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Research paper

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THE FIGURE OF MAHDI IN SUFI ESCHATOLOGY OF DAGESTAN: HISTORICAL AND CONTEMPORARY CONTEXT

Abstract. This article explores Sufi conceptions of Mahdi in the historical context of Dagestan and analyzes their current state. In Dagestani Sufism, the figure of Mahdi is an integral part of eschatological beliefs, centered around the expectation of the imminent arrival of the savior of the Islamic world and the understanding of one's role in this process. The article traces the development of these teachings in detail: from their dissemination in the works of Middle Eastern Sufis to their adaptation in the writings of Dagestani *'ulama* and Sufis. These eschatological ideas entered Dagestan in the second half of the 18th century and, evolving over two centuries, became a significant part of regional Sufism. It has been established that after the end of the Caucasian War, some *'ulama* loyal to the new imperial authority utilized these beliefs to counteract anti-colonial sentiments. Apocalyptic expectations and related ideas about Mahdi were revived at the beginning of each Islamic century, as well as during times of political and economic crises. In the post-Soviet period, against the backdrop of the collapse of the USSR and the revival of Islam in national republics, the figure of Mahdi gained special significance for Dagestani Sufis. In the contemporary era, Sufi conceptions of Mahdi not only remain relevant but also receive new impetus for development. In Dagestan, they manifest in a specific form—through the concept of the deputy (*na'ib*) of Mahdi and the recognition of a special mission for his followers. This phenomenon in Dagestan can be seen as a consequence of the reconciliation process between the state and Sufism in the post-Soviet period.

Keywords: Sufi Mahdism; Mahdi; al-Sha'rani; Ibn 'Arabi; Sa'id-Afandi al-Chirkawi; Mufti of Dagestan; Muftiate; apocalypse; Islamic eschatology; history of Islam in Dagestan, Sufism in Dagestan

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Исследовательская статья

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ФИГУРА МАХДИ В СУФИЙСКОЙ ЭСХАТОЛОГИИ ДАГЕСТАНА: ИСТОРИЧЕСКИЙ И СОВРЕМЕННЫЙ КОНТЕКСТ

Аннотация: Статья посвящена исследованию суфийских представлений о Махди в историческом контексте Дагестана, а также анализу их современного состояния. В дагестанском суфизме фигура Махди является частью эсхатологических воззрений, заключающихся в ожидании скорого пришествия спасителя исламского мира и осмыслении своего места в этом процессе. В статье подробно прослеживается развитие подобных учений: от их распространения в трудах ближневосточных суфиев до адаптации в работах дагестанских ʻалимов и суфиев. Эти эсхатологические представления проникают в Дагестан во второй половине XVIII в. и, эволюционируя в течение двух столетий, становятся важной частью регионального суфизма. Установлено, что после окончания Кавказской войны они использовались некоторыми ʻалимами, лояльными новой имперской власти, для противодействия антиколониальным настроениям. Апокалиптические ожидания и связанные с ними идеи о Махди актуализировались в начале каждого мусульманского столетия, а также во времена политических и экономических кризисов. В постсоветский период, на фоне краха СССР и возрождения ислама в национальных республиках, фигура Махди приобрела особое значение для дагестанских суфиев. В современную эпоху суфийские представления о Махди не только сохраняют актуальность, но и получают новый импульс развития. В Дагестане они проявляются в специфической форме – через концепцию заместителя (наʼиб) Махди и осознание особой миссии его последователей. Этот феномен в Дагестане можно рассматривать как следствие процесса примирения государства и суфизма в постсоветский период.

Ключевые слова: суфийский махдизм; Махди; аш-Шаʻрани; Ибн ʻАраби; Саʻид-афанди ал-Чиркави; муфтий Дагестана; муфтият; апокалипсис; эсхатология в исламе; история ислама в Дагестане; суфизм в Дагестане

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Introduction

Messianic ideas associated with the belief in the advent of the Mahdi (Arabic: "the rightly guided one") – the final successor of the Prophet Muhammad and the savior of the Islamic world who will deliver humanity from evil and injustice – occupy a significant place in Islamic eschatology.

The figure of the Mahdi is particularly important in Shi'a (Imami) Islam, where belief in his return is inextricably linked to the doctrine of the "Hidden" Imam – Muhammad al-Mahdi. According to Shi'a teaching, the twelfth Imam went into occultation in his youth and remains hidden until he is to appear at the End of Time (*ākhir al-zamān*). Thus, in Shi'ism, the Mahdi is regarded as a specific historical figure – the son of the eleventh Imam Ḥasan al-'Askarī (d. 874) and a descendant of the Prophet Muhammad through his grandson Ḥusayn.

In Sunni Islam, the figure of the Mahdi is conceived with less doctrinal precision. According to Sunni traditions, he will be born at the End of Time and will emerge in adulthood as a universal Islamic leader. His name, according to tradition, will be Muḥammad, and his father's name 'Abdallāh. The majority of Sunni scholars believed that the Mahdi would be a descendant of the Prophet Muhammad's grandson Ḥasan ibn 'Alī, although an alternative view held that he would descend from his other grandson, Ḥusayn. Some scholars attempted to reconcile these versions, suggesting that the Mahdi would descend from both branches of the Prophet's lineage.

The ambiguity of Sunni thought concerning the Mahdi created favorable conditions for various socio-religious movements in Islam to appropriate the eschatological role for themselves. In this context, the role of Sufis was particularly significant. As noted by N. Gardiner, Sufi claims to spiritual authority often extended into explicit or implicit assertions of divinely granted political power, a phenomenon most vividly expressed in claims to mahdism[1] – the messianic role of restoring justice on earth before its ultimate destruction [1, p. 250].

The present article is devoted to an investigation of the genesis of Sufi conceptions of the Mahdi in Dagestan, the historical evolution of these ideas, their connection to apocalyptic sentiments within society, as well as the formation of a contemporary Sufi movement that claims a heroic and eschatological mission.

Apocalyptic Expectations Among Muslims in the Late Medieval and Early Modern Periods

According to Sunni traditions, the Mahdi is expected to appear at the beginning of a new century. This belief contributed to the fact that at the start of each Islamic century, the theme of his advent became particularly salient, generating waves of apocalyptic expectation among Muslims. This tendency was most evident at the end of the 9th century AH, when several Islamic theologians, relying on traditions about the seven-thousand-year duration of the world and the revelation of the Prophet during its final millennium, asserted that the coming century would be a time of eschatological events and that the End of the World, as promised in the Qur'an, would occur before the conclusion of the Islamic millennium.

The ensuing debates prompted the renowned Egyptian scholar Jalāl al-Dīn al-Suyūṭī (d. 1505) to write a short treatise refuting this claim. He titled his work *al-Kashf 'an mujāwazat hādhihi al-umma al-alf* ("The Unveiling [of the Truth] Regarding the Existence of This Community Beyond One Thousand Years"). According to al-Suyūṭī, the Muslim umma (community) would last more than 1,000 years but would not reach 1,500 years. He interpreted the tradition stating that the Prophet lived in the final millennium as an indication that the main part of his community would exist within that time frame. Thus, the Prophet himself, in al-Suyūṭī's view, was born two, three, or four centuries before the end of the sixth millennium, and therefore, the chain of eschatological events should begin in the years 1200, 1300, or 1400 AH [2].

1. In Western academic literature, the term *Mahdism* denotes religious-political movements associated with belief in the coming of Imam Mahdi. In turn, the concept of "Sufi Mahdism" refers to analogous movements within Sufism, in which Sufi leaders either assert their own messianic destiny or claim to act as intermediaries between the Mahdi and the people.

In support of his hypothesis, the scholar cited several traditions. According to them, the Dajjāl is to appear at the beginning of a new century, after which he will be slain by ʿĪsā (Jesus), who will reign for forty years. Following the rising of the sun from the West, humanity will live for another 120 years, and between the two trumpet blasts (which herald the death of all life on Earth and the advent of the Day of Judgment), an additional forty years will pass. The total duration of these events, amounting to 200 years, according to al-Suyūṭī, could not possibly fit within the interval between 898 AH – when his treatise was written – and the year 1000 AH.[2]

Further developing his argument, al-Suyūṭī referred to a number of eschatological traditions that emerged in the context of fierce political struggles between pro-ʿAlid, pro-Umayyad, and pro-ʿAbbāsid factions during the 8th–9th centuries CE [3, p. 17]. These traditions, recorded by Nuʿaym b. Ḥammād (d. 843) in his collection Kitāb al-Fitan, claimed that the Mahdi would appear in the year 200 or 204 AH. Al-Suyūṭī reinterpreted these dates as corresponding to the years 1200 or 1204 AH, respectively.

This interpretation was supported by two authoritative Islamic scholars known for their works on eschatology – Ibn Ḥajar al-Haytamī (d. 1567) [4, p. 59] and Muḥammad b. Rasūl al-Barzanjī (d. 1691). The latter expressed near-complete certainty that the Mahdi would appear no later than the year 1200 AH [5, p. 344].

Thus, by the beginning of the 13th century AH (corresponding to November 4, 1785 CE), apocalyptic sentiments intensified throughout the Islamic world. A noteworthy testament to these expectations in Dagestan is found in a note by an unknown author, written in the colophon of a manuscript copy of the renowned occult treatise *Shams al-Maʿārif*, transcribed in the year 1195 AH (1781 CE):

"In the year 1209 [AH], the amount of rainfall will decrease, and drought will last [longer than usual]. In the year 1210, food shortages will reach such a degree that some people will be unable to find even a mudd of [barley or wheat] porridge. In the year 1211, there will be a solar eclipse lasting three days. In the year 1222, Allah will erase the letters from all the Qur'ans, and their pages will appear blank. In the same year, the Dabbat al-Arḍ will appear. In the year 1250, the Dajjāl will reveal himself – may Allah curse him. All of this comes from a scroll of the Prophet, peace be upon him, which he sent from his Rawḍa".[3]

Despite the author's unusual attempt to ascribe these predictions directly to the Prophet in order to lend them greater credibility, their origin is most likely linked to the science of jafr (*ʿilm al-jafr wa-l-ḥurūf*) – the occult art of divination using the Arabic alphabet, its numerical values, and astrological properties. Such practices, particularly in relation to eschatological themes, were widespread throughout the Islamic world, including in Dagestan.

Shi'i Concepts of the Mahdi in Sufism

For understanding the development of Sufi ideas about the Mahdi in Dagestan, the writings of the renowned Egyptian Sufi and Islamic scholar ʿAbd al-Wahhāb al-Shaʿrānī (d. 1565) and their subsequent discussion by Sunni theologians are of particular value.[4]

In one of his works, *al-Yawāqīt wa-l-Jawāhir*, in which he sought to reconcile the teachings of Shaykh Ibn ʿArabī (d. 1240) with "orthodox" Islam, al-Shaʿrānī devotes special attention to the origin, activity, and advent of the Imam Mahdi. Among other things, he embraces the Shi'i (Imāmī) concept of the Mahdi, stating:

"He is one of the sons (*min awlād*) of Imām al-Ḥasan al-ʿAskarī. He was born on the middle night of the month of Shaʿbān in the year 255 AH, and he will remain alive until he meets ʿĪsā b. Maryam, peace be upon him. Thus, his age in our time, that is, in the year 958 AH, is 706 years. This was told to me by Shaykh Ḥasan al-ʿIrāqī, who is buried atop Qumm al-Rīsh, overlooking the Ratlī Pond in the protected city of Cairo, from the Imām al-Mahdī when he met with him. Our master, Sayyid ʿAlī al-Khawwāṣ, agreed with him on this – may God have mercy on them" [7, vol. 2, pp. 507–508].

2. The year 898 AH began on October 23, 1492 CE, and the year 1000 AH began on October 19, 1591 CE.
3. *Shams al-Maʿārif*, held at the Institute of History, Archaeology and Ethnography of the Dagestan Federal Research Center of the Russian Academy of Sciences (hereafter: IHAE DRC RAS), Oriental Manuscripts Fund. Collection 14, Inv. 1, File No. 1414, fol. 159a.
4. W. Madelung has previously addressed the issue of Shi'i influence on the Sunni doctrine of the Mahdi [6, p. 1237]. However, a detailed analysis of the biographies of certain scholars who held such views shows that they were more likely of Shi'i affiliation.

Al-Shaʿrānī then cites a passage that he attributes to Ibn ʿArabī's *al-Futūḥāt al-Makkiyya*, in which it is asserted that the Mahdi is none other than the twelfth Shi'i Imam, Muḥammad b. al-Ḥasan al-ʿAskarī.[5]

In another of his well-known works, a hagiographic collection on the lives of Sufis, al-Shaʿrānī, recounting the biography of Shaykh al-Ḥasan al-ʿIrāqī, describes in detail the latter's encounter with the Imam Mahdi. This account was related to al-Shaʿrānī in person. According to al-ʿIrāqī, during that meeting – while he was still a young man – he asked the Mahdi about his age, and the Mahdi replied that he was 620 years old. Al-ʿIrāqī claimed that the encounter occurred exactly 100 years prior to the time he recounted it to al-Shaʿrānī [9, vol. 2, p. 392; vol. 4, pp. 315–316].

Naturally, the vast majority of Sunni scholars did not accept such an overtly pro-Shi'i view of the Mahdi. One of them – the aforementioned al-Barzanjī – criticized al-Shaʿrānī, stating that the latter had attributed this opinion to Ibn ʿArabī, whereas *al-Futūḥāt* actually asserts that the Mahdi is a descendant of al-Ḥasan, the grandson of the Prophet, and that he would be born shortly before the End of Days. However, al-Barzanjī immediately sought to excuse al-Shaʿrānī by claiming that the relevant passage in *al-Yawāqīt* was forged by Shi'is, and that the author had not managed to revise his book before his death[6] [5, p. 177].

The Egyptian Muslim scholar Abū al-ʿIrfān al-Ṣabbān (d. 1792) also cites the fabricated passage from the *Futūḥāt*, cautiously noting that Ibn ʿArabī's words contradict Sunni reports concerning the Imam al-Mahdi [10, pp. 475–477]. Nonetheless, this did not stop another Egyptian scholar and Sufi, al-Ḥasan al-ʿIdwī al-Ḥamzāwī (d. 1886), from criticizing al-Ṣabbān for his "audacity" in pointing out inconsistencies in Ibn ʿArabī's statements.

Al-ʿIdwī offered his own interpretation, attempting to reconcile the disputed texts with Sunni traditions. According to him, the claim that the Mahdi is a descendant of al-Ḥasan actually refers not to the Prophet's grandson, but to al-Ḥasan al-ʿAskarī. In this reading, al-Ḥasan al-ʿAskarī is not the Mahdi's father, but merely one of his ancestors, while his actual father, in accordance with the hadiths, is ʿAbd Allāh.

To support his interpretation, al-ʿIdwī cited a corresponding quotation from al-Shaʿrānī, although he referred to al-Ṣabbān and significantly distorted the original passage:

"Al-Mahdi comes from the descendants (*min wuld*) of Imām al-Ḥasan al-ʿAskarī. He was born on the middle night of the month of Shaʿbān in the year 1255 AH, and he will remain alive until he meets ʿĪsā, son of Maryam, peace be upon him. This was told to me by Shaykh al-Ḥasan al-ʿIrāqī, who is buried atop Qumm al-Rīsh, overlooking the Ratlī Pond in the protected city of Cairo, and my master ʿAlī al-Khawwāṣ agreed with him on this." [11, p. 121].

By adding a thousand years to the Mahdi's date of birth and introducing other textual changes, al-ʿIdwī sought to distance this Mahdi from the Shi'i concept.

Some time later, another Egyptian scholar, Muʾmin b. Ḥasan al-Shablandjī (d. 1891), in his book dedicated to the biography of the Prophet and his family (*ahl al-bayt*), also reproduced this distorted quotation from al-Shaʿrānī [12, p. 147].

Sufi Ideas About the Mahdi in Dagestan

The works of al-Shaʿrānī gained wide circulation in Dagestan beginning in the second half of the 18th century, when the renowned Dagestani scholar Abū Bakr al-ʿAymākī (d. 1791) brought them from the Middle East. In a letter addressed to his teacher Ibrāhīm al-ʿUrādī (d. 1770), al-ʿAymākī writes that he returned from

5. It is unknown when and by whom this passage from Chapter 366 of *al-Futūḥāt al-Makkiyya* was fabricated. It is known, however, that multiple manuscript versions of the *Futūḥāt* exist, in which this passage appears in a distorted form. The inauthenticity of the fragment can be judged based on the autograph manuscript of the *Futūḥāt*, preserved in the city of Konya (Turkey) in the Yusuf Ağa Library (MS 4859). In this manuscript, the origin of the Mahdi is treated strictly from a Sunni perspective. A dedicated website even exists presenting a digital copy of the authentic autograph (https://www.futmak.com). For more on the authentic works of Ibn ʿArabī, see [8].

6. In all early manuscript copies of *al-Yawāqīt* preserved to the present day, this text appears unchanged. For example, it exists in a copy transcribed in 1625 and compared with the author's autograph in 1684. This same copy was used for the most recent edition of *al-Yawāqīt* in 2023. All previous editions – 1860 (based on the autograph), 1890, 1903, 1998, and 2003 – also reproduce this passage. To date, no manuscript copy or printed edition of *al-Yawāqīt* is known in which this excerpt appears in the altered form cited by al-ʿIdwī. This fact, along with the mention of the same passage in at least three other works by al-Shaʿrānī, leaves no doubt that he indeed held these views.

the Hajj "having succeeded in acquiring rare books, including *al-Yawāqīt wa-l-Jawāhir* and other works of al-Shaʿrānī" [13, p. 348]. The Dagestani manuscript tradition attributes to al-ʿAymākī the compilation of an index (*fihrist*) for *al-Yawāqīt wa-l-Jawāhir*. Moreover, his autobiography, included in his work *Majmaʿ al-Awbāsh*, was composed under the influence of al-Shaʿrānī's *Laṭāʾif al-minan wa-l-akhlāq*.

It is unlikely that al-Shaʿrānī's writings directly shaped a Shi'i conception of the Mahdi in a scholar like al-ʿAymākī. Nonetheless, that conception did gain some traction in Dagestan in the late 18th and early 19th centuries. A vivid example is a poem in Arabic composed by the ʿālim and poet Muḥammad the Blind al-Kibūdī at the behest of Surkhay-khan (d. 1827). In it, the poet appeals to the Almighty for protection and victory for the ruler of Kumukh, for the sake of the Prophet, his family, and the twelve Imams, including Muḥammad ibn al-Ḥasan al-ʿAskarī. In the poem, the latter is described as:

"... the Imam, the Proof (*ḥujjah*), al-Mahdī, the seal of the bequeathers, source of life, the restorer (*muʿīd*) of Allah's religion after it had been scattered..."[7]

Despite this, in Dagestan – where Sunni Islam has traditionally held firm – such views could not gain widespread acceptance. Many *ʿulamāʾ* who encountered al-Shaʿrānī's works preferred to ignore this aspect of his doctrine. However, the arrival in Dagestan of the work *Mashāriq al-Anwār* by Ḥasan al-ʿIdwī, which sought to "sunnitize" al-Shaʿrānī's citation, introduced some confusion among local scholars.

The distinguished Dagestani scholar Muḥammad Ṭāhir al-Qarākhī (d. 1880) was undoubtedly a devoted admirer of al-Shaʿrānī's works. His personal collection included several printed and manuscript editions of this author, some of which al-Qarākhī himself transcribed. Al-Shaʿrānī's *Laṭāʾif al-minan*, like al-ʿAymākī's biographical section in *Majmaʿ al-Awbāsh*, inspired al-Qarākhī to compose his own autobiography in a separate treatise, as he mentions in the introduction [14, p. 17].

Notably, al-Qarākhī's works – alongside his numerous marginal glosses and annotations on loose leaves – make no mention of al-Shaʿrānī's Shi'i-leaning views on the Mahdi. The situation evolved in May 1870, when he received al-ʿIdwī's *Mashāriq al-Anwār* from Egypt. He recorded a joyful note on the title page of one of his printed books, calling the received work "an excellent new composition."

Around the same period, al-Qarākhī was working on one of his major juridical treatises, *Sharḥ al-Mafrūḍ*, begun in the years of the Imāmate (early 1850s) and completed around 1879. In this work he briefly mentions the Mahdi: "...[he] is from the descendants (*nasl*) of al-Ḥasan al-ʿAskarī and will be born in Medina..." [15, p. 204]. Here, the influence of al-ʿIdwī[8] is evident, though al-Qarākhī emphasizes that the Mahdi has not yet been born, whereas the al-ʿIdwī citation claims that his birth occurred several decades earlier. At the very end of the book, al-Qarākhī also notes that the twelfth Shi'i Imam is believed to be in occultation and that the Shiʿa regard him as the awaited Mahdi [15, p. 834]. Thus, al-Qarākhī clearly differentiates between the Sunni and Shi'i conceptions of the Mahdi.

An intriguing question is whether the mountaineers perceived their anti-colonial struggle during the Caucasian War as part of the eschatological events preceding the End of Time. It is indisputable that among the mountaineers – as among Muslims elsewhere – apocalyptic expectations intensified during periods of severe upheaval: wars, epidemics, earthquakes, and so forth. Al-Qarākhī himself repeatedly emphasized in his letters and notes that he lived in an era of *ākhir al-zamān* (the End of Time). Moreover, when Shamil's son, Gazimuhammad, was appointed *naʿīb* of Karata, al-Qarākhī wished him to remain in office "until the appearance of the Mahdi"[9].

However, the mountaineers' anti-colonial struggle did not crystallize into any defined form of Mahdism. The linking of the events of the Caucasian War with eschatological beliefs occurred among some mountaineers only after the war concluded.

7. A digital copy is held in the author's private archive. The original manuscript is part of the handwritten collection of Muḥammad Ṭāhir al-Qarākhī, preserved in the village of Tsulda (Republic of Dagestan), and is written in his own hand.
8. In this work, al-Qarākhī refers quite frequently to *Mashāriq al-Anwār*, especially in passages dealing with eschatological matters.
9. *Barīqāt alsuyūf aljabāliyyā fī baʿd alghazawāt alshamawilliyyā*, autograph, AOM IHAE DFRC RAS [Archive of Oriental Manuscripts, Institute of History, Archaeology and Ethnography, Dagestan Federal Research Center, Russian Academy of Sciences], f. 14, inv. 1, no. 653(b), fol. 49a.

The Figure of the Mahdi as Guardian of the Empire

An intriguing example of this strategic appropriation is found in an Arabic text contained within a composite manuscript of various historical works on Dagestan[10]. As noted at the end of the text, it is attributed to Shaykh Ibn ʿArabī, who purportedly included it in one of his jafr-based predictions of future events.

The manuscript (sheet size approximately 16 × 20 cm, broad naskh script, written in blue ink) was copied by an unknown scribe in the first half of the 20th century, based on a manuscript by the noted Dagestani scholar Muslim al-ʿUrādī (d. 1919). It contains textual corrections and additions made in red ink from another exemplar, as well as marginal glosses that may have been added by the scribe or the original manuscript's author (see Fig. 1).

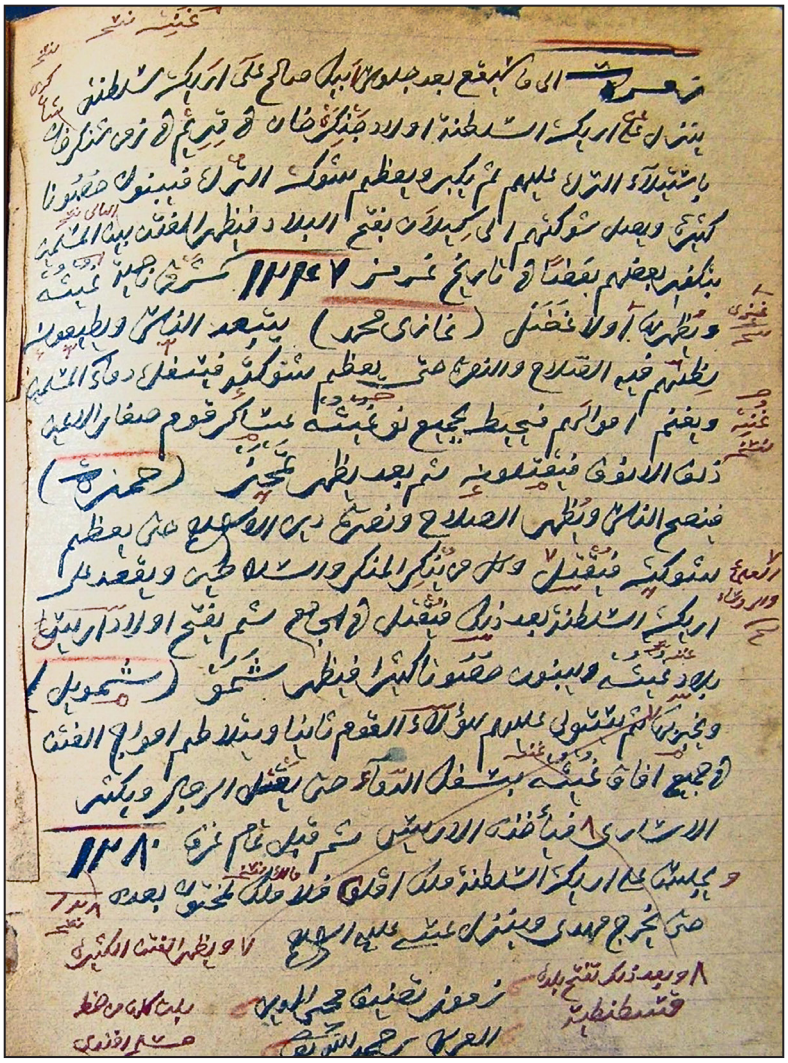

Fig. 1. Text attributed to the apocryphal treatise *Rumūz* by Shaykh Ibn Arabī
Photo by Dzhamal Malamagomedov

Рис. 1. Текст, приписываемый апокрифическому сочинению шейха Ибн ʻАраби «Румуз».
Фото: Джамал Маламагомедов

10. Digital copy of the manuscript is kept in the author's private collection.

The text reads:

“A prediction concerning what will occur after the enthronement of Bek Ṣāliḥ (the ‘righteous bek’; in red ink, an alif with fatḥa is added to the word bek, turning it into Abek – trans. note, Kh.A.):

In the time of Shankir Khan (marginal note: in [another] copy – Shan Kerey – trans. note, Kh.A.), the descendants of Jangīz Khan shall ascend the throne of power in Crimea as a result of their conquest by the Turks (interlinear addition: shall descend from [the throne] – trans. note, Kh.A.). The power of the Turks shall then grow and expand, and they shall build many fortresses. Their influence will spread as far as Gilan through the conquest of cities.

At that time, turmoil will erupt among the Muslims (interlinear addition: in [another] copy – among the inhabitants – trans. note, Kh.A.), and they shall begin accusing one another of unbelief. This will occur in the year GH-R-M-Z (غرمز) 1247 in the eastern part of the region of Ghuysu (غُيْثُهْ) (marginal note: in [another] copy – Guni (غُنِهْ) – trans. note, Kh.A.).

First, there shall appear Ghazal (غَضَنْ) (Ghāzī Muḥammad) (marginal note: in [another] copy – Ghāzī (غزي) – trans. note, Kh.A.). People will follow him and submit to him, believing him to be pious and victorious. His power shall be consolidated, after which the blood of Muslims shall be shed, and their property will be taken as spoils.

Then the entire region of Ghuysu (marginal note: in [another] copy – Guni – trans. note, Kh.A.) will be surrounded by the armies of a narrow-eyed people with wide noses, who will kill him. After that, Tamhāz (Ḥamzat) will appear. He will guide the people, exhibit piety, and aid the religion of Islam until his authority is established.

Then he will kill (marginal note: the scholars and leaders – trans. note, Kh.A.), as well as all who condemned the forbidden and reproached the rulers (*salāṭīn*). After that, he will occupy the throne of power, but will be killed in the Friday (congregational) mosque.

Thereafter, the descendants of Arīs (اريس) shall conquer the cities of Ghuysu (interlinear addition: in [another] copy – Guni – trans. note, Kh.A.) and build numerous fortresses. Then Shamāv (Shāmil) will appear and destroy them (marginal note: and a great fitna [turmoil] will begin – trans. note, Kh.A.).

However, this people shall soon reconquer them. Waves of sedition shall sweep through the entire region of Ghuysu (interlinear addition: Guni – trans. note, Kh.A.), accompanied by bloodshed. People will be killed, and many will be taken captive (marginal note: after this, they shall conquer the city of Constantinople – trans. note, Kh.A.).

Then [Shamāv] shall be seized by the al-Arīs (الاريس). Before the year GH-R-F (غرف) 1280 (marginal note: in [another] copy — 128 — trans. note, Kh.A.), an uncircumcised king shall ascend the throne of power. After him, the circumcised (interlinear addition: in [another] copy – king – trans. note, Kh.A.) shall no longer attain power – until the Mahdī appears and ʿĪsā descends, peace be upon them both.

Allusions (*rumūz*) from the work of Muḥyī al-Dīn al-ʿArabī – may the Almighty God have mercy on him”.

A marginal note written in red ink reads:

“I copied all of this from the text written in the hand of Muslim Afandī al-ʿUrādī – may the Eternal All-Merciful [Lord] have mercy on him”.

Thus, this text is unquestionably apocryphal and of Dagestani provenance. The reference to rūmuz, to which it is assigned, evidently points to one of the numerous works attributed to Ibn ʿArabī that include similar prognostications. Such texts were typically encoded using systems of Islamic lettrism (*ʿilm al-ḥurūf*).

This text begins with a reference to the rise of the Chinggisids in Crimea. The figures named – Bek (or Abek) Salīḥ and Shankīr-khan – are difficult to identify but likely refer to 15th-century events. However, an alternative reading that they lost power in Crimea, rather than gained it, shifts the timeframe to the second half of the 18th century, when Şāhin Gerāy (d. 1787), the Crimean khan, abdicated in 1783 in favor of Russia. Nevertheless, in that case, the subsequent passage regarding the rise of Turkish power does not fit neatly into that historical context.

The author then relocates events to Dagestan, referring to the region by the name of one of its community confederations – Qoisubul – which was the origin of the first and third Dagestani imams.

In another copy, the locus of major events is specified as Gunīb – the final stronghold of Imam Shamil. The author deliberately incorporates familiar eschatological motifs – such as the battle with the "narrow-eyed, broad-nosed" people and the conquest of Constantinople – to frame recent Caucasian events within a continuum of apocalyptic portents, while avoiding overly precise descriptions that might cast doubt on the prophecy's authenticity.

Another point of interest lies in the other figures mentioned in the text. To refer to the Russians, the author uses the expression "descendants of Arīs". It is possible that this name was borrowed from Lisān al-ʿArab, which recounts the story of the followers of ʿAbd Allāh b. Arisa, a man who lived in antiquity and whose descendants became known for killing the prophet who had been sent to them by God [16, vol. 6, p. 5]. This may be indicative of a meticulous and deliberate approach undertaken by the author during the composition of the text.

The key message lies in the final assertion: after the installation of a Russian tsar in Dagestan, Muslims will no longer regain political power until the appearance of the Mahdi. In light of this, and given the text's clearly anti-imamate stance – portraying the imams as sources of turmoil, accusations of unbelief, killings, imprisonment, etc. – one can reasonably infer its primary aim and approximate date of composition. It was most likely composed in the early 1860s and intended to leverage the authority of the Sufi Shaykh Ibn ʿArabī to instill in the mountaineers the idea that resistance to imperial troops was futile, a notion that was significant in certain regions of the Caucasus following Imam Shamil's capture in 1859.

Thus, eschatological imaginaries – particularly the figure of the Mahdi – became instruments for suppressing anticolonial sentiments within society. As will be shown in subsequent sections, this argument was frequently employed by Dagestani Sufis.

Eschatological Expectations in Dagestan after Its Conquest by the Russian Empire

The conquest of Dagestan by the Russian Empire, which came to symbolize for the highlanders the collapse of the old world order, left a profound and disorienting impression on many of them. Some interpreted this event as a harbinger of the imminent apocalypse.

For example, an anonymous marginal note in the autograph manuscript of Ṭabaqāt by al-Bāginī (d. 1912) reports that "ʿAlī al-Kulādī, who had attained gnosis of God," foretold that a sign of the approaching End Times would be the captivity of pilgrims. The author of the note interpreted this prophecy as already fulfilled, identifying it with the capture of Imam Shamil [17, p. 473].

Al-Bāgīnī also quotes the words of Shaykh Jamāl al-Dīn al-Ghāzīghumūqī (d. 1866), addressed to his murīd Ismāʿīl al-Sīwāklī (d. 1884–85) prior to the latter's departure to the Russian Empire in the early 1860s:

"I am the last *quṭb* in Dagestan. After me, there shall be no *quṭb* until the End of Time" [17, p. 542].

With the advent of the 14th century AH (12 November 1882 CE), apocalyptic expectations in Dagestan once again regained their relevance. Dagestani ʿulamāʾ were familiar with al-Suyūṭī's claim that the End of the World was to occur before the year 1500 AH, and that the sequence of eschatological events would begin at the start of one of the final centuries. However, the discrepancy between these predictions and the observable reality caused them considerable confusion.

Thus, the future Sufi shaykh Shuʿayb al-Bāgīnī posed a question to Ḥasan al-Alqadarī (d. 1910), noting that the year 1308 AH had already arrived, yet the eschatological events promised by al-Suyūṭī had not taken place. In response, al-Alqadarī characterized al-Suyūṭī's predictions as "weakly substantiated claims" and reminded him that the exact time of the End is known only to the Almighty [18, pp. 173–174].

Evidently, al-Bāgīnī was not satisfied with this answer, as he later declared:

"We, in this year 1329 AH, are living in the End Times" [17, p. 450].

Al-Alqadarī himself openly adhered to the Shiʿi (Imāmī) concept of the Mahdī [19, pp. 57, 191, 223], as well as to a number of other doctrinal positions characteristic of Shiʿi theology, which prompted criticism from

some of his contemporaries. Nevertheless, his views appear to have been shaped more by the influence of Shiʿi teachings than by the works of al-Shaʿrānī.

The Revolution and the Mahdī

One of the events that intensified apocalyptic expectations among the Dagestani population was the 1917 Revolution and the subsequent Civil War. The prevailing political and social instability of that period was interpreted by many as the fitna foretold in ḥadīth literature, preceding the appearance of the Imām al-Mahdī.

Among those who addressed this theme was the well-known public figure, theologian, and Sufi shaykh Sayfullāh-Qāḍī (d. 1919). He left behind several statements that would later influence the formation of a distinct Sufi understanding of the Mahdī in post-Soviet Dagestan.

In April 1919, at the height of the political crisis in Dagestan and just six months before his death, Sayfullāh-Qāḍī sent a letter to one of his murīds, responding, among other things, to his question regarding the Mahdī. In this letter, the shaykh wrote that while no one knows the exact time of the Mahdī's appearance, he could share the following:

"Three years ago, the Messenger of Allah – may Allah bless, greet, exalt, and honor him – appeared to me. With him was a young man – so beautiful that no more perfect form could be imagined in a human being. He seemed to be about 21 years old. He was elegant, slender, and perfect in form.

The Prophet – peace and blessings be upon him – said: 'This is my Mahdī, my descendant. His name corresponds to my name, and his mother's name corresponds to my mother's name'. However, he did not mention 'his father's name', as is found in the books! The Prophet showed him affection and joy. I shook his hand and embraced him, just as I did with the Prophet himself.

However, he did not tell me when the Mahdī would appear, and I did not ask him out of reverence. But, my son, in my estimation, the time of his appearance is near. I will not name a specific date, but he will appear when the fitna, like a flood, covers the entire earth. It has already spread to nearly all regions, save for a few, but soon it will reach them as well. That is when he will appear, and as for the rest, only Allah knows." [20, p. 299].

The letter does not make it clear whether this was a vision in a dream or a physical encounter. The latter was quite common among Sufis, who frequently claimed to have met the Prophet in the corporeal realm. If the encounter with the Mahdī occurred while awake, this would imply that he is already alive and that his emergence is imminent.

However, given that Sayfullāh-Qāḍī had a similar dream 17 years earlier [21, p. 206], it is reasonable to assume that in this case as well the shaykh was referring to a vision seen in a dream.

The fact that Sayfullāh-Qāḍī's closest followers, including his successor Ḥasan al-Qāhī (d. 1937), and the latter's successor Muḥammad Yaʿṣubī al-ʿĀṣalī (d. 1942), did not attach particular importance to this vision further supports the interpretation that the shaykh was describing a dream rather than a waking encounter.

Both of them were convinced that they were living in the End Times, yet neither made any explicit declarations regarding the imminent arrival of the Mahdī. For example, Ḥasan al-Qāhī mentions the Mahdī in his writings only in the context of quoting the words of Shaykh Aḥmad al-Sirhindī, known as Imām Rabbānī (d. 1624), who stated that the Naqshbandī ṭarīqa would continue through spiritual succession until the Day of Judgment, and that the Mahdī would be its shaykh [22, p. 423]. Al-Qāhī cited this statement to underscore the superiority and significance of the Naqshbandī path, which at that time competed with the Qādirī *ṭarīqa*.

The second shaykh, Muḥammad Yaʿṣubī, during the mass repressions of the 1930s, composed a small book entitled Treasuries of Safety from the Tribulations of the [Present] Time (*Kunūz al-amān min fitan al-zamān*). In this work, he compiled various supplications recited during times of calamity and distress and also addressed questions of divine predestination. He devoted a separate section to the signs of the End Times, believing that the events unfolding around him testified to its nearness. Nevertheless, the Mahdī is mentioned

in the book only once or twice, and solely in the context of reflections on whether his coming belongs to the "Minor" or "Major" signs of the End [23, p. 153].

It is evident that during the Soviet period, the figure of the Mahdī and eschatological themes more broadly did not occupy a significant place in the teachings of the later shaykhs of this *ṭarīqa*. An analysis of the Arabic manuscript legacy of some of them shows that pressing issues of fiqh were of far greater interest than abstract speculation about the End of Time. However, with the advent of the new Islamic century, this situation began to change.

The Figure of the Mahdī in the Post-Soviet Period

A few years after the beginning of the 15th Muslim century (21 November 1979), the country experienced a major political upheaval – the dissolution of the USSR. This event, along with the ensuing loss of social stability during the 1990s, revitalized apocalyptic expectations in Dagestan with a significantly renewed intensity.

The post-Soviet resurgence of Islam in Dagestan is intrinsically linked to the work of the renowned Sufi shaykh of the Naqshbandī and Shādhilī *ṭuruq*, Saʿīd-afandī Atsayev (d. 2012). A disciple of the aforementioned Sayfullāh-Qāḍī, he was born during brutal religious persecutions and devoted most of his life to the study of Islam despite pressure from Soviet authorities. This is precisely why the collapse of the atheist state and the revival of Islam in the national republics – events that unfolded at the dawn of the new Islamic century – were perceived by Saʿīd Afandī with particular emotional intensity, as meaningful harbingers of the promised eschaton, during which Islam would triumph under the leadership of the Mahdī and ʿĪsā.

All of the shaykh's works were produced during the post-Soviet era – from the early 1990s until his death in 2012. In what may be considered his principal text, *Majmūʿat al-Fawāʾid* (The Treasury of Benevolent Knowledge), composed in a question-and-answer format and completed in 1995, the figure of the Mahdī is mentioned several times. However, the text includes no assertions that the Mahdī is already alive or will soon appear.

In his subsequent two-volume collection of Avar poetry, *Nazmābī* (Poems), finished in the late 1990s, the shaykh dedicates a separate, substantial poem to the Mahdī, titled "Address to the Mahdī." In the opening quatrain, he conveys his emotional anticipation of the Mahdī's arrival:

"Oh our great Imām, treasure of Allāh,
The End of Times has come – so why do you tarry?
While the unbelievers are lost in confusion,
Is it not time for Islam to be reborn?"

Throughout the poem, the shaykh laments the moral decay of contemporary society and the problems facing the Islamic community, calling on the Mahdī to lead an armed struggle [24, pp. 209–215]. His repeated direct addresses to the Mahdī in the second person suggest that by this point he held a firm belief that the Mahdī was already alive.

Indeed, in 1999, when directly asked by a journalist whether the Imām al-Mahdī already existed, Saʿīd-afandī responded confidently and succinctly: "Yes, of course he exists. And he is currently alive!" [25, p. 7].

A year later, Saʿīd-afandī completed another magnum opus – *Qisās al-Anbiyāʾ* (Stories of the Prophets), a two-volume poetic history of the prophets. In the chapter on the Mahdī, he again declares: "He is alive today, but hidden from the people, and shall appear when the earth is filled with violence." [26, p. 316].

There, after presenting the Sunni account of the Mahdī's identity and advent, Saʿīd-afandī critiques the Shiʿi concept as: "a gravely erroneous belief, inconsistent with Sharīʿa and rejected by reason". He continues: "The story of the true Mahdī that we recounted earlier is found in the book *al-Yawāqīt*" [26, pp. 323–324].

Clearly, the shaykh referred to al-Shaʿrānī's *al-Yawāqīt wa-l-Jawāhir*, likely accessed via al-Shablandjī's *Nūr al-Abṣār*, which – as previously noted – includes a distorted passage from *al-Yawāqīt*. Saʿīd-afandī frequently cited al-Shablandjī's work in at least two of his writings – The Treasury and Stories of the Prophets – including when discussing the Mahdī.

Thus, several factors shaped Saʿīd-afandī's conviction that the Mahdī is alive and expected imminently: the belief that the world would not last beyond 1500 AH, based on al-Suyūṭī's statement, which is often (erroneously) treated as ḥadīth in Dagestan[11]; the resurgence of apocalyptic expectations following the new Muslim century, the Soviet collapse and social instability, and the onset of the new millennium in the Gregorian calendar; the distorted quotation from al-Shaʿrānī indicating that the Mahdī "should have been born" in 1255 AH; Sayfullāh-Qāḍī's words about his encounter with the Mahdī and his imminent appearance, which Saʿīd-afandī would certainly have known.

Up to this point, we have examined cases in which various assertions about the imminent onset of a chain of eschatological events were articulated in Arabic and preserved in manuscript sources. This significantly limited the number of individuals who were familiar with such pronouncements. However, with the works of Saʿīd-afandī, a new stage in the development of Sufi conceptions of the Mahdī in Dagestan begins. All of his writings were composed in the Avar language, and many of them were translated and published during his lifetime. This facilitated the broad dissemination of apocalyptic sentiments among his numerous followers.

Many of his adherents were unaware of the scholarly sources underpinning the shaykh's beliefs. They presumed that Saʿīd-afandī, through his spiritual unveiling (*kashf*), had learned of the Mahdī's recent birth. Drawing from ḥadīth that suggest the Mahdī would appear around the age of forty, they concluded that his birth had occurred not long ago.

Therefore, the expectation of the Mahdī's imminent appearance, along with other eschatological events, became a central element of contemporary Sufism within this ṭarīqa in Dagestan. This belief significantly shaped the behavior of particularly zealous *murīds*, foremost by diminishing their engagement in secular affairs. Yet its most consequential effect was suppressing jihādist tendencies during a period when the surge of Wahhābī underground activity and targeted attacks on *ʿulamāʾ* and Sufi leaders in the early 2000s had fueled desires for vengeance – both against Wahhābīs and corrupt officials.

The thesis that jihād is impossible before the appearance of the Mahdī was articulated by Saʿīd-afandī himself. In his final work, he noted that although numerous ḥadīths describe the signs of the End of Time, "there is not a single ḥadīth that states that, toward the End of Time, military campaigns (*ghazawāt*) will be waged for the elevation of Islam. It is only the appearance of the Mahdī and the return of the Prophet ʿĪsā that are mentioned" [28, p. 122].

This stance is not novel within Islamic tradition. As early as the 10th century, the Hanbalī jurist and muhaddith Abū Bakr al-Khallāl (d. 923) observed that some Shiʿa denied the permissibility of jihād prior to the Mahdī's appearance [29, vol. 3, p. 496].

Following the tragic death of Saʿīd-afandī in 2012, the subsequent decline in social tensions – driven by the mass exodus of Dagestani Salafis to terrorist organizations in the Middle East – as well as improvements in the republic's economic situation, might have suggested a weakening of apocalyptic expectations. However, with Akhmed Abdulaev, head of the religious organization "Muftiate of the Republic of Dagestan", acquiring public recognition as a Sufi shaykh in that same year, ideas concerning the Mahdī gained new momentum and became one of the tools employed in the construction of Abdulaev's personality cult.

The Deputy (nāʾib) of the Imam al-Mahdī

A. Abdulaev was appointed mufti of the Spiritual Administration of Muslims of Dagestan (DUMD)[12] in 1998. In 2010, he received a Sufi *ijaza* (authorization) from his spiritual mentor, Saʿīd-afandī, and in 2012, following the directive (*amr*) of another successor of the shaykh from Chirkey – ʿAbduljalīl-afandī of Buynaksk – he commenced direct practice as a Sufi guide.

The status of a Sufi shaykh significantly enhanced the mufti's authority among Dagestanis and Russian Muslims at large. Clearly, the formation of his distinct image as a spiritual leader embodying both the exoteric

11. For instance, Saʿīd-afandī refers in his final work to al-Suyūṭī's conclusion as a ḥadīth of the Prophet himself [27, p. 418].
12. Later renamed *Muftiate of the Republic of Dagestan*.

(*ẓāhir*) and esoteric (*bāṭin*) dimensions of Islam began only after he received the *ijaza*. Thus, in 2011, one of the mufti's close disciples claimed that A. Abdulaev was a descendant of the Prophet Muhammad[13] – although in 2008, the mufti himself had been unable to confirm this [30, p. 70].

It was also in 2011 that the mufti's persona first acquired eschatological connotations. In a poem by one Khalid-Askhāb Mamatkhanov, published in the Avar language as part of a collection of Abdulaev's speeches and interviews, his mission was proclaimed to be the preparation of the world for the coming of the Mahdī:

"Today, there is no mufti in the world equal to him.

We are convinced that nowhere is there one like him.

Until the Mahdī appears, to be a leader —

He is ready, as the insightful perceive". [29, p. 187].

In 2013, Mufti A. Abdulaev was declared the custodian of a relic of the Prophet – allegedly one of his hairs – handed over to him by a UAE citizen, Ahmad b. Shaykh Muhammad al-Khazraji[14]. The collection of relics in the mufti's possession was later expanded with other items, though the provenance of these additions remains unclear.

The appropriation of such honors, combined with the apocalyptic expectations of Dagestani Sufis – who were convinced of the imminent appearance of a Mahdī already living – soon led to the spread of the idea that A. Abdulaev was his deputy (*nāʾib*). This claim first surfaced online around 2014.

For example, in one video published on a private YouTube channel, the accompanying text stated that the mufti's grandfather, the Sufi shaykh ʿAbdulḥamīd-afandī (d. 1977), had foretold that his grandson would become the *nāʾib* of the Imam al-Mahdī. The same video asserted that "the time of the Mahdī's appearance is near," and urged viewers "not to make plans for decades ahead"[15].

It is noteworthy that the figure of Shaykh ʿAbdulḥamīd-afandī had already been used by Dagestani Sufis in the construction of similar mythological narratives. For instance, in the biography of Shaykh Saʿīd-afandī, published during his lifetime, it was claimed that ʿAbdulḥamīd-afandī once asked his murīds about "a blessed orphan living on the edge of the village of Chirkey" [26, p. 6], thereby prophesying a great future for the young Saʿīd.

Yet, for such an ideomyth to emerge, it required deeper foundations not tied to any specific individual. Namely, the proclamation of someone as the *nāʾib* (deputy) of the universal Islamic ruler within a certain territory presupposes that this territory itself possesses special characteristics distinguishing it from other regions of the Islamic oecumene.

The process of sacralizing certain areas of Dagestan began as early as the Middle Ages, when holy places (*ziyārāt*, *mazārāt*) came to be especially venerated. However, the first attempts to sacralize the entire historical-geographical region of Dagestan appear to have emerged only in the second half of the 19th century.

For instance, in one of his letters written from the city of Troitsk[16], Sayfullāh-Qāḍī urged Ḥasan al-Qāhī to recognize that "Dagestan is the first place in the world where the legacy of religion and the light of Islam have been preserved, whereas in other places, only the name of Islam remains" [20, p. 269]. In the post-Soviet period, this statement by Sayfullāh-Qāḍī was frequently cited by Dagestani Sufis in response to criticism from Wahhābīs, who conversely viewed Dagestan as a stronghold of religious heresies and innovations.

A particularly important role in the sacralization of the region was played by Saʿīd-afandī. In his Stories of the Prophets, likely in response to Wahhābī polemics, he relates a tradition that during the Prophet Muḥammad's Ascension (*al-Miʿrāj*), he saw "a very beautiful and wondrous place" on Earth. When he asked the angel Jibrīl what this place was, the angel replied: "This is Dagestan – a land of paradise. Whoever wages *ghazāwāt* and becomes a martyr on this land shall receive a reward equal to that of a hundred martyrs" [26, p. 276].

13. "Dagestani Arabs—Direct Descendants of the Prophet Muḥammad," *ISLAMDAG.RU*, electronic resource, accessed September 16, 2024, https://islamdag.ru/istoriya/31070.

14. Rasulov M., "Mufti of Dagestan Akhmad Afandi Became the Custodian of a Relic of the Prophet Muḥammad (peace and blessings upon him)," *Islam.ru*, September 4, 2015, electronic resource, accessed September 16, 2024, https://islam.ru/news/2015-09-04/36078.

15. Khalikov I., "Naʾīb of Imām Mahdī (k.w.s.) Akhmadḥaji afandi (k.w.s.)," YouTube video, accessed September 16, 2024, https://youtu.be/_Onswu_ZcoY?si=Zk9MrKwKi7Qj55yF.

16. Based on contextual evidence, the letter appears to have been sent in 1907–1908.

Evidently, this tradition was borrowed from the work of the Arab geographer and littérateur Zakariyyā al-Qazwīnī (d. 1283), which contains an apocryphal ḥadīth extolling several cities along the eastern Caspian, including the ancient city of Dahistān (دهستان) [31, p. 419]. The phonetic similarity of the two toponyms, coupled with the shaykh's lack of knowledge regarding the long-destroyed city, led to a misinterpretation and a false syllogism.

Thus, the eschatological status of the mufti as the *nāʾib* (deputy) of the Imam al-Mahdī gained wide currency among his murīds. This title is often used as a form of praise for A. Abdulaev and has even become a poetic epithet.

For example, in one Avar-language poem dedicated to the mufti's wife and adviser, Aina Gamzatova, it reads:

"Are you not the fortunate one who gained the prize,

By being close to the *nāʾib* of the Mahdī?"[17]

The attribution of a political-eschatological title to the mufti by his supporters should be regarded as part of a broader process of consolidating Akhmed Abdulaev's position following 2012. One of the instruments of this consolidation was a rethinking of the concept of the "mufti."

Unlike the Russian context – where the mufti is primarily understood as an administrator and the head of a Muslim religious organization (the muftiate) – in classical Islam, the mufti is a jurist (*faqīh*) authorized to issue legal-religious opinions (*fatwās*). Accordingly, in Islamic jurisprudence, the mufti performs a legislative function but does not wield executive power. The latter belongs to the religious-political leader – caliph, imām, sulṭān, or amīr – who, among other things, holds the authority to appoint and dismiss qāḍīs and mosque imāms. In the absence of a legitimate Islamic ruler, this right passes to authoritative representatives of the Muslim community (*ahl al-ḥall wa-l-ʿaqd*). Thus, the Russian and Sharīʿa-based conceptions of the mufti's status fundamentally differ.

Initially, it appears that A. Abdulaev did not view the office of mufti as equivalent to that of a Sharīʿa-based leader of Muslims. In a 2008 interview, for example, he stated that the mufti had no authority to appoint or remove mosque imāms but could only recommend a given candidate: "At all times, it is only the jamāʿat who chooses the imām; we confirm him, and the Ministry of Justice registers the appointment…" [30, p. 22].

However, this position changed following the active promotion of his spiritual authority. In 2021, the fatwā department of the "Muftiate of the Republic of Dagestan" issued a *fatwā* declaring that A. Abdulaev possessed the right to appoint and dismiss imāms, as he was considered the legitimate Islamic ruler of the Muslims. In support of this claim, the *fatwā's* authors cited medieval Shāfiʿī jurists' statements regarding the powers of the caliph – the head of the Islamic state [32, pp. 297–299]. Nevertheless, the fatwā did not explain how an Islamic ruler could exist in the absence of an Islamic state.

In 2023, one of the mufti's closest followers, Murad Ismailov, publicly declared at a mass gathering of several thousand Muslims that A. Abdulaev was "our caliph and commander of the faithful (*amīr al-muʾminīn*) in our time and place".[18]

Thus, the eschatological beliefs of Dagestani Sufis came to be embodied in the figure of A. Abdulaev, who, according to their convictions, is not only a political leader but also a sacred figure in Islam, destined to prepare the ground for the appearance of the final Sufi shaykh of the Naqshbandī *ṭarīqa* and savior of the Islamic world – the Imam al-Mahdī.

These eschatological views also manifested in material form – through the construction of the Spiritual Center named after the Prophet ʿĪsā. The implementation of this large-scale project (see Fig. 2), situated on 36 hectares of land between Makhachkala and Kaspiysk, began in 2015 at the initiative of Mufti A. Abdulaev. In addition to a mosque, the complex includes a muftiate building, a kindergarten, a school,

17. Gamzatova A. [@alinarasieva], Telegram post, September 15, 2024, https://t.me/alinarasieva/7147.
18. "Republican Majlis of ʿUlamāʾ in the Village of Assab, 2023," *Islam in the Shamil District*, YouTube video, accessed September 16, 2024, https://youtu.be/0LKFbJj4m7Q?si=0J8TwtF40btpIQbA.

a child development center, a sports facility, and an "Alley of Heroic Doctors" leading to the Caspian Sea.[19] A number of commercial enterprises are already operating on the grounds of the center.

Fig. 2. Photo of the Prophet ʿĪsā Spiritual Center
(screenshot from a video published on the Telegram channel t.me/duhovniy_centr; accessed: February 1, 2025)

Рис. 2. Фото Духовного центра им. пророка ʻИсы
(скриншот из видео, опубликованного в Telegram-канале t.me/duhovniy_centr; дата обращения: 01.02.2025)

The naming of the complex in honor of the Prophet ʿĪsā endowed the project with additional eschatological significance in the eyes of the mufti's murīds. The site's special sacred status enabled the "Muftiate" not only to attract significant financial donations for its construction but also to systematically mobilize unpaid labor from among its followers. For instance, in January 2024, Aina Gamzatova posted a video on her Telegram channel showing an elderly man working at the center's construction site. In the video, he urges Muslims to join the building effort as soon as possible, since, in his words, "the Mahdī is expected to appear within two years".[20]

Another consequence of such eschatological beliefs, which has partially transformed the sociocultural landscape of Dagestan, is the growing interest in archery. Numerous prophetic traditions concerning the End Times mention various types of medieval weaponry – spears, bows, sabres, etc. This has served as a basis for certain contemporary interpretations of forthcoming eschatological events in an archaic framework.[21] According to these interpretations, once the prophesied events commence, modern technologies and weaponry will become inoperative, and people will revert to a medieval way of life.

Such views have gained wide currency among Dagestani Sufis. One of the popular Sufi preachers, Abū ʿĀrif al-Dāgistānī (secular name: Ali Saigidguseinov), expressed indignation over the fact that some individuals continue to purchase apartments on the tenth floors of residential buildings, despite knowing that after the arrival of the Imam al-Mahdī, "there will be no electricity".[22]

The promotion of archery among the followers of the "Muftiate of the Republic of Dagestan" (Muftiyat RD) appears to have begun in 2014.[23] By 2015, the first archery range had opened in Dagestan,[24] and from that time onward, the Muftiate and associated communities began organizing competitions in this sport.[25]

19. "SpiritualEducational Center Named After the Prophet ʿĪsā to Be Built in Dagestan," *Regnum.ru*, electronic resource, accessed September 16, 2024, https://regnum.ru/news/3632258.
20. A. Gamzatova [@alinarasieva], Telegram post, September 15, 2024, https://t.me/alinarasieva/7863.
21. Such an interpretation is, for example, one of the eschatological predictions of the Sufi shaykh Muḥammad Naẓīm al-Qubrūṣī (d. 2014) [33, p. 6].
22. Abu Arif adDagistani, Telegram post, September 20, 2024, https://t.me/AbuArifDagistani/4334.
23. Abū Mukhammad Akhmad, "Learn to Shoot with a Bow," *islamdag.ru*, electronic resource, accessed September 20, 2024, https://islamdag.ru/vse-ob-islame/26065.
24. "First Archery Range to Open in Dagestan," *islamdag.ru*, electronic resource, accessed September 20, 2024, https://islamdag.ru/news/17222.
25. "Great Weekend – Archery Competition," *islamdag.ru*, electronic resource, accessed September 20, 2024, https://islamdag.ru/

The significance of archery is justified not only by its status as a sunnah of the Prophet but also by the necessity of mastering this skill in preparation for the forthcoming battles under the leadership of the Imam al-Mahdī. For example, in 2015, a video titled "Competition of the Warriors of Imam al-Mahdī" was published, in which, to the accompaniment of a nashīd, competitions in archery, spear-throwing, and cold weapon combat are shown among *murīds* in the village of Dylym[26]. Subsequently, archery gained particular popularity and became an integral part of many religious events organized by the Muftiate, which significantly contributed to the sport's spread throughout the republic.[27]

At present, apocalyptic sentiments persist among Dagestani Sufis and are periodically reinforced by the information platforms of the Muftiate[28]. Aina Gamzatova, who holds an influential position within this organization and possesses a special Sufi status[29], actively employs the figure of the Mahdī to define adherence to the true path of Islam. In her rhetoric, she uses expressions such as "the army of Imam al-Mahdī"[30] and "the ship of Imam al-Mahdī,"[31] thereby creating the image of a unified community preparing for his arrival. Furthermore, Gamzatova continues to promote a central idea of Sufi Mahdism in Dagestan – the assertion that jihād is impermissible before the advent of the Imam al-Mahdī[32].

Conclusion

Unlike other Mahdist movements that, during times of sociopolitical upheaval, exploited society's apocalyptic expectations as a means of seizing power – and later became key forces of anti-colonial resistance – in Dagestan, eschatological beliefs began to be employed in the interests of colonial authorities immediately after the region's incorporation into the Russian Empire. These beliefs, which eventually crystallized into an independent Mahdist movement, continue to play a significant role in the lives of Dagestani Sufis affiliated with this particular branch of the ṭarīqa.

Dagestani Sufi Mahdism has taken on a specific form – namely, the claim to act as the *nāʾib* (deputy) of the Mahdī and to fulfill a unique mission on his behalf. Unlike traditional Mahdist movements, which often included explicit claims to the status of Mahdī, in Dagestan – where Muslim theologians wield significant influence – such claims would be unlikely to gain broad support. This form of Mahdism should be regarded as one of the most notable phenomena of contemporary Russian Islam.

The Mahdist phenomenon in Dagestan may be seen as a consequence of the reconciliation between the state and Sufism in the post-Soviet period. This reconciliation led to the abandonment of political Islam by Sufi leaders. However, the growing number of their followers – aspiring to live in the "Golden Age" of Islam – found themselves, in the context of the decline of the "Islamic revival" in Dagestan, in need not only of sermons on spiritual refinement but also of concrete visions of a brighter future. The apocalyptic discourse, which enables both speculation on future expectations and the veiled articulation of Sufi leaders' claims to divinely granted authority, has proven to be a convenient instrument for achieving these goals.

news/16683.

26. "Competition of the Warriors of Imām Mahdī," ProDin Media, YouTube video, accessed September 20, 2024, https://youtu.be/BmjGFyJ8FOw?si=c9QVpDDxZtchbySX.

27. "Various Types of Archery Are Actively Developing in Dagestan," GTRK – Dagestan, electronic resource, accessed September 20, 2024, http://gtrkdagestan.ru/news/V-Dagestane-aktivno-razvivayutsya-razlichnye-vidy-strelby-iz-luka/.

28. "Will Imām Mahdī Appear in 2023?" *Muftiate RD*, YouTube video, posted June 2, 2022; accessed November 17, 2024, https://youtu.be/vEiSITuSLfo?si=EDQWfQmK39bHIkhC. As of September 2024, the video had reached 2.3 million views.

29. Special attention should be paid to the status of the spouse of a Sufi shaykh, which acquired particular significance in the post-Soviet period and is denoted by the Kumyk term *bağu* – a respectful form of address for adult women. First recorded in reference to Uzlipat, the wife of Shaykh Saʿīd-afandī, this usage likely entered the Avar-speaking region through the proximity of the village of Chirkey to Kumyk communities. Overall, the increasing importance of women in Dagestani Sufism since the early 20th century may be seen as a byproduct of secularization processes, as previously discussed in [34].

30. A. Gamzatova [@alinarasieva], Telegram post, October 2, 2024, https://t.me/alinarasieva/7795.

31. A. Gamzatova [@alinarasieva], Telegram post, October 2, 2024, https://t.me/alinarasieva/6374.

32. A. Gamzatova [@alinarasieva], Telegram post, October 2, 2024, https://t.me/alinarasieva/6235.

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