Followers of Fethullah Gülen, a self-exiled cleric accused of plotting the Turkish coup attempt of 2016, are buried under a cacophony of labels: ‘moderate Muslims,’ ‘pioneers of interfaith dialogue,’ ‘American stooges,’ and ‘seditious infiltrators.’ Much less known to the outsiders but more captivating to the followers is another debate: Could Gülen be the awaited Mahdi, the eschatological redeemer of Islam? If so, how does one read the signs of him being the savior? In following the signs, I shift the focus from Turkey to the Caucasus, where the movement gained prominence for bringing former Soviet citizens back into the fold of Islam after seventy years of communist rule. Seen from there, Gülen appears as only the latest in a long line of religious figures who, by crossing into the Caucasus, climbed the spiritual ladder toward a holier status. In the Islamic and pre-Islamic folklores of the Middle East, Central Asia, and South Asia, the Caucasus has a reputation as the boundary space between what is familiar and what lies beyond—the farthest point of the earth where one could encounter the peris of Persian mythology, Gog and Magog of Abrahamic traditions, nomadic hordes of Central Asia, or the Communist Red Army until more recent times. As a three-way land bridge between Turkey, Iran, and Russia, the Caucasus is a place of encounters and transformative possibilities, where leaders could cast themselves in a messianic mold by repelling foreign threats or conquering evil forces. Drawing on ethnographic work in the Caucasus with those who read the signs, tracing them further in the esoteric texts that inspired Gülen, and reading them in relation to Mahdist movements in the past, I recast Gülen as a messianic figure and demonstrate how old imperial frontiers, such as the Caucasus, become fertile grounds for messianic imagination. In the frontier, horizontal mobility leads to vertical ascension in spiritual rank and generates a form of authority—conceptualized here as ‘diasporic kingship’—that haunts political centers from the periphery.

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