, the epistemological bridge between the community and the occulted Imam is manifested through the institution of scholarly authority, or Marja'iyyah. This concept asserts that occultation does not create a vacuum of authority; rather, it transforms leadership into a collective form grounded in justice and knowledge. As Mavani argues, religious authority during occultation serves as a guardian that keeps the vision of social justice alive and directed. This institution ensures that the principle of Lutf (divine grace) remains present in the community's sociopolitical life through the guidance of just jurists (Mavani, 2013).

During occultation, Mahdiism also gives rise to a non-utopian political ethic. The physical absence of Imam Mahdi prevents absolute claims to political power; every power structure is therefore considered relative and subject to the principles of justice and moral criticism. In this framework, Mahdiism functions as a theological check on absolutism while affirming that perfect justice will be fully realized only with the appearance of Imam Mahdi (Muthahhari, 2003). The concept of Lutf (divine grace) provides a rational foundation for this argument. Theologians maintain that an All-Wise God would not leave the world without a guide or Hujjah (proof of God)(Mavani, 2013). The Imam's occultation does not mean that guidance ceases; instead, its mode changes from physical instruction to spiritual and intellectual inspiration. Henry Corbin (1993) describes this in relation to the "Imaginal World" (Alam al-Mithal), in which the Imam is present in the inner consciousness of his followers and guides them toward universal truth beyond material limitations.

.

Criticism of Accusations of Escapism and Fatalism

One of the main criticisms of Mahdiism is the claim that belief in Imam Mahdi encourages religious escapism and social fatalism. This criticism usually assumes that an orientation toward the end times weakens commitment to structural change in the real world. In Twelver Shi'i theology, however, this assumption is not entirely accurate. Modern Shi'i thinkers such as Murtadha Muthahhari and Ali Shariati argue that awaiting Imam Mahdi has an ethical dimension that requires active participation by the community. Intizar is understood as a process of developing critical consciousness and rejecting all forms of oppression. Mahdiism thus provides moral legitimacy for resistance to injustice rather than an escape from social reality (Shariati, 1980).

The Rationality of Longevity: Between Miracles and Natural Law

A critical issue in Mahdiism is Imam Mahdi's longevity, which is believed to have exceeded one thousand years. Muhammad Baqir Shadr (2014) analyzes this issue through three arguments. First, the biological or scientific argument: modern science does not theoretically regard death as a rigid biological necessity at a particular age, but as the accumulation of cellular damage that could technically be slowed if external factors were controlled. Second, the historical argument: the histories of religions recognize figures believed to have lived for a long time, such as the Prophet Noah and Prophet Khidr. Third, the theological argument: if God can create the universe from nothing, preserving the life of one human being is not logically impossible from a theological perspective. For Shi'i communities, the Imam's longevity is a sign of God's power and a test of the community's patience

Philosophy of History and the Teleology of Justice

Mahdiism offers a distinctive philosophy of history. Unlike secular perspectives that often view history as a sequence of random events, Mahdiism understands history teleologically, as having an ultimate purpose (telos). That purpose is the establishment of absolute justice on earth (Thabathaba'i, 1975). For Shi'i philosophers, human history is an evolution of consciousness toward acceptance of divine truth. In this context, Imam Mahdi is not merely a political figure, but the culmination of human potential in intellectual and moral perfection. The belief that the "final act of the human drama" will be the victory of the righteous gives adherents a basis for resisting historical pessimism, even when the world appears deeply chaotic

The Transformation of Intizar: From Passive Waiting to Social Activism

From the perspective of the sociology of religion, Mahdiism in Twelver Shi'ism can be understood as a form of collective and transhistorical social hope. This hope goes beyond individual optimism and functions as a normative framework directing the community's social actions toward universal justice. Belief in the emergence of Imam Mahdi shapes a future-oriented morality, in which ethical actions in the present are understood as part of the structural and moral preparation for a just world order (Sachedina, 2014).

Furthermore, Mahdiism functions as a mechanism of social resilience in the face of modern crises such as social inequality, political uncertainty, and moral nihilism. The belief that history is moving toward the ultimate establishment of justice helps prevent collective despair and destructive radicalism. Mahdiism is therefore not escapist; it provides an interpretive framework that gives social suffering meaning as a temporary phase within a meaningful historical process (Syam, 2017).

A key finding of this study is the semantic and sociological shift in the concept of Intizar (expectation). Traditionally, waiting has often been understood as a passive act. Ali Shariati (1980), however, reconstructs Intizar as a "School of Protest." (1) Passive Intizar (fatalistic): waiting for a miracle without attempting to change social structures. This view assumes that the world must become corrupt before the Imam appears, and thus allows oppression to continue unchecked. (2) Active Intizar (constructive): the belief that the appearance of Imam Mahdi is conditioned by the community's collective preparedness (Muthahhari, 2003). If the Imam comes to establish universal justice, his followers must already have developed just and progressive character. Waiting in this sense is an act of worship that requires both self-purification and social reform.

Mahdiism offers an alternative to modern nihilism and the failure of secular utopias. Unlike materialist ideologies that often see history as a random sequence without purpose, Mahdiism provides a metaphysical foundation for social hope that is not undone by temporary political failures. Sachedina emphasizes that Islamic messianism is not merely an escape, but a framework for realizing a moral order in the real world (Sachedina, 2014). This cosmological optimism holds that the end of history will be the victory of universal justice, guaranteed by divine will, and thus helps prevent systemic despair in an era of dystopian anxieties.

Mahdiism and the Establishment of Universal Human Rights

Further analysis suggests that Imam Mahdi's principal mission is to restore human rights that have been taken away. In Shi'i eschatological narratives, Imam Mahdi will fill the earth with justice just as it was previously filled with oppression. This corresponds to universal human rights principles concerning equality, the right to security, and freedom from slavery (Arif, 2019). The hope for the restoration of human rights encourages adherents to stand at the forefront of defending oppressed people in their own communities, creating a pattern of social behavior responsive to oppression.

Mahdiism, Collective Identity, and Community Cohesion

Beyond serving as a theological doctrine, Mahdiism plays an important role in shaping the collective identity of Shi'i communities. Belief in the existence of an Imam Mahdi who is alive but occulted creates a strong symbolic bond among adherents. This bond strengthens internal solidarity and builds social cohesion, particularly in minority situations and under structural pressure. From the sociology of religion perspective, such cohesion is important for maintaining community stability. Shared hope for a just future creates a sense of collective purpose that transcends individual interests. Mahdiism therefore shapes not only individual moral orientation but also strengthens the community's overall social structure (Hasbi, 2021).

The Relevance of Mahdiism in the Indonesian Context

In Indonesia, Mahdiism interacts in distinctive ways with local culture. A symbolic parallel can be drawn between Imam Mahdi and the Javanese myth of the "Ratu Adil" (Just Queen/King) in Javanese cosmology (Hasbi, 2021), which may facilitate a subtler form of cultural reception. (1) Education and literacy: Shi'i communities in Indonesia, as noted by Zulkifli (2013), express their eschatological hope by strengthening educational institutions. They regard educating the nation as part of the intellectual preparation for the return of justice-oriented values. In contemporary society, Mahdiism also contributes to human-capital development by emphasizing moral and intellectual education during occultation. The belief that the Imam's appearance requires communal preparedness encourages the internalization

of discipline, justice, and social responsibility. Education is seen not only as a means of social mobility but also as a process of forming ethical subjects capable of contributing to the universal justice envisioned in Shi'i eschatology (Zulkifli, 2013; Rakhmat, 2015). (2) Resilience and social cohesion: amid discrimination, hope for future justice provides inner peace and discourages reactive behavior. Attention shifts from horizontal conflict toward social contributions through humanitarian service (Hasbi, 2021).

In Indonesia, "Active Intizar" can be seen in how adherents respond to inequality by strengthening literacy and humanitarian action. Education is understood as intellectual preparation for the advent of a just world order. Furthermore, Imam Mahdi's mission to fill the earth with justice can also encompass the restoration of ecological balance. In eschatological narratives, oppression includes not only political tyranny but also environmental destruction caused by human greed. This social hope therefore encourages adherents to become local reformers who protect the environment as part of their moral responsibility during the period of occultation (Muthahhari, 2003).

Social Hope and Cosmological Optimism

Mahdiism offers what may be called "cosmological optimism." In a modern era dominated by dystopian narratives, this theology provides confidence that truth will ultimately prevail in history (Rakhmat, 2015). Its psychosocial implications are considerable: individuals who hope for a just future tend to have better mental well-being. They are less likely to become trapped in nihilism because they believe every good action is a "brick" in the construction of an ideal future civilization. This hope becomes a defense against despair, which often affects modern societies (Syam, 2017).

In a modern landscape characterized by a crisis of meaning and existential nihilism, Mahdiism serves as a religious counter-narrative to worldviews that deny historical purpose. Shi'i eschatology asserts that human history is moving toward moral victory and justice, not meaninglessness or destruction without purpose. This teleological narrative strengthens the psychosocial stability of individuals and communities, since every ethical action is understood to have cosmic significance in history's movement toward final justice (Sachedina, 2014).

Mahdiism also plays an important role in forming the collective identity of Shi'i communities. Belief in the existence of an Imam Mahdi who is alive but occulted creates a strong symbolic bond among adherents, reinforcing internal solidarity and social cohesion, especially in minority situations and under structural pressure. From the sociology of religion perspective, this cohesion helps maintain community stability. Shared hope for a just future creates a collective purpose that goes beyond individual interests. Mahdiism therefore shapes individual moral orientation while strengthening the community's overall social structure (Zulkifli, 2013).

Mahdiism as a Theology of Hope and the Reconstruction of the Meaning of Suffering

One important contribution of Mahdiism to contemporary Islamic theology is its ability to reconstruct the meaning of human suffering within a framework of cosmological hope. In many modern social theories, suffering is understood as a consequence of failures in economic, political, or cultural systems, often leading to structural pessimism and a crisis of meaning. Mahdiism, by contrast, places suffering within a meaningful historical process directed toward the establishment of universal justice.

In Shi'i eschatology, the suffering of the oppressed (mustad'afin) is not regarded as a final condition, but as a transitional phase in human history. Belief in Imam Mahdi as

the guarantor of divine justice provides a metaphysical foundation for the view that no injustice is eternal. Mahdiism thus functions as a theology of hope that prevents the normalization of suffering and rejects the moral legitimization of structural oppression (Sachedina, 2014).

This approach has significant psychosocial implications. Individuals and communities who believe that history is moving toward an ethical purpose may have greater mental resilience when facing social pressure. Eschatological hope does not encourage escape from reality; instead, it cultivates "active patience"—patience accompanied by a moral commitment to continue striving for justice within the limits of human capacity (Rakhmat, 2015).

Mahdiism also helps build a constructive ethic of suffering. From this perspective, suffering is not romanticized or glorified; it is understood as a reality that must be challenged through moral and social transformation. The concept of Active Intizar emphasizes that awaiting Imam Mahdi means rejecting every form of oppression, whether personal or structural. Suffering thus becomes a trigger for critical awareness rather than a reason for resignation or apathy (Shariati, 1980).

In modern societies often marked by a crisis of meaning and existential nihilism, Mahdiism provides an alternative narrative affirming that human life does not unfold in historical emptiness. Every ethical action, however small, is considered to have cosmic resonance within the divine plan of history. This view strengthens individual moral integrity and encourages sustained social engagement, because justice is understood as a historical project involving human participation, even though its ultimate realization rests with divine will (Amanat, 2012).

Thus, Mahdiism functions not only as an eschatological doctrine about the future, but also as an interpretive framework shaping how the community understands suffering, responsibility, and hope in the present. This reconstruction of suffering's meaning is one reason Mahdiism remains relevant and adaptable in response to continually changing global social challenges.

The Ecological Dimension: Restoring Nature as a Manifestation of Universal Justice

The contemporary relevance of Mahdiism can also be extended to discussions of the global environmental crisis. In Shi'i eschatological narratives, Imam Mahdi's primary mission is to fill the earth with justice just as it was filled with oppression (Corbin, 1993). In contemporary terms, "oppression" is understood not only as political subjugation but also as destructive exploitation of nature caused by human greed, which damages God's creation (Nasr, 1997). From this perspective, ecosystem destruction is a form of injustice against the rights of nature. Hope for the coming of the Savior therefore includes a vision of ecological restoration, in which justice is manifested through the recovery of balance between humanity and nature (Muthahhari, 2003). This gives adherents a moral responsibility to take a leading role in environmental conservation as a preparatory act for the dawn of universal justice (Shadr, 2014).

Mahdiism and Contemporary Global Challenges

In the contemporary global context, Mahdiism can be read as a theological response to global humanitarian crises, including economic inequality, prolonged conflict, and environmental destruction. Shi'i eschatology asserts that justice is not an impossible utopia, but the ultimate goal of history, guaranteed at a cosmological level.

This perspective has significant ethical implications. Hope for ultimate justice encourages the community to reject the normalization of injustice in the present. Mahdiism thus offers a global moral framework relevant to interfaith and

intercivilizational dialogue in efforts to uphold universal human values (Sachedina, 2014).

CONCLUSION

Based on the analysis presented, several fundamental conclusions can be drawn:

First, theologically, Mahdiism in Twelver Shi'ism is a logical continuation of the concepts of Imamah and Prophethood, grounded in the principle of Lutf (divine grace). The occultation of Imam Mahdi is not viewed as an absence of authority, but as a shift in the mode of divine guidance from an outward form to an inward, intellectual one. This requires the community to achieve moral independence under the supervision of just religious scholars.

Second, sociologically, this doctrine has transformed from a mere salvation myth into a dynamic theology of hope. The concept of Intizar (expectation) has been reconstructed from a passive, fatalistic attitude into active engagement that requires collective preparation. Hope for the coming of a "Global Reformer" obliges adherents to become "local reformers" at both individual and social levels. This demonstrates that eschatological belief can provide the impetus for justice and moral integrity in the real world rather than serving merely as metaphysical escape.

Third, in Indonesia, Mahdiism demonstrates considerable cultural adaptability and contributes to the resilience of its adherent communities. This belief is expressed through stronger literacy and education as a form of preparing the way for justice. Amid nihilism and global uncertainty, Mahdiism offers a robust cosmological optimism: the conviction that human history will not end in destruction, but in the victory of universal justice.

REFERENCES

Amanat, A. (2012). *Apocalyptic Islam and Iranian Shi'ism*. I.B. Tauris.
Amir-Moezzi, M. A. (2016). *The spirituality of Shi'i Islam: Beliefs and practices*. I.B. Tauris.
Arif, S. (2019). Teologi pembebasan dalam Islam: Konteks Mahdiisme. *Jurnal Studi Keislaman*, *19*(2), 145–168.
Corbin, H. (1993). *History of Islamic philosophy*. (L. Sherrard, Trans.). Kegan Paul International.
Hasbi, M. (2021). Dialektika penantian: Konsep intizar di Indonesia. *Jurnal Teologi Dan Filsafat*, *12*(1), 34–56.
Hussain, J. (2018). *The occultation of the twelfth Imam: A historical background*. Cambridge University Press.
Mavani, J. (2013). *Religious authority and political thought in Twelver Shi'ism*. Routledge.
Muthahhari, M. (2003). *The Mahdi's revolution*. WOFIS.
Rakhmat, J. (2015). *Islam dan teologi harapan*. Remaja Rosdakarya.
Sachedina, A. A. (2014). *Islamic messianism: The idea of Mahdi in Twelver Shi'ism*. SUNY Press.
Shadr, M. B. (2014). *Inquiry on the Mahdi*. Islamic Seminary Publications.
Shariati, A. (1980). *Expectation: The school of protest*. Abuzar Chip.
Syam, N. (2017). *Eskatologi politik: Menanti Sang Imam di era modern*. UIN Press.
Thabathaba'i, S. M. H. (1975). *Shi'ite Islam*. (S. H. Nasr, Trans.). SUNY Press.
Zulkifli. (2013). *The struggle of the Shi'is in Indonesia*. ANU E Press.

Copyright holder:
© Auzulkha. S., Safira. L., Andriani. Y.

First publication right:
International Journal of Islamic Thought and Research

This article is licensed under:
CC-BY-SA