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Abstract Only – Work in Progress

“Negotiating Shi’i Identities in the Messianic Age”

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This paper will examine the symbolic significance of the Shi’i messianic expectation of the Mahdi in light of contemporary events. It will situate a variety of Shi’i discourses of the authority of the jurist as espoused by Iran's Ayatollah Khomeini, Iraq's Ayatollah Sistani, and Lebanon’s Hassan Nasrallah along the continuum of a messianic narrative that is central to the questions of authority and Shi’i identity. The inception of this messianic narrative could be located in the tragic death of the third Shi’i Imam, Hussein, at Karbala. Its realization, however, is deferred to the appearance of the Mahdi at the end of time. This paper will argue that the eschatological anticipation of the eventual victory of Shi’i Muslims at the end of time is the dominant narrative that shapes contemporary Shi’i political and trans-historical consciousness. It is the symbolic significance of this narrative that explains Hizballah’s war with Israel and the current Iranian president Mahmud Ahmadinejad's pursuit of nuclear power.