Often persecuted and oppressed, the faith of my ancestors was never destroyed; at times it flourished as in the epoch of the Fatimite Khalifs, at times it was obscure and little understood.

Imam Sultan Muhammad Shah Aga Khan III
In 1975, the late Prince Sadruddin Aga Khan (uncle of Imam Shah Karim al-Husayni Aga Khan IV) urged the Ismaili Muslims of Canada to be “Ambassadors” of the Ismaili Muslim community (read a primer on Who are the Shia Ismaili Muslims (http://ismailignosis.com/2015/05/15/who-are-the-shia-ismaili-muslims-a-primer-with-visual-charts/)). Being an ambassador, in the Prince’s words, means explaining Ismaili traditions, history, and religion to every person that one interacts with.
I would like to see every Ismaili and particularly every young Ismaili become an Ambassador, a real ambassador of the community. And I mean active ambassadors, Ambassadors who really work hard. I want you to be active ambassadors. I want you to explain to your Canadian friends, to your neighbors, to the people that you work with, that you live with, the people that entertain you, or that you will be entertaining, what you are, where you come from, about your traditions, about your culture, about your religion, about the way in which the community functions... Explain the role of the Imam, not only his religious functions but also the economic and social advice that you receive from the Imam and what has happened to the community as a result of its unity in other parts of the world.

Prince Sadruddin Aga Khan,
(Vancouver, Canada, January 22, 1975)

Being a true and active “ambassador” of the Ismaili Muslim Community requires one to be intimately familiar with the 1,400 year history of the Ismaili Imamat and the Ismaili Community. The Imam of the time, Mawlana Shah Karim al-Husayni, recently shared how important it is to him that the Community learn about its own history and have a “sense of pride” and “understanding of our past”:
I wanted to just share with my Jamat leaders in Canada something which has been very important to me since many years back. And that is that the Jamat should learn about its remarkable history, should learn about the pluralism of its history, should learn about the great names, so that there is a sense of pride and an understanding of our past – of the greatness of the past of the Shia Ismaili Muslim Tariqah.

– Imam Shah Karim al-Husayni Aga Khan IV, (Speech in Vancouver, November 2009)

The 1,400 year history of the Ismaili Imams and Community has not always been comfortable. The Ismaili Imams are today very much respected on the world stage and live in security. Likewise, most of the Ismaili Muslims enjoy security and the freedom to practice their faith. Thanks to the Imam’s guidance and blessings, the Ismailis have become culturally diverse, intellectually vibrant, practically progressive and ethically pluralistic Community today, However, until quite
recently, the Ismaili Imamat and Community had to regularly endure oppression, violent persecution, massacres and genocides at the hands of oppressive Muslim dynasties and rules.

This article tells the inspiring story of some of the most tragic moments in 1,400 year Ismaili history, with a focus on the grave persecutions endured by the Imams and the Ismaili Community from the death of the Prophet to the cessation of most of the persecution in time of Imam Sultan Muhammad Shah. Most striking is how the recent Ismaili Imams, out of their sheer mercy and love for the unity and welfare of Islam, selflessly served the needs and interests of all Muslims – despite the historical fact that the Ismaili Imams were severely persecuted by the Umayyad, ‘Abbasid, Saljuq, Ayyubid, Mongol, Timurid, Safawid and Ottoman dynasties. It is indeed miraculous that the Ismaili Imams and Community even survived these persecutions, massacres and genocides in the first place. Indeed, the very existence and endurance of the Imamat through such dangerous conditions over several centuries constitutes a proof of the Imamat’s legitimacy and divine inspiration. The scholar of Ismaili studies, Wladimir Ivanow, once wrote that:

My learned friends in Europe plainly disbelieved me when I wrote about the [Ismaili] community to them. It appeared to them quite unbelievable that the most brutal persecution, wholesale slaughter, age-long hostility and suppression were unable to annihilate the community.

– Wladimir Ivanow,
(“My First Meeting with the Ismailis in Persia,” Ilm 3, no. 3 (December 1977): 16–17)
This article, although lengthy, hopes to provide the reader with a very moving experience of Ismaili Muslim history. It conveys the struggles and the hardships that the Ismaili Imams had to constantly face; the dangers and threats endured by the Ismaili Muslims who followed them; the persecutions and genocides that threatened to wipe the Ismailis out; the miraculous survival of the Ismaili Imamat and the emergence of the Community in recent times; and finally, the manner in which the contemporary Ismaili Imams, having practically forgiven the past atrocities, now tirelessly work for the well-being of all Muslims and humanity at large.

This article, therefore, is dedicated to the memory of all the Ismaili Imams and murids, past and present, who risked or lost their lives enduring persecution, oppression, attacks and hardship for the sake of their faith. An Ismaili Muslim living in the 21st century must connect to the depths of his or her religious identity through remembering and understanding this past. Reading through the stories, accounts, and experiences documented in this history will hopefully allow the reader to “feel” this past, to transcend the present fleeting moment and bring the departed ones back to life in one’s remembrance of them. Most importantly, reading through this article’s recollection of Ismaili history can facilitate a deeper understanding of the Imam of the time whose spiritual essence encompasses the history and memory of all his predecessor-Imams and their murids.
History fosters a partnership with the dead, and the dead come to life through history. It also serves as a therapy for undue obsession with the present, and this may help to liberate one from being bound excessively by time. In Ismailism, the fact that the Imam embodies a tradition extending considerably backwards in time creates the setting for such an experience. By encapsulating the past within himself, the Imam serves as history incarnate, so to speak. In this sense, history is not only ‘learned’; it is also ‘experienced’, with a heightening sense of one’s intellectual and moral imagination.

The Present Imam embodies the history and memory of the previous Imams and the murids of their times.

**Links to Periods of Isma‘ili History**

As this lengthy article covers several periods of Ismaili history, we recommend reading it in segments, which are linked below for the reader’s convenience.

Seventh Century: Umayyad Oppression of the Ahl al-Bayt

Eight Century: ‘Abbasid Persecution of the Shi‘i Imams

Ninth Century: ‘Abbasid Persecution of the Concealed Isma‘ili Imams

Tenth Century: Struggles of the Fatimids and the Persian Isma‘ili Philosophers

Eleventh Century: Massacres of Isma‘ilis in Multan, North Africa and Persia

Twelfth Century: Murder of Imam Nizar and Saljuq Slaughter of the Nizari Isma‘ilis

Twelfth-Thirteenth Centuries: Murders of the Nizari Imams and Saljuq Massacres of the Nizari Isma‘ilis

Thirteenth-Fourteenth Centuries: Mongol Genocide of the Nizari Isma‘ilis

Fourteenth Century: Surviving the Mongols under Taqiyyah

Fourteenth-Fifteenth Centuries: Timurid Massacres amidst the Cover of Sufism

Sixteenth-Seventeenth Centuries: Safawid Persecutions of the Persian Nizari Isma‘ilis
Eighteenth Century: Nizari Imams’ Emergence from Obscurity

Nineteenth Century: The Rise of the Aga Khans


**Seventh Century: Umayyad Oppression of the Ahl al-Bayt**

Imam al-Husayn’s family and companions surrounded by an Umayyad army numbering over 40,000 troops.
“Mu‘awiya and his successors were particularly hostile toward these supporters of ‘Ali and his sons. It was routine for the Umayyads to condemn or persecute the family of ‘Ali, and they were even cursed from the pulpit.” (Vincent Cornell)

Immediately after the death of the Prophet Muhammad, the Imam ‘Ali bin Abi Talib (632-661) and his family were denied their rightful succession. The office of leadership of the community, which was bequeathed by the Prophet to ‘Ali by divine right, was instead assumed by Abu Bakr, ‘Umar and Uthman, while the shi‘ah of ‘Ali continued to recognize him as their spiritual Guide (wali). Meanwhile, Abu Bakr disinherited Hazrat Fatimah of the property of Fadak which she inherited from the Prophet Muhammad.

Numerous Sunni and Shi‘i sources agree that Abu Bakr and ‘Umar went to the house of Imam ‘Ali and ‘Umar threatened to set the house on fire if the family did not give allegiance to Abu Bakr. Some reports even say that ‘Umar broke down the door of the house, causing Hazrat Fatimah to miscarriage and die as a result.
‘Umar threatened to set the house on fire unless they came out and swore allegiance to Abu Bakr. Al-Zubayr came out with his sword drawn, but stumbled and lost it, whereupon Umar’s men jumped upon him and carried him off. There is some evidence that the house of Fatima was searched (futtisha). Ali is reported to have later repeatedly said that had there been forty men with him he would have resisted. To what extent force was used in other cases must remain uncertain. In general the threat of it was probably sufficient to induce the reluctant to conform...The Banu Hashim thus found themselves in a situation strangely reminiscent of the boycott that the pagan Makkans organized against them in order to force them to withdraw their protection from Muhammad.

(Madelung, The Succession to Muhammad, 43-44)

When Imam ‘Ali was finally acclaimed the fourth Caliph, he was immediately opposed by ‘Aisha, the widow of the Prophet and her cousin Mu‘awiyah. This led to the First Civil War and the well-known Battle of the Camel and Battle of Siffin. Imam ‘Ali was then assassinated by a Kharijite who struck him with a poisoned sword.

670-680 – Murder of Imam al-Hasan and Imam al-Husayn

In the aftermath, Imam al-Hasan (661-670) was Caliph for a short time. However, his own officers and army betrayed him and al-Hasan was forced to abdicate the Caliphate to Mu‘awiyah. In the following years, the family of the Prophet, including both Imam al-Hasan and Imam al-Husayn (661-680) were severely oppressed under Mu‘awiyah’s rule.
During this period, ‘Ali’s descendants, especially his sons Hasan and Husayn, were increasingly perceived by opposition groups as the ideal rivals of the Umayyad Caliphs because of their piety and their relationship to the Prophet. For this reason, Mu‘awiya and his successors were particularly hostile toward these supporters of ‘Ali and his sons. It was routine for the Umayyads to condemn or persecute the family of ‘Ali, and they were even cursed from the pulpit.

(Vincent Cornell, Voices of Islam, 115)

The Imam al-Hasan died in 670 from a poisoning allegedly planned by Mu‘awiya. After Mu‘awiya’s death, his son and successor Yazid sent forces to intercept Imam al-Husayn – who was massacred in 680 with his family members including several grown and infant sons at Karbala by a large Umayyad army. The next Imam, Imam Zayn al-Abidin was nearly murdered at Karbala, and saved by his sister Zaynab bint al-Husayn before Shimar had the chance to kill him.

After 10 days of waiting, negotiating, and occasionally fighting, a final battle took place in which Husayn, all of his adult male relatives and supporters, and some of the women and children were killed in a brutal fashion. The surviving women and children, along with Husayn’s adult son ‘Ali Zayn al-Abidin (680-713), who was too ill to take part in the fighting, were taken captive and transported, along with the heads of martyrs, to Yazid’s court in Damascus. Along the way from Karbala to Damascus, the members of the Prophet’s family who were taken prisoner were exhibited in chains in the public markets of the cities through which they passed.

(Vincent Cornell, Voices of Islam, 116)
Eight Century: The ‘Abbasid Persecution of the Shi‘i Imams

Imam Muhammad al-Baqir [A.S.] teaching in Medina. Painting by Qasim Ali, ca. 1525
“The ‘Abbasid caliph al-Mansur had decided to scourge to death whoever was to be chosen officially by the Imam as his successor thereby hoping to put an end to the Shi‘ite movement.” (Seyyed Hossein Nasr)

The Imam Zayn al-Abidin was succeeded by Imam Muhammad al-Baqir (713-743), and then Imam Ja‘far al-Sadiq (743-765). The Umayyad and ‘Abbasid Caliphs persecuted and repressed any challenge to their claims of being the political and religious leaders of Islam. Thus, the Shi‘i Imams Muhammad al-Baqir and Ja‘far al-Sadiq lived and taught in an environment of caution and danger, while the ‘Abbasid Caliphs slaughtered a number of descendants of Imam ‘Ali.

No doubt, it must have been dangerous for the Imams and their followers to openly propagate their beliefs, and to publicly announce that certain individuals, other than the ruling caliphs, were the divinely appointed spiritual leaders of the Muslims.

(Daftary, The Ismailis, 82)
The caliph al-Mansur adopted still more repressive measures against the ‘Alids and the Shi‘is. In 141/758, he massacred a group of the Rawandiyya who besieged his palace and hailed him as the incarnation of divinity. A few years later, he had many of the ‘Alids, notably from the Hasanid branch, imprisoned or killed. The ‘Abbasids’ breach with their Shi‘i origins and their efforts to legitimize their own rights to the caliphate were finally completed by the caliph Muhammad al-Mahdi (158–169/775–785), who abandoned the ‘Abbasid claim to Abu Hashim’s inheritance and instead declared that the Prophet had actually appointed his uncle al-‘Abbas as his successor. This, of course, implied the repudiation of the analogous claims of the ‘Alids.

(Daftary, The Ismailis, 79)

765-799 – The Sons of Imam Ja‘far al-Sadiq

The ‘Abbasid Caliph al-Mansur intended to kill the designated successor of Imam Ja‘far, Imam Isma‘il ibn Ja‘far (http://ismailignosis.com/2014/10/02/who-succeeded-imam-jafar-al-sadiq-seven-proofs-for-the-imamat-of-imam-ismail-ibn-jafar/) and put an end to the Imamat. The Imam Ja‘far al-Sadiq himself allegedly died of poisoning on the orders of the ‘Abbasid Caliph. He had sent away his son and appointed successor, Imam Isma‘il (d. after 765), out of Madinah.
The question of the successor to the Imam (Ja‘far al-Sadiq) having been made particularly difficult by the fact that the ‘Abbasid caliph al-Mansur had decided to scourge to death whoever was to be chosen officially by the Imam as his successor thereby hoping to put an end to the Shi‘ite movement.”

(Seyyed Hossein Nasr, Ideals and Realities of Islam, 165-66)

The other sons of the Imam Ja‘far al-Sadiq did not fare better. His son Musa al-Kazim (d. 799) was arrested twice by the ‘Abbasids, imprisoned and murdered. Then Musa al-Kazim’s son, ‘Ali al-Rida b. Musa was reportedly poisoned by the ‘Abbasids.

Nevertheless, Musa was not spared the Shi‘i persecutions of the ‘Abbasids. He was arrested several times and finally died (possibly having been poisoned) in 183/799, whilst imprisoned at Baghdad on the caliph Harun al-Rashid’s orders.

(Daftary, The Ismailis, 89)

Meanwhile, Imam Isma‘il ibn Ja‘far al-Sadiq and his son Imam Muhammad b. Isma‘il escaped ‘Abbasid persecution by going into concealment from the public.

**Ninth Century – ‘Abbasid Persecution of the Concealed Ismaili Imams**
“Those people (the concealed Isma‘ili Imams) were constantly on the move because of the suspicions various governments had concerning them. They were kept under observation by the tyrants, because their partisans were numerous and their propaganda had spread far and wide.” (Ibn Khaldun)

Jabal Mashad in Masyaf, Syria. Jabal Mashad is believed to hold the tombs of Imam Muhammad ibn Isma‘il and the three Isma‘ili Imams who succeeded him: Imam ‘Abdullah ibn Muhammad al-Radi [Imam Wafi Ahmad], Imam Ahmad ibn ‘Abdullah
al-Wafi [Imam Taqi Muhammad], and Imam al-Husayn ibn Ahmad al-Taqi [Imam Radi al-Din ‘Abdullah].

Imam Muhammad b. Ismail (d. after 795) was forced to flee Arabia and head to Persia in order to avoid being killed by the ‘Abbasids.

However, after the recognition of the imamate of Musa al-Kazim by the majority of al-Sadiq’s followers, Muhammad’s position became untenable in his native Hijaz where his uncle and chief rival Musa also lived. It was probably then, not long after al-Sadiq’s death, that Muhammad left Medina for the east and went into hiding, henceforth acquiring the epithet al-Maktum, the Hidden. As a result, he was saved from persecution by the ‘Abbasids, while continuing to maintain close contacts with the Mubarakiiyya, who like most other radical Shi‘i groups of the time were centred in Kufa.

(Daftary, The Ismailis, 95)

795-899 – The Period of the Concealed Imams

Imam Muhammad b. Isma‘il was succeeded by three Imams who lived in concealment (satr) from the public:

- Imam ‘Abdullah b. Muhammad, also known as al-Wafi and al-Radi
- Imam Ahmad b. ‘Abdullah, also known as Muhammad al-Taqi
- Imam al-Husayn b. Ahmad (d. 881), also known as al-Radi ‘Abdullah

The Imam ‘Abd Allah b. Muhammad b. Ismail initially sought refuge in Persia in order to escape the persecution of the ‘Abbasids:
According to this official version, Muhammad b. Isma‘il appointed as his successor his eldest son ‘Abd Allah, the first of the second heptad of the Isma‘ili imams. In order to escape ‘Abbasid persecution, ‘Abd Allah, who later received the surname al-Radi, sought refuge in different parts of Persia and did not reveal his identity and place of residence except to a few trusted associates. Eventually, he settled in Askar Mukram near Ahwaz, in the province of Khuzist¯an, whence he later fled to Basra and then to Salamiyya in central Syria. In Salamiyya, the residence of the imams and the headquarters of the Isma‘ili da‘wa for the next few decades, he posed as an ordinary Hashimid, of whom there were many in that locality, and as a merchant... Before dying in about 212/827–828, ‘Abd Allah had designated his son Ahmad as his successor Ahmad, who according to Isma‘ili tradition was the author of the famous Rasa’il Ikhwan al-Safa, was, in turn, succeeded by his son al-Husayn, and then by the latter’s son ‘Abd Allah (‘Ali), also called Sa‘id, who later became known as ‘Abd Allah al-Mahdi.

(Daftary, The Ismailis, 100)

These Imams settled in Salamiyyah and appeared as Hashimite merchants. They directed an underground and vibrant Isma‘ili da‘wah movement which began achieving success in the latter part of the ninth century. The Sunni historian Ibn Khaldun describes their activities in his Muqaddimah:
Those people (the concealed Isma‘ili Imams) were constantly on the move because of the suspicions various governments had concerning them. They were kept under observation by the tyrants, because their partisans were numerous and their propaganda had spread far and wide. Time after time they had to leave the places where they had settled. Their men, therefore, took refuge in hiding, and their (identity) was hardly known, as (the poet) says:

If you would ask the days what my name is, they would not know,
And where I am, they would not know where I am.

This went so far that Muhammad, the son of the Imam Isma‘il, the ancestor of ‘Ubaydallah al-Mahdi, was called “the Concealed” (al-Makhtum). His partisans called him by that name because they were agreed on the fact he was hiding out of fear of those who had them in their power.

(Ibn Khaldun, Muqaddimah, tr. Frank Rosenthall, Read Here (https://ballandalus.wordpress.com/2014/02/25/ibn-khaldun-d-1406-on-the-the-alid-lineage-of-the-fatimids/))

Tenth Century: Struggles of the Fatimid Imam-Caliphs and Executions of Persian Isma‘ili Philosophers

“The Aghlabids had then been instructed by their ‘Abbasid overlords to search for the Isma‘ili Imam and his companions.” (Farhad Daftary)

Imam al-Husayn al-Radi ‘Abdullah was succeeded by Imam ‘Abdullah Muhammad al-Mahdi (881-934), also known by the names of Sa‘id and ‘Ali, who declared his Imamat openly. Imam al-Mahdi, who would go on to become the first Fatimid
Imam-Caliph, was heavily pursued and tracked by ‘Abbasids for the first half of his life. Certain Ismaili da‘is were captured and tortured to reveal the identity and location of the Imam.

In 291/904, al-Husayn was captured by the ‘Abbasid troops and sent to the caliph al-Muktafi in Baghdad, where he was interrogated under torture and revealed the identity and whereabouts of the Isma‘ili Imam before being executed. Thereupon, the ‘Abbasids launched a widespread search for ‘Abd Allah al-Mahdi, who had meanwhile proceeded to Egypt.”

(Daftary, The Ismailis, 123)

It seems likely that al-Mahdi was deterred from going to Yaman, where a loyal Isma‘ili community awaited him under the leadership of Ibn Hawshab Mansur al-Yaman, in order to avoid serious confrontations with the ‘Abbasids who had then intensified their chase of the Isma‘ili Imam. It is also possible that dissident Qarmati activities had already started in Yaman, making the Imam’s settlement there even more dangerous… The Aghlabids had then been instructed by their ‘Abbasid overlords to search for the Isma‘ili Imam and his companions.

(Daftary, The Ismailis, 125)

The Anti-Fatimid Rebellion Against Imam al-Qa‘im

The Imam al-Mahdi was succeeded by his son and heir, Imam al-Qa‘im bi-amr Allah. The reign of the Imam al-Qa‘im was threatened by Abu Yazid’s Khariji revolt in 944-945. At one point, the Imam and the Fatimid army were besieged in the walled city of Mahdiyya.
With the Berbers swarming quickly to his side, Abu Yazid launched his revolt against the Fatimids in 332/943–944. He swiftly conquered almost all of southern Ifriqiya, seizing Qayrawan in Safar 333/October 944. Subsequently in Jumada I 333/January 945, the rebels began their siege of Mahdiyya, where al-Qa’im was now staying. But Mahdiyya put up a vigorous resistance for almost a year, repelling Abu Yazid’s repeated attempts to storm the capital and mounting its own counter-offensive, aided by the new reinforcements sent by Ziri b. Manad, the amir of the Sanhaja.

(Daftary, The Ismailis, 147)

The Imam al-Qa’im died in 946 while the Fatimid armies, led by his son and successor Imam al-Mansur bi’llah (946-953), were fighting the Khariji rebellion. It was as the head of the Fatimid army in the mist of a military victory over the rebels that the Imam al-Mansur disclosed his father’s death and declared himself as the new Imam of the time.

943-971 – Executions of the Persian Isma‘ili Philosophers

In this very same period, the great Persian Isma‘ili philosophers – Ahmad al-Nasafi, Abu Hatim al-Razi, and Abu Ya‘qub al-Sijistani – formulated the intellectual and philosophical dimensions of Isma‘ili thought and doctrine. They were all heavily persecuted and executed for their beliefs.
[t]he Isma‘ilis of Khurasan and Transoxania were severely persecuted. Al-Nasafi and his chief associates were executed at Bukhara in 332/943, soon after the accession of the amir Nuh I.

(Daftary, The Ismailis, 113)

The early evidence of philosophical theology in Ismailism is mainly preserved in the words of Abu Ya‘qub al-Sijistani, the da‘i of eastern Persia and Transoxania who was executed as a ‘heretic’ on the order of the Saffarid ruler of Sistan, Khalaf b. Ahmad (963-1003).

(Daftary, Ismailis in Medieval Muslim Societies, 215)

Eleventh Century: Massacres of Isma‘ilis in Multan, North Africa and Persia
“...the Ismaʿilis of Qayrawan, Mahdiyya, Tunis, Tripoli and other towns were massacred by the Sunnis of Ifriqiya, under the leadership of their Maliki jurists and scholars, and with the connivance of the Zirids.” (Farhad Daftary)

In 1010-1111, the Ismaʿilis of Multan and the surrounding areas were mercilessly massacred by the Ghaznawids. This was because they recognized the Imamat of Imam al-Muʿizz li-Din Allah (952-975), the successor of the Imam al-Mansur.
The sovereignty of al-Mu‘izz was now openly proclaimed in Multan, where the khutba was read in the name of the Fatimid caliphs, instead of their ‘Abbasid rivals. This Isma‘ili state survived until 396/1005–1006, when Sultan Mahmud of Ghazna invaded Multan and made its last Isma‘ili ruler, Abu’l-Futuh. Da’ud b. Nasr, a tributary. A few years later, in 401/1010–1011, Multan was actually annexed to the Ghaznawid dominions, Abu’l-Futuh was taken prisoner and the Isma‘ilis of Multan and its surrounding areas were ruthlessly massacred.

(Daftary, The Ismailis, 167)

1016 – Massacre of the North African Isma‘ili Muslims

In 1016, the Ismaili Muslim populations of North Africa (Ifriqiya) were persecuted by the local mobs and eventually massacred out of existence.

Consequently, conditions soon become opportune for the anti-Shi‘i sentiments of the Sunni inhabitants of Ifriqiya. In 407/1016–1017, following the accession of the Zirid al-Mu‘izz b. Bad‘is (406–454/1016–1062), the Isma‘ilis of Qayrawan, Mahdiyya, Tunis, Tripoli and other towns were massacred by the Sunnis of Ifriqiya, under the leadership of their Maliki jurists and scholars, and with the connivance of the Zirids. These persecutions and popular riots against the Isma‘ilis continued, and their communities in Ifriqiya were practically extinguished by the time the Zirid al-Mu‘izz transferred his allegiance to the ‘Abbasids a few decades later.

(Daftary, The Ismailis, 183)

1044 – Massacre of Isma‘ilis in Transoxania

The Imam al-Mu‘izz was succeeded by the following Fatimid Imam-Caliphs: Imam al-‘Aziz bi’llah (975-996), Imam al-Hakim bi-amr Allah (996-1021), Imam al-Zahir li-I‘zaz Din Allah (1021-1036), and Imam al-Mustansir bi’llah (1036-1094).

In 1044-1045, the Qarakhanid ruler in Transoxania ordered the mass slaughter of numerous Ismailis in Bukhara and nearby regions for having given their spiritual allegiance to the Fatimid Imam-Caliph al-Mustansir.

In 436/1044–1045, a large number of Isma‘ilis, who had been converted by Fatimid da‘is and who recognized the Imamate of al-Mustansir, were massacred in Bukhara and elsewhere in Transoxania on the orders of the local Qarakhanid ruler Bughra Khan. But Isma‘ilism survived in that region, and later in 488/1095, Ahmad b. Khidr, another Qarakhanid who ruled over Bukhara, Samarqand and western Farghana, was accused by the local Sunni ‘ulama’ of having embraced Isma‘ilism, and was executed.

(Daftary, The Ismailis, 203)

In the same period, Nasir-i Khusraw, the last Isma‘ili philosopher of the Fatimid era, was the victim of the persecution of the Sunni ‘ulama’ of Khurasan. His home was attacked by mobs and an attempt was made on his life. Nasir was forced to flee and find refuge in Badakhshan where he wrote and taught in exile until his death.
As the head of Ismaili missionary activity in Khurasan for the Fatimid da‘wa, Nasir’s missionary successes put his life into danger. Both the Sunni and the Twlver Shi‘i religious scholars (‘ulama’), as well as the crowds of common people under their influence, threatened his life...So when public pressure against Nasir escalated in his hometown of Balkh, he realised he had to flee.”

(Alice Hunsberber, Nasir Khusraw, The Ruby of Badakhshan, 8)

Twelfth Century: The Murder of Imam Nizar and the Saljuq Slaughter of the Persian Nizari Isma‘ilis
“The Saljuq authorities ordered a thoroughgoing purge of their military and administrative systems in order to eliminate all those suspected of being Ismailis. Several thousand people were killed in this operation, including many falsely accused by their enemies. Then the Saljuqs sanctioned the expulsion of Ismailis from urban areas, a policy that led to widespread killings of civilians, often in mob violence instigated by local Sunni authorities.” (Peter Willey)

By the late eleventh century the control of the Fatimid Caliphate had passed into the hands of the military general Badr al-Jamali. He arrived in Cairo in 1074 and restored order after the city was plagued by famine, looting and rebellions. However, Badr soon became the effective ruler as the chief of the army and the Fatimid vizer. He then ensured that his son al-Afdal succeeded to his position. The Imam al-Mustansir bi’llah, who had previously designated his eldest son Abu Mansur Nizār (1094-1095) as the next Imam, passed away in 1095.

Upon his death, Imam Nizār was opposed by the all-powerful Fatimid vizier al-Afdal, who put another son, al-Musta‘li on the Fatimid throne in a coup d’état. Imam Nizār and those who followed him – the Nizari Isma‘iliis – refused to acknowledge Musta‘li as the Imam-Caliph and maintained the original designation of the Imam al-Mustansir bi’llah.
The caliph al-Mustansir himself died a few months after Badr, having already designated his eldest son Abu Mansur Nizar to succeed him as the next Fatimid Imam and caliph. Nizar was an independent-minded man of about fifty who resented the excessive military control over the state. Sensing his potential threat, the new vizier and military commander al-Afdal decided to impose his own candidate on the throne, Nizar’s half-brother Musta‘li, who was married to al-Afdal’s sister... This coup de théâtre was completely unacceptable to Nizar and his followers, not least because they believed the Imam’s nass or designation of his successor could not be overturned under any circumstances.

(Peter Willey, Eagle’s Nest, 16)

1095 – Imam Nizar is Murdered by al-Afdal

Imam Nizar initially received military support from Alexandria but was eventually defeated by the more powerful Fatimid armies in 1095. Al-Afdal imprisoned the Imam Nizar and had him executed. However, the sons and grandsons of Nizar survived and fled Egypt.
Aftakin and [Imam] Nizar, fearing for the welfare of those around them, sought a guarantee of safety. It was granted but both leaders were arrested and sent to Cairo. There, according to al-Maqrizi, who again reports in the voice of a third party, ‘he surrendered Nizar to a member of the palace entourage of al-Musta‘li and the latter built around him walls and [in there] he died.’...Several members of the caliphal family, however, fled to the far West, among them specifically three of Nizar’s brothers, Muhammad, Isma‘il, and Tahir, and a son of his named al-Husayn...Thus a small coterie of dissidents and Nizari supporters gathered somewhere in the West (the Maghrib) waiting for an opportunity to reassert their claim(s) to the imamate.

(Paul Walker, Succession to Rule in the Shi‘ite Caliphate, 255)

Following the death of Imam Nizar, Hasan-i Sabbah led the Nizaris in Persia during this turbulent time in which the Saljuqs attacked persecuted the Nizari Isma‘ilis for decades. Hasan had visited Egypt and observed the declining state of the Fatimid Caliphate and sensed that immediate action was necessary for the survival of the Imamat. In 1090 Hasan captured the famous fortress of Alamut and over the next few years, the Nizari Isma‘ilis captured more fortresses in Rudbar, Qumes, Khurasan, and Quhistan. Hasan led the Nizaris to fight and defend themselves against Saljuq attack – at one point the Nizari Isma‘ilis defeated a Saljuq army of 10,000 men. The Imams succeeding Imam Nizar, known as Imam al-Hadi, Imam al-Muhtadi, and Imam al-Qahir lived in concealment as they escaped Egypt and made their way to the Nizari Isma‘ili territories in Persia established through the efforts of Hasan-i Sabbah.

(Daftary, The Ismailis, 621)

1101-1106 – Saljuq Slaughters of the Persian Nizari Isma‘īlis

The Saljuq rulers of Persia perceived the Nizari Isma‘īlis in their domains as a threat to their power. In the beginning of the twelfth century, the Saljuq sultans and amirs in Persia ordered the massacre of all Nizari Isma‘īlis in Baghdad, Isfahan and Quhistan and any Saljuqs who sympathized with them:

The growing power of the Nizaris finally forced Barkiyaruq to move against them. Barkiyaruq in western Persia and Sanjar in Khurasan agreed in 494/1101 to take combined action against them, who were now posing a serious threat to Saljuq power in general. Accordingly, Barkiyaruq sanctioned the massacre of Nizaris in Isfahan and Baghdad, as well as many of the Saljuq officers suspected of conversion, while Sanjar had many Nizaris killed or enslaved in Quhistan.

(Daftary, The Ismailis, 330)
The Nizari Isma‘ilis in Saljuq domains in Persia were repeatedly attacked by local Sunni mobs, and often scapegoated for the murders of Sunni leaders. Saljuq rulers and amirs regularly ordered the total elimination of the Isma‘ilis of Quhistan and other regions. A number of Isma‘ilis in Isfahan were even burnt alive in a bonfire. Nevertheless, the Isma‘ilis in Persia persisted and endured.

The assassinations, whatever their real source, often triggered massacres of the Isma‘ilis. The assassination of a Saljuq amir or a Sunni qadi, who had initiated action against the Isma‘ilis, would often rouse the Sunni population of a town to gather all those suspected, or accused by private enemies, of being Isma‘ilis, and to kill them. Around 486/1093, the people of Isfahan, for instance, moved by a dubious report that a certain Isma‘ilis couple had been luring passers-by into their house and torturing them to death, rounded up all the suspected Isma‘ilis and threw them alive into a large bonfire in the centre of the town. And in 494/1101, Barkiyaruq and Sanjar came to an agreement about eliminating all the Isma‘ilis of their respective regions. Sanjar sent the amir Bazghash against the Isma‘ilis of Quhistan. This expedition caused much devastation, and three years later, another Saljuq expedition destroyed Tabas, killing many Isma‘ilis in the region. However, the Isma‘ilis of Quhistan maintained their position, and in 498/1104–1105 the Isma‘ilis of Turshız were even able to undertake operations as far west as Rayy. At the same time, Barkiyaruq ordered a second massacre of the Isma‘ilis of Isfahan in 494 AH.

(Daftary, The Ismailis, 329)
First, the Saljuq authorities ordered a thoroughgoing purge of their military and administrative systems in order to eliminate all those suspected of being Ismailis. Several thousand people were killed in this operation, including many falsely accused by their enemies. Then the Saljuqs sanctioned the expulsion of Ismailis from urban areas, a policy that led to widespread killings of civilians, often in mob violence instigated by local Sunni authorities. The largest massacres of this kind took place in the two main centres of Saljuq power, Isfahan and Baghdad. Last but not least, the Saljuqs dispatched a series of military expeditions against the main centres of Ismaili power in Rudbar and Qohistan, retaking some fortified bases and devastating many areas of Ismaili settlement. This was the case, for instance, in the town of Tabas in Qohistan that was completely destroyed and its inhabitants slaughtered.

(Peter Willey, Eagle’s Nest, 32)

1107 – The Saljuq Attack on the Nizari Isma‘ilis of Shahdiz

Most Sunni Muslims lived on good terms with the Isma‘ili Muslims among them but a mob or ruler would often endeavour to exterminate the Isma‘ilis. The Isma‘ilis of Shahdiz sought to make peace with the Saljuq Sultan in the early 1100s, arguing that beside the belief in Imamat, the Ismailis and Sunnis shared more in common. The Isma‘ilis were willing to acknowledge the political authority of the Sultan and pay him tribute. But Abu’l-Hasan ‘Ali b. ‘Abd al-Rahman, al-Samanjani, a leading Shafi‘i scholar, denounced the Ismailis and obstructed the peace negotiations. As a results, the Isma‘ilis of Shahdiz were assaulted and killed; the Ismaili leader Ahmad b. Attash was skinned alive, his wife forced to commit suicide by leaping off the ramparts of the fort, and Ahmad’s son was beheaded.
Hodgson remarks that during Alamut times most of the Sunnis lived on relatively good terms with the Shi‘i Ismailis among them, until ‘a mob or a ruler would set the goal of destroying all Ismailis at once.’ When Muhammad Tapar (d. 511/1118), the great Saljuq Sultan, personally led a campaign against the Ismaili community of Shahdiz at Isfahan, the Ismailis argued that they differed little from their Sunni neighbors except in the matter of the imamate. The sultan therefore had no cause to attack them so long as they accepted him as their political leader, which they were willing to do. Apparently the Ismailis had many Sunni friends in the Saljuq army who argued their cause and delayed engagement of the battle, but certain elements among the religious authorities urged it on. Even among the clerics there were differences of opinion but the extremists finally managed to silence the moderates, the Ismailis were assaulted, and the community suffered terrible losses. Their leader Ahmad b. Attash was ignominiously paraded through the streets of Isfahan before being skinned alive.

(Virani, The Ismailis in the Middle Ages, 103)
Ahmad managed to engage the Saljuqs in a series of negotiations, also involving the Sunni ‘ulama of Isfahan in a long, drawn-out religious disputation. In a message to the sultan, Ahmad argued that the Nizaris were true Muslims, believing in God and the Prophet Muhammad and accepting the prescriptions of the shari‘a. They differed from the Sunnis only concerning the matter of the imamate, and therefore maintained that the sultan had no legitimate ground for acting against them, especially since the Nizaris were willing to recognize the sultan’s suzerainty and pay him tribute. This message led to a religious debate. It seems that at first most of the sultan’s advisers and the Sunni jurists and scholars were inclined to accept Ahmad’s argument. A few, notably Abu’l-Hasan ‘Ali b. ‘Abd al-Rahman al-Samanjani, a leading Shafi‘i scholar, stood fast against the Isma‘ilis, denouncing them as being outside the pale of Islam, and persuading the sultan to reject Ahmad’s request. The debate thus ended and the siege continued... In the final assault, most of the Nizaris were killed but a few managed to escape. Ahmad’s wife, decked in jewels, threw herself from the ramparts, but Ahmad was captured. He was paraded through the streets of Isfahan and then skinned alive. Ahmad’s son was also put to death, and their heads were sent to the caliph al-Mustazhir at Baghdad.

(Daftary, The Ismailis, 337)

The local Saljuq amirs continued to routinely massacre the Nizari villages and attack the Nizari strongholds. Several attacks took place between 1124 and 1126.
[The Nizari leader] Buzurg-Ummıd was confronted with the enmity of the local amırs from the very beginning of his reign, and in 518/1124 some 700 Nizaris were massacred in Amid in Diyar Bakr. In 520/1126, two years after his accession, the Saljuqs launched new attacks against the Nizari strongholds in both Rudbar and Quhistan, probably to test the leadership capabilities of Hasan-i Sabbah’s successor. Sultan Sanjar had not sanctioned any anti-Nizari activity for almost two decades, which may reflect the existence of some sort of truce between the Saljuqs and the Nizaris. However, he now decided to confront the Nizaris, and a large army, commanded by his vizier, was sent against Turaythith in Quhistan, as well as against Bayhaq and Tarz in the district of Nıshapur, with orders to massacre the Nizaris of those localities and pillage their properties.

(Daftary, The Ismailis, 345)

1129: Saljuq Slaughter of the Syrian Nizari Isma‘ilis

The Saljuq Sultan Alp Arslan ordered the ra’is of Aleppo to arrest and execute the Nizari Isma‘ili leadership of Aleppo. This led to the massacre and imprisonment of at least 200 Nizari Isma‘ilis:
According to Ibn al-Adım, Muhammad Tapar had written to Alp Arslan warning him against the menace of the Nizaris and insisting on their elimination. At the same time, Sa‘id b. Badi, the ra‘is of Aleppo and the commander of the militia, had been urging Alp Arslan to take measures against the Nizaris. Alp Arslan finally agreed and entrusted the task to Ibn Badi. Abu Tahir and other Nizari leaders, including the da‘i Isma‘il, and a brother of al-Hakim al-Munajjim, were arrested and killed. Some two hundred Nizaris of Aleppo were also massacred or imprisoned and their properties were confiscated.

(Daftary, The Ismailis, 335)

Later, the prefect and governors of Damascus orchestrated the murder of the Nizari Isma‘ili leaders of Damascus and sent the town mob and militia to massacre the local Nizari populations; around 6,000 Nizari Isma‘ilis were killed and their properties pillaged while several Nizari leaders were crucified on the city walls:
Al-Mazdaqani, who had been retained as vizier by Tughtigin’s son and successor Taj al-Muluk Buri (522–526/1128–1132), continued to support the da‘i Isma‘il and the Nizaris. But Buri waited for the right opportunity to rid himself of al-Mazdaqani and the Nizaris, being spurred on towards these objectives by the prefect of Damascus, Mufarrij b. al-Hasan b. al-Sufi, and the city’s military governor, Yusuf b. Firuz. Al-Mazdaqani was murdered in Ramadan 523/September 1129, and this was followed by a general massacre of the Nizaris in Damascus, similar to the anti-Nizari reaction of the Aleppines after the death of Ridwan. The town militia (ahdath) and the mob, supported by the predominantly Sunni inhabitants of Damascus, turned on the Nizaris, killing more than 6000 people and pillaging their properties. Their dar al-da‘wa was also destroyed and some Nizaris were crucified on the wall of Damascus, including a freedman called Shadhi al-Khadim, a disciple of Abu Tahir in Aleppo and, according to Ibn al-Qalanisi, the root of all the trouble.

(Daftary, The Ismailis, 349)

In the 1140s, the Shah Ghazi killed and beheaded a large number of Nizaris in Rudbar – even building towers with their severed heads. In the same period, in Rayy and Alamut, a large number of Nizaris were attacked and killed by ‘Abbas.
After the assassination of his son Girdbazu in 537/1142 at the hands of fida‘is, Shah Ghazi continuously attacked the Nizaris of Rudbar, killing large numbers of them and building towers of their heads. Similarly, ‘Abbas, upon hearing in 535/1141 the news of the Nizari assassination of Jawhar, his master, in Sanjar’s camp, massacred the Nizaris of Rayy and thereafter attacked and killed many Nizaris in the district of Alamut and elsewhere.”

(Daftary, The Ismailis, 357)

1171 – Salah al-Din (Saladdin) Extinguishes the Descendants of the Fatimid Caliphs

Meanwhile in the twelfth century, Salah al-Din brought an end to the now defunct Fatimid Caliphate by arresting and imprisoning all the Fatimid family members and descendants of the Imam al-Mustansir bi’llah – to ensure the extinction of the Fatimid lineage in Egypt.

When Salah al-Din brought a formal end to Fatimid rule in 567/1171, he ordered all available members of the former ruling family arrested and incarcerated in the Dar al-Muzaffar, males and females to be kept separated. Obviously the females needed to be imprisoned for some months only.

(Walker, Succession to Rule in the Shiite Caliphate, 249)

Twelfth-Thirteenth Centuries: Murders of the Nizari Imams and Saljuq Massacres of the Nizari Isma‘ilis
“...in the year 600/1204, a large number of people accused of Isma‘ilism were murdered in lower ‘Iraq.” (Farhad Daftary)

By 1162, the Nizari Imams had migrated to Alamut and the twenty-third Imam Hasan ‘ala-dhikrihi al-salam (1162-1166) openly assumed leadership of the Nizari Isma‘ilis. However, this Imam was brutally murdered in 1166 by his own brother-in-law.
A year and a half after the declaration of the qiyama, on 6 Rabi I 561/9 January 1166, Hasan II was stabbed in the castle of Lamasar by a brother-in-law, Hasan b. Namawar, who belonged to a local Daylami branch of the Shi‘i Buyid family and who opposed Hasan II’s new policies. Hasan II ‘ala dhikrihi’l-salam died of his wounds and was succeeded by his nineteen-year-old son Muhammad, who was born in Shawwal 542/March 1148.

(Daftary, The Ismailis, 363)

The next Imam, Mawlana Nur al-Din Muhammad (A‘la Muhammad) allegedly died of poisoning in 1210.

Muhammad II died, possibly of poison, in Rabi I 607/September 1210, and was succeeded by his son Hasan III, who, as had become customary by then with the lords of Alamut, carried the honorific title of Jalal al-Dīn.

(Daftary, The Ismailis, 375)

In 1221, the Imam Jalal al-Din Hasan died of dysentery caused by suspected poisoning:
After a reign of eleven years, Jalal al-Din Hasan III died of dysentery in Ramadan 618/November 1221. His vizier, who was the tutor of the next imam, accused Hasan III’s Sunni wives and sister of having poisoned him. They were all put to death.

(Daftary, The Ismailis, 377)

The Imam ‘Ala al-Din Muhammad was murdered in his tent near Alamut in 1255:

Soon afterwards, on the last day of Shawwal 653/1 December 1255, ‘Ala al-Din Muhammad III, who had always been fond of shepherding, was found murdered in a hut, adjoining his sheepfold, in Shırkuh near Alamut.

(Daftary, The Ismailis, 392)

During the thirteenth century, many rulers continued to massacre large Nizari Isma‘ili populations on several occasions:

Meanwhile, the Sunni rulers had maintained the practice of occasionally massacring the Nizaris. It is reported, for instance, that in the year 600/1204, a large number of people accused of Isma‘ilism were murdered in lower ‘Iraq.

(Daftary, The Ismailis, 374)

**Thirteenth Century: The Mongol Genocide of the Nizari Isma‘ilis**
Hulegu Khan’s siege of the Nizari fortress of Alamut

“[Imam Rukn al-Din] Khurshah’s family and dependants detained at Qazwin were put to the sword by Qaraqi Bitikchi, while Otegu-China, the Mongol commander in Khurasan, summoned the Qhistani Nizaris to great gatherings and slaughtered some 12,000 of them.” (Farhad Daftary)

In the mid-thirteenth century, the Mongols made preparations to destroy the Nizari state and exterminate all the Isma‘ili populations. A genocide of the Nizari Isma‘ili Muslims, including women and children, was ordered by Genghis Khan. Prior to this development, the Nizari Isma‘ili Imams had formed an alliance with the Sunni
'Abbasid Caliph and sent peace envoys to the Mongols. The Isma‘ilis and the Sunnis had even sent a joint Embassy to Christian Europe proposing a Muslim-Christian alliance, which was rejected.

In one of his imperial edicts, Genghis Khan had ordained that the Ismailis were to be annihilated: “None of that people should be spared,” he decreed, “not even the babe in its cradle.” These chilling words heralded one of history’s most lurid examples of mass extermination... We hear an ominous foreboding of the coming genocide from William of Rubruck, a Franciscan friar at the court of King Louis IX of France, who was sent on a diplomatic mission to the Great Khan Mongke. He tells that the Great Khan had sent his brother Hulagu to the lands of the Ismailis with an army, ‘and he ordered him to put them all to death.’

(Virani, The Ismailis in the Middle Ages, 4, 7)

1265 – The First Mongol Massacres

In his first incursion, Hulegu Khan – the brother whom Genghis Khan appointed to exterminate the Nizari Isma‘ilis – attacked the towns of Tun and Tus and slaughtered their Isma‘ili populations:

Hulegu entered Persia through Khurasan in Rabi I 654/April 1256 and selected the Nizari town of Tun, which had not been effectively reduced by his advance guards under Ket-Buqa, as his first target... The Mongols slaughtered all the inhabitants of Tun except the younger women, according to Juwayni, or the artisans (pıshihvaran), according to Rashid al-Din.”

(Daftary, The Ismailis, 393)
The Mongol Siege of Maymundiz and the Surrender of the Imam

By October 26 of that year, the Mongol armies besieged several Nizari Isma‘ili fortresses including Maymundiz where the Imam of that time, Mawlana Rukn al-Din Khurshah, was staying. The Mongols pressued the Imam to surrender in person; in order to buy time and stall, the Imam sent out his brother and 300 Nizari Ismaili notables to negotiate with the Mongols. Hulegu Khan secretly murdered all these Nizari emissaries.
On 5 Shawwal/26 October, Khurshah sent out his brother Shahanshah in the company of 300 men, who arrived at Hulegu’s camp two days later...Shahanshah was now sent back to Rudbar with the message that if Khurshah destroyed the castle of Maymundiz and presented himself in person before the king, he would be received with honour, otherwise God alone knew what would befall him. Around this time, Hulegu secretly put to death near Qazwin many of the Nizaris who on different occasions had been sent to him.

(Daftary, The Ismailis, 395)

The Imam Rukn al-Din Khurshah eventually surrendered with all of his family and dependants. His family members were taken captive by the Mongols. However, when the Mongols entered the castle of Maymundiz, a group of devoted fida‘is resisted them until the last man.

On the day following his surrender, Khurshah brought out all his family, dependants and the other occupants of the castle, also offering the meagre treasures of Maymundiz as a token of submission. When the Mongols went up to the castle to commence the work of dismantling its buildings and structures, however, they were confronted by a group of devoted fida‘is whose desperate last resistance was broken up only after three days of fierce fighting.

(Daftary, The Ismailis, 396)

1257 – Mongol Massacre of Imam Rukn al-Din Khurshah and the Nizari Īsma‘īlis
In 1257, the Imam Rukn al-Khurshah and his companions set out to Mongolia while escorted by the Mongol guards. These guards continually abused and harassed the Imam and his party. The Great Khan refused to see the Imam. On his return journey, the Mongol guards executed the Imam and all of his companions.

On 1 Rabi I 655/9 March 1257, Khurshah set out on his fateful journey to Mongolia with nine companions and a group of Mongol guards led by Bujrai. On the return journey, somewhere along the edge of the Khangai mountains in north-western Mongolia, the eighth and final lord of Alamut and his companions were led away from the road and put to the sword by the Mongols.

(Daftary, The Ismailis, 396)

After the Imam Rukn al-Din Khurshah had left for Mongolia, the Mongols massacred thousands upon thousands of Nizari Isma‘ilis in Persia: the Imam’s family and dependents (including infants) were summarily executed; the Mongol commander summoned the Nizaris of Quhistan – in the guise of a gathering – and massacred them (akin to the “red wedding” in the Game of Thrones). All of this took place under the general order of Genghis Khan to destroy all of the Isma‘ilis. Some estimates place the total number of Nizari Isma‘ilis killed in these massacres at 100,000.
In the meantime, after Khurshah’s departure for Mongolia, there had taken place a general massacre of the Persian Nizaris who had been placed in Mongol custody. Khurshah’s family and dependants detained at Qazwin were put to the sword by Qaraqai Bitikchi, while Otegu-China, the Mongol commander in Khurasan, summoned the Qhistani Nizaris to great gatherings and slaughtered some 12,000 of them, adding immeasurably to the tragedy of the end of the Nizari state in Persia. According to Juwayni, the massacres had been carried out in accordance with a decree of Mongke to the effect that none of the Nizaris should be spared, reflecting an earlier order of Chingiz Khan himself.

(Daftary, The Ismailis, 397-98)

1257 – The Survival of the Nizari Isma‘ili Imamat

Despite the great Mongol genocide, the Nizari Isma‘ilis endured and most importantly, the lineage of Nizari Imams survived in the person of Imam Shams al-Din Muhammad (1257-1310), the younger son of the slain Imam Rukn al-Din Khurshah. This Imam lived in concealment (satr), according to the sources, in Tabriz where he was disguised as an embroiderer.
According to Nizari tradition, a group of their dignitaries had managed, before the fall of Alamut, to safely conceal Rukn al-Din Khurshah’s minor son, Shams al-Din Muhammad, who had received the nass to the imamate. Shams al-Din, who succeeded to the imamate on his father’s death in 655/1257, was then taken to Adharbayjan. There, he grew up and lived clandestinely and precariously as an embroiderer, whence his nickname of Zarduz. Certain allusions in the still unpublished Safar-nama (Travelogue) of Nizari Quhistani, the first post-Alamut Nizari poet, indicate that Shams al-Din Muhammad, and possibly his immediate successor, lived in concealment in Adharbayjan.

(Daftary, The Ismailis, 412)

Nevertheless, the Mongol-sponsored Sunni historian Ata Malik Juwayni announced the extinction of the Nizari Imams and the Isma‘ilis, saying that “of him and his stock no trace was left, and he and his kindred became but a tale on men’s lips and a tradition in the world.” In this way, the Isma‘ilis were written out of existence, while actually surviving and re-emerging in later centuries.
Juwayni’s arrogant and brutal boast that ‘of him [Rokn al-Din] and his stock no trace was left’ was to be proved conclusively false. Of course, the massacres of 1256 were followed by centuries of darkness for the Ismailis, but there were survivors. History has taught us, especially recently, that peoples inspired by a genuine faith can never be completely eliminated as their conquerors hope. Gradually the number of Ismaili survivors grew. Their Imamate was preserved and grew in strength, too, until in the 19th century modern Ismailism emerged under the leadership of the Aga Khans.

(Wiley, Eagle’s Nest, 84)

**Thirteenth-Fourteenth Centuries: Surviving the Mongols under Taqiyyah**

“In all these lands through which I traveled, in every place I practiced taqiyyah for taqiyyah is my religion and the religion of my ancestors.” (Imam Shams al-Din Muhammad)

In this extremely dangerous environment, where Mongol leaders continued to hunt down the Nizari Isma’ilis, the Imams and the Community generally practiced taqiyyah and lived in the guise of Sunnis, Twelvers, Sufis, or Hindus – depending on the region and time period. The Imams after the Mongol invasion generally lived in strict concealment and their whereabouts were only known to trusted high ranking followers.
In general, during much of their post-Alamut history the Nizaris have been obliged to dissimulate rather strictly in order to safeguard themselves against widespread persecution. To that end, they not only concealed their true beliefs as well as religious literature, but also resorted to a wide variety of Sunni, Sufi, Twelver Shi‘i and Hindu disguises in the midst of hostile surroundings in the Iranian world and the Indian subcontinent.

(Daftary, The Ismailis, 404)

In the dangerous times in which this Imam and his immediate successors lived, it has often been assumed that they concealed their identities...Clearly, one of the reasons that we know so little of the Imams of this period is precisely because they didn’t want their existence to be commonly known. Attracting unwanted attention in such a hostile environment would have been exceedingly dangerous, even fatal, and success in concealing the identity of the Imams contributed to the survival of the lineage. Faithful members of the community in areas in which the threat was most acutely felt would have been loath to reveal the names and whereabouts of their Imams, or indeed their own identity.

(Virani, The Ismailis in the Middle Ages, 56)

1257-1310 – The Journeys of Imam Shams al-Din Muhammad

According to several historical sources, the Imam Shams al-Din Muhammad travelled around the Muslim world. He risked his life in order to visit all the surviving Nizari Isma‘ili communities to raise their morale, show them the survival of the Imamat, and renew their allegiance. An unpublished manuscript contains the following quotation which is likely from the Imam Shams al-Din Muhammad:
May it not remain hidden from all the servants that as Mawlana ‘Ali and Mawlana Husayn (on whose mentions be peace) have said, ‘We will have to pass through Jabalistan (i.e., Gilan) and Daylam, which will be the final Karbala. The palace of Caesar and the fortress of Alamut [will be reduced to such straits] that were they given to even a poor old woman, she would not accept them.’ All of this came to pass and was seen by the people of the world. Aught of what I said was belied. Now I have left the land of Iran for Turan and traveled through its cities to see them. I passed through Samarqand, Bukhara, Cathay, Scythia, Balkh, China and the land beyond China (Chin wa-Machin), Tibet and Kashmir. I also passed through the land of the Franks. In short, I actually beheld the world from one end to the other. I clearly manifested myself in the cities of Uch and Multan and fulfilled the promise that I had made to the loving devotees. [After experiencing] the kindness of the loving devotees and friends of Hindustan, I returned to Iran. In all these lands through which I traveled, in every place I practiced taqiyya for taqiyya is my religion and the religion of my ancestors. That is to say, “dissimulation (taqiyyah) is my religion and the religion of my ancestors.” In every place we portrayed ourselves in a manner and form that we deemed prudent for the task of the people. However, my disciples know best what is prudent for our (own) task! If someone knows better the task and what is advisable, let him come forward. Nobody in the world can claim this. If someone doubts this it is because of depravity and the whisperings of the devil. May God keep all the servants in his protection!”

Imam Shams al-Din Muhammad,
(Virani, The Ismailis in the Middle Ages, 54)
If the earlier quoted passage is indeed to be attributed to the Imam Shams al-Din Muhammad, it seems highly likely that he was traveling throughout the regions in which his followers lived in order to reinforce their allegiance in the aftermath of the Mongol invasion and the evaporation of Ismaili political power. In his Book of Supreme Admonitions, Pir Shihab al-Din Shah poignantly points out that at this time, many of the Persian Ismailis abandoned their faith for fear of their lives. Certainly, trying to reconnect with these scattered communities would have been a high priority for the Ismaili leadership.

(Virani, The Ismailis in the Middle Ages, 57)

1368 – The Murder of Imam Qasimshah

The Imam succeeding Shams al-Din Muhammad was Imam Qasimshah (1310 – 1368). According to the few available sources that shed light on this obscure period, the Imam Qasimshah’s life was constantly in danger and he was ultimately murdered by a member of his family – Muhammad Shah – who also claimed the Imamat for himself. This resulted in a schism between the Qasimshahi Nizari Isma‘ilis and the Muhammadshahi Nizari Isma‘ils.
That the Imams in this period were in real danger is confirmed in an ode (qasida) of a certain Da‘i Anjudani, who informs us that the Imam Qasimshah (and here his reference is to the first Qasimshah) was murdered. It appears from these verses that there were numerous attempts to have him poisoned, one of which finally succeeded. Unfortunately, this poet provides us no further details regarding the perpetrators of the crime, nor any information about their identities, referring to them simply as “his enviers, worthy of hellfire” and “the accursed.” The murder of Qasimshah is also alluded to in the work Seven Aphorisms (Haft Nukta), which is associated with one of the Imams by the name Islamshah, perhaps the first. While not explicit, this work is highly suggestive that the murderer was from the Muhammadshahi line, which, however, is never mentioned. Nevertheless, it is very clear that a family member was involved.

(Virani, The Ismailis in the Middle Ages, 57)

The Imam Qasimshah was succeeded by his son, Imam Islamshah (1368 -1426). While little is known about this Imam, there is a work called Seven Aphorisms that is attributed to him and quotations from him appear in other Nizari texts. Some sources relate that Imam Islamshah left Adarbayjan and migrated to Iran.

**Fourteenth-Fifteenth Centuries: Timurid Massacres amidst the Cover of Sufism**
“They [Nizari Isma‘ilis] must be slain,” “attack them and snatch the wealth from their hands,” “their property and children are to be distributed as booty,” “may Almighty God abase them and curse them!” (Jalal-i Qa’ini)

The Nizaris of this period underwent immense hardship and endured numerous attacks. In 1393, Timur (Tamerlaine) led an expedition to massacre the Nizari Isma‘ilis of Anjudan.
The Persian chroniclers of Timur’s reign do refer to Nizaris activities in Anjudan and mention an interesting expedition led by Tımur himself in Rajab 795/May 1393 against the Nizaris of Anjudan, who apparently belonged to the Qasim-Shahi branch and had by then attracted enough attention to warrant this action. Tımur was then engaged in his campaigns in Persia, and whilst en route from Isfahan to Hamadan and Baghdad his attention was diverted to the Nizaris of the Anjudan area where he spent a few days. Timur’s soldiers killed many Nizaris and pillaged their properties. According to Sharaf al-Din Ali Yazdi (d. 858/1454), the rebellious Anjudani Nizaris attempted in vain to seek shelter in their special underground tunnels, and most of them lost their lives when they were flooded out by Timur’s troops.

(Daftary, The Ismailis, 418)

1378 – 1416: Massacres of the Nizari Isma‘ilis of Qazwin

In Qazwin, the prominent Khushayji family faced opposition from ‘Ali Kiya for their adherence to the Nizari Isma‘ili Imamat and had to defend themselves. In the course of these battles, the Nizari Imam known as Khudawand Muhammad – who was likely the Imam Islamshah – rallied the Nizaris of the area and opened up a second front against ‘Ali Kiya. The Nizari Imam and his forces even retook Alamut for short periods. However, ‘Ali Kiya joined up with Timur (Tamerlane) and his superior armies defeated the Nizari forces. The Nizari losses were massive due to Tamerlane’s massacres. In 1416, there was a mass execution of Nizari Isma‘ili leaders such that “the waters of the White River turned red with the blood of those killed.”
The Kushayjis made forays into Daylam from Qazwin, but in 781/1378, ‘Ali Kiya’s forces drove the Ismaili refugees out of that city. The Kushayji family then fled to Sultaniyya, originally a dependency of Qazwin, where they joined some of their co-religionists. Nearby Taliqan, with a substantial Ismaili population, was ruled by the inimical Malik Bisutun, who was defeated by the Ismailis in 787/1385. Shortly after this minor victory, however, Tamerlane’s troops were to massacre the Ismailis in Mazandaran, and shortly thereafter those in Anjudan as well.”

(Virani, The Ismailis in the Middle Ages, 35)

Though the Ismailis continued to inhabit Alamut and the South Caspian for much of this period, their former political power had been shattered. Henceforth, at least politically, the Ismailis were of minor, regional significance. Soon enough, in 819/1416, they were subject to yet another massacre in which “the waters of the White River (Saf idrud) turned red with the blood of those killed.” Among those executed were many Ismaili leaders, including some descendants of the Ismaili Imam Khudawand ‘Ala al-Din Muhammad. It must have been around this time, about one and a half centuries after Alamut first capitulated to the Mongols, that the Ismailis gave up all hopes of regaining the fortress as their center. While Ismaili activity continued in this region, the Imams appear to have already moved away to safer, more politically quiescent surroundings.”

(Virani, The Ismailis in the Middle Ages, 45)

1415 – Massacres of the Nizari Isma‘ilis of Quhistan
In 1415, Jalal Qa’ini was sent by Sultan Shahrukh with orders “to exterminate, suppress...kill, banish and expel the [Ismaili] community from Quhistan.”

“They must be slain,” “attack them and snatch the wealth from their hands,” “their property and children are to be distributed as booty,” “may Almighty God abase them and curse them!” Jalal-i Qa’ini, writing at the beginning of the fifteenth century, opens his discourse on the Ismailis in this manner, spewing fire and brimstone...An adherent of the Hanafi school of Sunni Islam, he was charged by Sultan Shahrukh with the task of suppressing “heretics” (bad-madhhaban), who presumably included not only the Shi’a, but perhaps even non-Hanafi Sunnis...Tamerlane’s son and successor, Sultan Shahrukh (r. 807–850/1405–1447), who cultivated an image of strict Sunni piety, sent Jalal-i Qa’ini many decades later in 818/1415 “to exterminate, suppress ... kill, banish and expel the [Ismaili] community from Quhistan”... Certainly, no Ismailis living in such hostile circumstances could openly practice their faith. Taqiyya was the only way to survive.

(Virani, The Ismailis in the Middle Ages, 103)

1426-1497 – Nizari Isma’ilis live in taqiyyah as Sufis

Imam Islamshah transferred the residence of the Ismaili Imams to central Persia – near Qumm and Mahallat – and enjoyed a long Imamat of nearly 55 years. He was succeeded by Imam Muhammad b. Islamshah (1426 – 1464).

Imam Muhammad b. Islamshah was succeeded by Imam Mustansir bi’llah II (1464 – 1476) – known as ‘Ali Shah and Shah Qalandar. This Imam began what is known as the “Anjudan revival” period in which the Nizari Imams posed as Sufi Pirs while directing a more active Nizari da‘wah from the village of Anjudan.
Imam Mustansir bi’llah was succeeded by Imam ‘Abd al-Salam (1476-1494) – who composed a famous Ode (qasidah) in which he openly declares the spiritual reality of the Imamat. The first line of the famous Ode of ‘Abd al-Salam states:
Harken ye who quest for union, who boasts that he seeks. Heed my words, for I am the Book of God that speaks!
Now I am ‘Abd al-Salam, but if with this company I am grieved, to this assembly I’ll bid adieu, once again to return to it.

Imam ‘Abd al-Salam,
(Virani, The Ismailis in the Middle Ages, 169-177)
Imam ‘Abd al-Salaam was succeeded by Imam Shah Gharib Mirza (1494-1497) – also known as ‘Abbas Shah and Mustansir bi’llah III. He was the author of the Pandiyat-i Jawanmardi. The Pandiyat suggests that the Imams of this time were still in danger and it was forbidden for the Nizari Isma‘ili murids to mention their names openly:

> O faithful believers, Hadrat Mawlana Shah Mustansir bi’llah says: Never mention my name nor that of your Imam Shah ‘Abd al-Salamshah in the presence of the faithless, ignorant ones who harbor an innate enmity for the offices of prophecy and imamate.

Imam Shah Gharib Mirza (Mustansir bi’llah III)
(Pandiyat-i Jawanmardi, in Virani, The Ismailis in the Middle Ages, 124)

**Sixteenth-Eighteenth Centuries: The Safawid Persecutions of the Persian Nizari Isma‘ilis**

“The increased and more overt activities of the Nizari Isma‘ilis soon came to the attention of the earliest Safawid monarchs and their Twelver ‘ulama’ who reacted by subjecting them to renewed persecution.” (Farhad Daftary)

Imam Abu Dharr ‘Ali (1497-1573) succeeded as the thirty-fifth Imam on the eve of the Safawid revolution that took place in 1501. Initially, this situation reduced the taqiyyah practices and Imam Abu Dharr ‘Ali is reported to have married a sister or daughter of Tahmasp I, the successor and son of Shah Isma‘il Safawi.

**1573-74 – Safawid Persecution of Imam Abu Dharr ‘Ali**
The Safawids soon made Twelver Shi‘ism the state religion and imported a number of Twelver ‘ulama’ from Arab centres. As a result many Sunni Muslims and Sufi orders were oppressed and the Nizari Isma‘ilis faced renewed persecution from the Safawids:

It seems that the true religious identity of the Nizari imams and their followers had become somewhat better known after the establishment of Safawid rule, despite their continued use of the Sufi guise. The increased and more overt activities of the Nizari Isma‘ilis soon came to the attention of the earliest Safawid monarchs and their Twelver ‘ulama’ who reacted by subjecting them to renewed persecution. We have records of two particular instances of such persecution taking place during the first Safawid century.

(Daftary, The Ismailis, 436)

Shah Tahmasp persecuted the Qasim-Shahi Nizaris in the time of their thirty-sixth imam, Murad Mirza, the son and successor of Abu Dharr ‘Ali. The Tarikh-i Alfi, an extensive history of the Muslim world from the death of the Prophet to around the year 1000/1591–1592, which was compiled in India by several authors at the request of the emperor Akbar, refers under the same year 981/1573–1574 to the persecution of the Nizaris of Anjudan in the time of a certain Murad who claimed their imamate... [S]ources relate that Murad had numerous followers also in India, who sent him large sums of money from Sind and elsewhere. Murad Mirza and his predecessor evidently did not reside permanently at Anjudan, where the headquarters of the Qasim-Shahi Nizari da‘wa had been located. Murad Mirza was engaged in political activity outside Anjudan, possibly in collaboration with Nuqtawis, and he had acquired supporters in Kashan and elsewhere in central Persia. Being alarmed by the
activities of Murad Mirza, early in 981/1573 Shah Tahmasp ordered Amır Khan Musilu, the governor of Hamadan, to proceed to the Anjudan area to capture Murad and deal with his followers (muridan). Amır Khan killed a large number of the Nizaris of Anjudan and its surroundings and took much booty from them, but Murad Mirza himself, who was then staying at a fortress in the district of Kamara around Anjudan, managed to escape. Soon afterwards, he was captured and imprisoned near the royal quarters. In Jumada II 981/October 1573, Murad Mirza escaped from prison with the assistance of Muhammad Muqim, a high Safawid official who had come under the influence of the Nizari Imam. Murad proceeded to the vicinity of Qandahar, receiving help on the way from his followers in Fars, Makran and Sind. A few months later, he was recaptured in Afghanistan by a contingent of Safawid guards commanded by Didar Beg. Murad was brought before Shah Tahmasp, who had him executed along with Muhammad Muqim. It is interesting to note that Khayrkhwah, a contemporary of Tahmasp I as well as Murad Mirza and the latter’s predecessor, states that one of the Nizari Imams of his time went into hiding (satr) for seven years, probably making reference to Murad Mirza.

(Daftary, The Ismailis, 437)

1573–1722 – Nizari Isma‘ili taqiyyah in the guise of Twelvers

The Imam Murad Mirza was succeeded by Imam Dhu’l-Faqar ‘Ali (1573-1634) – also known as Khalil Allah I. By this time, the Safawids had become less oppressive and this Imam married a Safawid princess. At this time, the Nizari Isma‘ilis and the Imam were practicing taqiyya and appearing as Twelver Shi‘is.
The close relationship existing between this Imam and the Safawids is attested by an epigraph, recovered in 1976 at Anjudan by the author, which reproduces the text of a royal edict issued by Shah ʿAbbas I in Rajab 1036/March–April 1627. According to this edict, originally installed in the main mosque of Anjudan and addressed to Amir Khalil Allah Anjudani, the current Qasim-Shahi Imam, the Shiʿis of Anjudan, named as a dependency of the dar al-muʿminın of Qumm, were exempted, like other Shiʿis around Qumm, from paying certain taxes. It is interesting to note that in this edict the Anjudani Shiʿis were regarded as Ithna ʿasharis, indicating that by that time the Persian Nizaris had successfully adopted the cover of Twelver Shiʿism, in addition to Sufism, as a form of taqiyya.”

(Daftary, The Ismailis, 437)
The Imam Dhu’l-Faqar ‘Ali was succeeded by his son Imam Nur al-Din ‘Ali (1634-1671). The successor of Imam Nur al-Din ‘Ali was his son Imam Shah Khalil Allah (1671 – 1680). During this period, the Nizari Isma’ili da’wah achieved greater success in the South Asia, Persia, and Central Asia.

Imam Shah Khalil Allah was succeeded by his son Imam Shah Nizar (1680 – 1722), and this Imam moved the headquarters of the Imamat from Anjudan to the village of Kahak.
The tombstone of Imam Shah Niizar II (d. 1722), Kahak
(Farhad Daftary, The Ismailis: Their History and Doctrines, 458)
In a famous qasida still recited by Nizari Isma‘ilis today, Imam Shah Nizar says about himself:
In the eyes of the people I am only a person by the name of Nizar, but in reality I am the one who sees everything in the world of reality. While I am present, the people with wisdom and intellect do not take advantage of my presence, and once I leave this world they make my tomb a sanctuary for the fulfillment of their wishes.

Imam Shah Nizar II,

(Har Chand Ke Man, Listen on Youtube (http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4nZ_N3SkyzI))

**Eighteenth Century: Nizari Isma‘ili Imams’ Emergence from Obscurity**

Imam Shah Nizar was succeeded by his son Imam Sayyid ‘Ali (1722 – 1754) when the Safawid dynasty came to an end. Imam Sayyid ‘Ali was in turn succeed by his son Imam Hasan ‘Ali (1754 -1759).

Imam Hasan ‘Ali Shah took the step of moving to Kirman. This was so that Khoja Isma‘ili pilgrims travelling from India could be safer and have easier access to the Imam. Many Khoja Isma‘ilis would die in the journey from India to Persia due to being attacked by plunderers.
Towards the end of Nadir Shah’s reign (1148–1160/1736–1747), Imam Hasan ‘Ali moved to Shahr-i Babak in Kirman, situated about 180 kilometres southwest of the city of Kirman, between Rafsanjan and Sirjan. This decision was apparently mainly motivated by the Imam’s concern for the safety of the Khoja pilgrims coming to Persia and the proper flow of the tithes from India to his treasury. In the chaotic conditions of Persia after the downfall of the Safawids, the Khojas who regularly travelled to the Anjudan and Mahallat areas to visit their imam and remit to him their religious dues were often plundered and killed between Na’in and Yazd by the Bakhtiyari tribesmen, in addition to suffering extortion on the route by various officials. Consequently, the Imam decided to move to Shahr-i Babak in southeastern Persia, a location closer to the Persian Gulf ports and the pilgrimage route of his Indian followers.

(Daftary, The Ismailis, 459)

Imam Hasan ‘Ali Shah became prominent in the political affairs of Kirman. However, the Imam was killed when Karim Khan Zand annexed Persia.

He was, indeed, the first Imam of his line to emerge from concealment and obscurity. He became actively involved in the affairs of Kirman, and was treated with respect by the Afsharid Shahrukh who ruled Kirman province from the time of Nadir Shah’s murder in 1160/1747 until he himself was killed in 1172/1758–1759, when Kirman was annexed to the territories of Karim Khan Zand, the founder of another short-lived dynasty in Persia.

(Daftary, The Ismailis, 459)
Imam Hasan ‘Ali Shah was in turn succeeded by Imam Qasim ‘Ali, who was in turn succeeded by Imam Abu’l-Hasan ‘Ali (d. 1792) – known also as Sayyid Abu’l-Hasan Kahaki. Imam Abu’l-Hasan ‘Ali was appointed the governor of Kirman during the Zand period (1750-1794). He was succeeded by his son Imam Shah Khalil Allah (1792 – 1817).

**Nineteenth Century: The Rise of the Aga Khans**
“...the Qajar monarch appointed the imam as governor of Qumm and bestowed on him the honorific title (laqab) of Agha Khan (less commonly but more correctly transcribed as Aqa Khan), meaning lord and master. Henceforth, Hasan ‘Ali Shah became generally known as Agha Khan Mahallati, because of his royal title and the family’s deep roots in the Mahallat area. The title of Agha Khan remained hereditary amongst his successors, the Nizari Imams of modern times.” (Farhad Daftary)

Imam Shah Khalil Allah moved from Kirman to Yazd – also in order to be closer to the Khoja Isma‘ili pilgrims who made dangerous journeys to see the Nizari Isma‘ili Imams. The local Twelver Shi‘i ‘ulama’ were extremely jealous of the Imam because of his popularity and the reverence shown by his Nizari Isma‘ili murids. In 1817, a mob led by a Twelver Shi‘i mullah stormed the Imam’s home, murdering the Imam and several Nizari Isma‘ilis.

It was at Yazd that two years later, in 1232/1817, the Nizari imam became a victim of the intrigues of the Ithna ‘ashari authorities and lost his life in the course of a dispute between some of his followers and the local shopkeepers. The Nizaris involved, who had used violence to settle their differences with the shopkeepers in the market place, took refuge in Shah Khalil Allah’s house and refused to emerge. A certain Mulla Husayn Yazdi, who as a Twelver resented the spreading influence of the Nizaris, collected a mob and attacked the imam’s house. In the ensuing uproar Shah Khalil Allah and several of his followers, including a Khoja, were murdered, and the imam’s house was plundered.

(Daftary, The Ismailis, 463)
Imam Khalil Allah was succeeded by his thirteen year-old son, Imam Hasan ‘Ali Shah. After the Imam’s death, the family was left unprovided for and nearly destitute. The late Imam’s wife, Bibi Pir Sarkar Mata Salamat went to the Qajar court, demanding justice for the new Imam and his family. The pleas were successful: Fateh ‘Ali Shah Qajar brought the murderers to justice, bestowed the title of “Aga Khan” on Imam Hasan ‘Ali Shah, gave one of his daughters in marriage to the Imam, and granted the Imam land and appointed him as the governor of Qumm in 1835.


After the death of Fateh Ali Shah and the accession of Muhammad Shah Qajar, Imam Hasan ‘Ali Shah Aga Khan I was made governor of Kirman. He returned to Kirman and restored law and order to the area using his personal military, fighting off Baluchi and Afghan rebels and raiders on behalf of the Qajars. He was expecting to receive compensation for his services from the new Shah, Muhammad Shah Qajar, but this was never granted. This mistreatment of the Imam was due to Qajar Court politics instigated by one Hajji Mirza Aqasi. This Qajar minister held a grudge against the Imam because Imam Hasan ‘Ali Shah refused to marry his daughter (of royal blood) to a lowborn son of Aqasi’s friend – a request that was a grave insult to the Imam. Mirza Aqasi’s anger resulted in the Imam being deposed as governor of Kirman in 1837 and never compensated for his services. After an unsuccessful rebellion against the more powerful Qajar forces, for which Imam Hasan ‘Ali Shah was held captive in Kirman and Tehran, the Imam was eventually pardoned and allowed to retire in Mahallat.

After again opposing the Qajars and fighting several minor battles, the Imam Hasan ‘Ali Shah, his brother and their party found themselves greatly outnumbered and escaped to Qandahar in Afghanistan. Here the Imam formed an alliance with the British, with whom he likely had prior contact. In 1842, when the British decided to
retreat from Afghanistan, their entire British-Indian garrison was killed by Muhammad Akbar Khan’s forces. The Imam’s forces then assisted in the evacuation of the British forces from Qandahar. The Imam Hasan ‘Ali Shah and his party then went to Sind where they helped defend the British from night attacks. The Imam also intervened diplomatically with the Baluchi chiefs to avoid further fighting with the British. The Imam and his family also survived a Baluchi raid where their possessions were plundered.

1848 – Imam Hasan ‘Ali Shah Sets in Bombay

Imam Hasan ‘Ali Shah and his party eventually settled in Bombay, to the great joy of the Khoja Isma‘ili Muslims, where he was joined by family members and attendants who migrated from Persia. The Imam personally performed religious ceremonies at the Bombay jamatkhana where he held darbar:

Agha Khan I was the first imam of his line to set foot in India and his presence there was greatly welcomed by the Nizari Khojas who flocked enthusiastically to his side to pay their homage and receive his blessings... Agha Khan I attended the jamatkhana in Bombay on special religious occasions, and led the public prayers of the Khojas there. Every Saturday when in Bombay, he also held durbar (Persian, darbar), giving audience to his followers who received his blessings.

(Daftary, The Ismailis, 474)

Twentieth Century: “The Unity of Islam” – Imam Sultan Muhammad Shah Aga Khan III’s Services to the Muslim World
“You should not forget what I have always considered the most beautiful of all Muslim prayers namely, that Allah Almighty in His infinite mercy may forgive the sins of all Muslims.” (Imam Sultan Muhammad Shah Aga Khan III)

The settlement of the Imam Hasan ‘Ali Shah and his family in India marked the end of the persecution of the Nizari Ismaili Imamat. It is also the time when Isma‘ili communities around the world began to come out of taqiyyah, as they would do over the next century. Imam Sultan Muhammad Shah explains how this period marked the end of the heavy persecution and hostility against the Nizari Isma‘ili Imams.
However, in 1848 Muhammad Shah’s reign came to an end, and my grandfather settled peaceably in Bombay and there established his durkhana or headquarters. Not only was this a wise and happy personal decision, but it had an admirable effect on the religious and communal life of the whole Ismaili world. It was as if the heavy load of persecution and fanatical hostility, which they had had to bear for so long, was lifted. Deputations came to Bombay from places as remote as Kashgar, Bokhara, all parts of Iran, Syria, the Yemen, the African coast and the then narrowly settled hinterland behind it.

Imam Sultan Muhammad Shah Aga Khan III,  
(Memoirs of the Aga Khan – Islam: The Religion of My Ancestors, Read on NanoWisdoms (http://www.nanowisdoms.org/nwblog/1225/))

Imam Hasan Ali Shah Aga Khan I next to Imam Aqa ‘Ali Shah Aga Khan II when he was the Pir.

Imam Hasan ‘Ali Shah Aga Khan I was succeeded by his son Imam ‘Aga ‘Ali Shah Aga Khan II (1881-1885), who also served as the pir during his father’s lifetime.

As the divinely-ordained successors and spiritual inheritors of the Prophet Muhammad, the Nizari Isma‘ili Imams have always been concerned for the welfare of all Muslims. But much of their time in the past centuries was spent trying to ensure their own survival and security and spiritual well-being of the Isma‘ili
Muslims through the heavy persecution, slaughters and massacres described above. Beginning with the Imamat of ‘Aga Ali Shah, the Nizari Isma‘ili Imams – no longer persecuted for their faith – were able to render immense services to Muslims of all persuasions and interpretations, beginning with the Muslims of India.

The growing prosperity of the Nizari Khoja community and his own policies earned Agha Khan II prestige among the Muslim population of India. He was elected president of a body called the Muhammadan National Association. In that position, which he held until his death, Agha Khan II promoted educational and philanthropic projects for the benefit of all Indian Muslims.

(Daftary, The Ismailis, 477)

1885 – Accession of Imam Sultan Muhammad Shah Aga Khan III

![Image of Agha Khan III and his associates](https://www.ismailignosis.com/content/uploads/2015/05/Aga-Khan-III-accession.jpg)
The 7-year-old Aga Khan III (1877 - 1957) at his enthronement ceremony as Imam of the Shia Ismaili Muslims in Bombay, 1st September 1885. He is surrounded by community elders and seated on the oblong wooden throne of imamate. (Photo by Keystone/Hulton Archive/Getty Images)

Imam Aga ‘Ali Shah Aga Khan II was succeeded by Imam Sultan Muhammad Shah Aga Khan III, who became the new Imam at the tender age of 7 years. Upon his installation, many of the members of the Community were distraught and concerned about the Imam being a small boy. To comfort his murids and remind them of his spiritual authority, the Imam Sultan Muhammad Shah proclaimed in his first address:

O Jamats, do not consider me small. I am the descendant of the Prophet and my grandfather is Hazrat ‘Amirul-Mu’minin (Hazrat ‘Ali) and my grandmother is Khatun-i-Jannat (Lady of Paradise) Hazrat Bibi Fatima. I am the Light (nur) of both Hazrat ‘Ali and the Holy Prophet (Muhammad). Though young in age, I am exalted.

Imam Sultan Muhammad Shah Aga Khan III,
(Bombay, September 1, 1899, in Steinberg, Ismaili Modern, 211)

Imam Sultan Muhammad Shah lived an illustrious life and his countless accomplishments exceed all enumeration. However, we will focus on how this Imam, the living manifestation of the Light (http://ismailignosis.com/2014/07/11/light-upon-light-glimpses-into-the-succession-of-the-shia-ismaili-imams/) of Muhammad and ‘Ali, rendered unprecedented services for the advocacy, security and well-being of ALL Muslims worldwide. This began when the Imam advocated for and represented the interests of the Indian Muslims before the British.
Meanwhile, the Aga Khan had increasingly concerned himself with the affairs of the Muslim community of India, beyond the immediate interests of his own followers. As a result, he gained much popularity amongst the Indian Muslims and their spokesmen. He participated actively in the first All-India Muslim Educational Conference, held at Bombay in 1903, and became the president of the second one, held at Delhi the following year. In 1906, he headed the Muslim delegation that met Lord Minto at Simla, asking the Viceroy to regard the Indian Muslims not as a minority but as a nation within a nation whose members deserved adequate representation on both local and legislative councils of the land. In 1907, he joined in the founding of the All-India Muslim League, and served as the permanent president of that body until he resigned from the position in 1912. Aga Khan III campaigned most energetically for various educational projects, for Khojas and other Indian Muslims. He played a leading part in the elevation of the Muhammadan Anglo-Oriental College at Aligarh to university status, a measure that came about in 1912.

(Daftary, The Ismailis, 482)

1907-1909 – Imam Sultan Muhammad Shah Advocates for Rights of Indian Muslims

During years of 1907-09, the Imam Sultan Muhammad Shah spared no effort to make sure that the Muslims of India received separate electorates to ensure proper and fair representation for the Indian Muslim minority.
In these two years he fought a running battle with the British Government and especially with John Morley, the Secretary of State for India, which was at times open warfare and at times guerilla action. With the dose support of Sayyid Ameer Ali, he nursed British public opinion by writing letters to The Times, using his contacts and friendships to influence men who were making decisions, organizing and using the platform of the London Muslim League to publicize his point of view, goading the All India Muslim League to persist in putting pressure on the Viceroy and the Government of India, writing articles in British journals, and employing all ways and means within his reach to finally make the British Government and Parliament concede separate electorates to the Muslims of India. Had the attempt failed later Indian history would probably have been different: some historians are prepared to argue that this was the first step which led, by stages, to the creation of Pakistan thirty-eight years later.

(Khursheed Kamal Aziz, Aga Khan III: Selected Speeches and Writings, Introduction, 12-13)

1910 – Imam Sultan Muhammad Shah Leads All-India Muslim League and Campaigns for Aligarh University

In the next year, 1910, the Imam Sultan Muhammad Shah delivered the first address of the All-India Muslim League, for which he was elected as the first President. Following this, the Imam went door to door among the houses of India to raise funds for the creation of Aligarh University.
The year 1910 was a very busy one for the Aga Khan. In January he gave the inaugural address at the annual session of the All India Muslim League in Delhi, which even today makes profitable reading. Later he spent several months in an exhausting tour of the subcontinent, taking the case for the creation of a Muslim university at Aligarh to the common man and collecting a very large sum of money for the purpose. The campaign was arduous, long and far-stretching; even Sir Sayyid Ahmad Khan had not travelled so extensively in his day on behalf of the MAO College. For the first time the issue of Muslim education was brought to the doorstep of virtually every middle-class home.

(Khursheed Kamal Aziz, Aga Khan III: Selected Speeches and Writings, Introduction, 13)

1914 – Imam Sultan Muhammad Shah Urges Turkey to Stay Neutral in World War I

When the First World War broke out, Imam Sultan Muhammad Shah wisely supported the British Allies and urged the Ottoman Empire to stay out of the fighting, reminding them that going to war on the side of the Germans did not serve Ottoman or Muslim interests. The Imam himself recounted this in his Memoirs:
As a Muslim I was most anxious that Turkey should be spared the trials and the horrors of renewed war, not against a ramshackle alliance of small Balkan states, but against the mighty combination of some of the greatest industrial and military nations in the world. The Turks had but lately emerged from their earlier ordeal; they were in desperate need of a breathing space; it seemed impossible that they could enter a new struggle and not face almost illimitable catastrophe.

Imam Sultan Muhammad Shah Aga Khan III,
(Memoirs of the Aga Khan, 120)

1916 – Imam Sultan Muhammad Shah Survives Assassination Attempt by German Agents

In 1916, the German agents assassinated the Imam’s cousin, Aga Farrokh Shah. At this time, Imam Sultan Muhammad Shah was ill and seeking medical help in Switzerland. The German Secret Service attempted to kill the Imam using a bomb and then poisoning his coffee.

In the same year, the Aga Khan lost a cousin in the pursuit of his pro-British policies during the war. He had despatched Aqa Farrukh Shah, the son of Aqa Akbar Shah (d. 1322/1904), on a pro-Allies political mission to the tribesmen and the Nizaris of Kirman, where he was murdered at the instigation of German agents. In 1917, the German agents evidently made an unsuccessful attempt on the life of the Aga Khan himself in Switzerland.

(Daftary, The Ismailis, 482)
The German Secret Service did not believe that I was really ill. They thought, however, that their country’s cause would be well served were I put out of the way for good. They arranged to have a bomb thrown at me; and to make the operation certain of success they also arranged, with typical German thoroughness, to have my breakfast coffee poisoned. The bomb did not go off; I did not drink the coffee.

Imam Sultan Muhammad Shah Aga Khan III,
(Memoirs of the Aga Khan, 217)

1919-1923 – Imam Sultan Muhammad Shah Intervenes with British for Just Treatment of Turkey

In the aftermath of World War I, Imam Sultan Muhammad Shah successfully intervened on behalf of Turkey and Muslims in general and caused the British to abandon an unfair treaty which treated the former Ottoman Empire with extreme unfairness.
The next four years were devoted to the twin problems of the future of Turkey and the khilafat. This was a repeat performance of what he had faced and achieved in 1907-9. His love of Islam was the connecting link. The future of Muslim India was at stake when the Morley-Minto reforms were being enacted into law. Now, after the war, it was the fortunes of Turkey which caused him untold anxiety and compelled him to fight another battle with the British Government. Once again with the support of Sayyid Ameer Ali, he mounted a two-pronged campaign. First, maximum pressure was put on Whitehall to treat Turkey justly in the post-war peace settlement and not to dismember its territories. All arguments from history, ethics, expediency and politics were marshalled. By turns he beseeched, warned and threatened the British Government. He used his friendship with Lord Beaverbrook and Lord Rothermere to turn the powerful voices (which soon grew into growls) of The Times, the Evening Standard and other newspapers against the official policy on Turkey... The humiliating and cruel Treaty of Sevres was annulled and replaced by the Treaty of Lausanne. The Aga Khan went to Lausanne in person in July 1923 to witness this triumph.

(Khursheed Kamal Aziz, Aga Khan III: Selected Speeches and Writings, Introduction, 14)

1923 – Imam Sultan Muhammad Shah Appeals to Save the Sunni Ottoman Caliphate

Having ensured that Turkey be treated fairly in the aftermath of the first World War, the forty-eight Shi‘i Isma‘ili Imam took an unprecedented step and campaigned for the safety of the Sunni Ottoman Caliphate. Only two decades earlier, the same
Ottoman Caliphate had been persecuting the Nizari Isma‘ilis of Syria and now the Isma‘ili Imam came to their rescue. This action was motivated by nothing else than the Isma‘ili Imam’s concern and affection for Islam and Muslims.

Imam Sultan Muhammad Shah with his partner Seyyed Ameer Ali in 1910
In spite of the fact that both he [Aga Khan III] and Ameer Ali were Shia by faith and therefore unable to acknowledge the religious status of the khilafat, the two statesmen, in an act of unmatched courage and rare foresight, wrote a long letter to the Turkish Prime Minister, Ismet Pasha (later Iniini), begging him in the name of the entire Muslim world, Shia and Sunni, and for the sake of the future of Islam, to keep the khilafat intact and thus allow Turkey to continue to command the spiritual esteem and allegiance of the world of Islam, and give every Muslim a centre to which he could look with confidence and affection.

(Khursheed Kamal Aziz, Aga Khan III: Selected Speeches and Writings, Introduction, 14)

It is surprising if not shocking that the hereditary Isma‘ili Imam exerted great energy and effort in trying to convince Turkey to not abolish the Ottoman Caliphate and depose the Sunni Caliph. In a 1923 Letter to the Turkish Prime Minster, Imam Sultan Muhammad Shah and Syed Ameer Ali (a Twelver Shi‘i) represented all Sunni Muslims and argued for the survival of the Sunni Caliphate:
What we respectfully urge is that the religious headship of the Sunni world should be maintained intact in accordance with the shariyyet. In our opinion, any diminution in the prestige of the Caliph or the elimination of the Caliphate as a religious factor from the Turkish body politic would mean the disintegration of Islam and its practical disappearance as a moral force in the world... In our opinion the Caliph-Imam symbolizes the unity of the Sunni Communion...and on this we believe, is the Ijmaa-i-Ummat that the Caliph, the vicegerent of the Prophet, is the Imam of the Sunni congregations, and that between him and the general body of worshippers, there is a nexus which knits together the Ahl-i Sunnat.

Imam Sultan Muhammad Shah Aga Khan III and Sayyed Ameer Ali, (“Appeal to Turkey to Retain the Khilafat” in K. K. Aziz, Aga Khan III: Selected Speeches and Writings, 771)

Thus, at a time when the Shi‘i Ismaili Imam enjoyed security and global prominence and the Sunni Caliphate was on the verge of extinction, the Isma‘ili Imam fought for the continuation and survival of this most important and sacred institution of Sunni Islam. This is incredibly striking given that the Isma‘ili Imams and their followers had been persecuted, slaughtered, massacred and targeted for genocide by the Umayyad, ‘Abbasid, and Ottoman Caliphs since the death of the Prophet Muhammad. But the Imam Sultan Muhammad Shah put aside all of these legitimate grievances over the past injustices and instead defended and upheld the Caliphate of Sunni Islam. In another letter to the London Times, Imam Sultan Muhammad Shah explained how it was his pure love for Islam and the unity of Muslims that motivated his appeal to maintain the Sunni Caliphate:
This desire is in no sense inconsistent with another life-long belief as one who, while belonging to the Ismailiah school of Islam, yet follows the tradition of Ali and Hassan, his eldest – viz., that the essential unity of Islam is of far greater importance than any sectarian differences. For this reason I have advocated the establishment of a strong Caliphate above parties and politics.

Imam Sultan Muhammad Shah Aga Khan III,
(“Appeal to Turkey to Retain the Khilafat” in K. K. Aziz, Aga Khan III: Selected Speeches and Writings, 773)

1928-1934: Imam Sultan Muhammad Shah Leads Indian Muslim Independence Movement

A decade later, Imam Sultan Muhammad Shah organized and mobilized the Indian Muslims, resulting in the creation of the All-India Muslim Conference where the Imam delivered the first address. This would lead to the independence movement for both India and Pakistan. Imam Sultan Muhammad Shah led the Muslim delegation, accompanied by Muhammad Ali Jinnah who hailed from an Isma‘ili family, to the Round Table Conferences that took place in London in the 1930 and 1931.
Imam Sultan Muhammad Shah and Jinnah at the Round Table Conference 1931

In 1928 he presided over the All-India Muslim Conference held at Delhi, which was to formulate Muslim views on how independence should evolve for India. Under his guidance, the assembly demanded guaranteed rights for Indian Muslims in the framework of a federal and self-governing India. In 1930, he led the Muslim delegation to the first Round Table Conference that was convened in London to consider the future of India. Muhammad Ali Jinnah, who came from a Khoja family and later became the founder of the state of Pakistan, was amongst the other members of this Muslim delegation. In the course of the second Round Table Conference, held in London in 1931, Aga Khan III had lengthy discussion sessions with Mahatma Gandhi who was then the sole representative of the Congress Party. These conferences, lasting until 1934, marked the climax of the Aga Khan’s involvement in Indian politics.

(Daftary, The Ismailis, 482)
But even more important than these conclaves were the private meetings and negotiations in which the principal issues were meticulously debated. The crucial talks took place between the Aga Khan (aided by Sir Muhammad Shafi, M. Jinnah, Zafrullah Khan and Dr Shafa’at Ahmad Khan) and M. K. Gandhi (accompanied by Mrs Sarojini Naidu) in the Aga Khan’s suite in the Ritz Hotel.

(Khursheed Kamal Aziz, Aga Khan III: Selected Speeches and Writings, Introduction, 16)

1937 – Imam Sultan Muhammad Shah Elected President of the League of Nations

Imam Sultan Muhammad Shah and Gandhi outside the Ritz Hotel
Since 1932, Imam Sultan Muhammad Shah served as India’s Delegate at the Assembly of the League of Nations. When Afghanistan joined the League of Nations, the Imam boldly proclaimed: “India is proud of her Eastern culture, Eastern traditions, Eastern language, Eastern civilisation and with Afghanistan, eighty million Muslims of India are proud, I am proud to belong to the Glorious Brotherhood of Islam.” On September 13, 1937, the forty-eight hereditary Imam of the Isma‘ili Muslims – whose pure ancestors along with their followers endured centuries of mass persecution – was unanimously elected as the President of the League of Nations. This event marked an unprecedented moment in human history where the Imam of the time literally presided over the Nations of the earth. It was also a public triumph for all Muslims when a Muslim and a direct descendant of the Prophet Muhammad was globally recognized.
One of the Muslim delegates of the League, Shaykh Mushir Hosain, provides the below eyewitness account of the Imam Sultan Muhammad Shah’s presence in the League of Nations:

The Hall was full with peoples of different nationalities professing different religions. The members of the League itself belonged to over fifty different nationalities. They were all educated, talented men representing their respective Governments. But none was more cultured or enlightened than His Highness the Aga Khan who had assimilated all that was best in the Eastern as well as in the Western culture. He, indeed, was most cultured of them all. In the presence of so many learned persons who claimed to represent nations scattered all over the world stood up a man – a responsible, thoroughly educated, well-experienced, well-travelled, well-polished man, a gentleman, a nobleman, respected by one and all, – and he proclaimed at the top of his voice that he was proud to belong to the Glorious Brotherhood of Islam. The bold announcement was thrilling. The occasion when it was made was thrilling. The Aga Khan’s words raised the prestige of Islam in an assembly which was almost prejudiced against it. I was overjoyed. I am a man hard to bend before anybody – not even “before a king”. But I would gladly bow before a man who spoke from his heart those thrilling words.
In his October 6, 1937 Address to the League of Nations, Imam Sultan Muhammad Shah’s summarized his vision and concern for the well-being and unity of humankind:
Indeed, all the problems that fall to the League of Nations may be ultimately reduced to one – that of man, and the dignity of man. It is in that sense that the work of the League assumes its true significance and acquires its permanent value. The tribulations of one people are the tribulations of all. That which weakens one weakens all. That which is a gain to one is surely a gain to all. This is no empty ideal. It is a veritable compass to guide aright the efforts of statesmen in every country and of all men of good will who, desiring the good of their own people, desire the good of the whole world.

>Imam Sultan Muhammad Shah Aga Khan III,  
(Adjournment Speech  

1954 – Platinum Jubilee: Imam Sultan Muhammad Shah Shah prays for the forgiveness of all Muslims
In Imam Sultan Muhammad Shah’s Platinum Jubilee Address made on February 3, 1954 in Karachi, he told the gathering of Isma‘ili Muslims to be firm in the tenets of the Isma‘ili interpretation of Islam while remembering to implore God to forgive the sins of all Muslims.

From the religious point of view, though you [Ismailis] must firmly stick to the tenets of your Faith, yet, you should not forget what I have always considered the most beautiful of all Muslim prayers namely, that Allah Almighty in His infinite mercy may forgive the sins of all Muslims.

Imam Sultan Muhammad Shah Aga Khan III,
(Platinum Jubilee Address, Karachi, February 4, 1954)

1955 – Imam Sultan Muhammad Shah Proclaims the “Final Reconciliation between Shia and Sunni Doctrines”
The Imami Ismailis maintain that the position of the ‘Ulu’l-amr Menkom never dies out and this succession goes on till the Day of Judgement on Earth. For this reason Ismailis celebrate the exceptionally long Imamat as they would celebrate every ascension to the spiritual throne of the Imamat in each century. In the present Imamat, the final reconciliation between the Shia and Sunni doctrines has been publicly proclaimed by myself on exactly the same lines as Hazrat Ali did at the death of the Prophet and during the first thirty years after that. The political and worldly Khalifat was accepted by Hazrat Ali in favour of the three first Khalifs voluntarily and with goodwill for the protection of the interests of the Muslims throughout the world. We Ismailis now in the same spirit [as Hazrat Ali had done] accept the Khalifat of the first Khalifs and such other Khalifs as during the last thirteen centuries helped the cause of Islam, politically, socially and from a worldly point of view. On the other hand, the Spiritual Imamat remained with Hazrat Ali, and remains with his direct descendants always alive till the Day of Judgement. That a spiritual succession to the Imamat makes the Imam the ‘Ulu’l-amr Menkom always according to the Qur’an and though he has his moral claim to the Khalifat as well, always he can, like Hazrat Ali himself owing to the conditions of the world, accept and support such worldly authorities as the Imam believes help the cause of Islam. Thus a final reconciliation without upsetting either Sunni or Shia doctrine has been proclaimed always by me as the faith of all the Ismailis.

Imam Sultan Muhammad Shah Aga Khan III,
Twentieth Century – Present – “From a Single Soul” – The Pluralist Vision of Imam Aga Khan IV

I know of no more beautiful expression about the unity of our human race, born indeed from a single soul.” (Imam Shah Karim al-Husayni Aga Khan IV)
Imam Sultan Muhammad Shah Aga Khan III passed away on July 11, 1957 and was succeeded by Imam Shah Karim al-Husayni Aga Khan IV, the 49th hereditary Imam. He is the present and living Imam of the Shi‘i Isma‘ili Muslims and the living claimant to the hereditary Shi‘i Imamat.

1957 – Imam Shah Karim al-Husayni Aga Khan IV Works to Improve Quality of Life for all People

The focus of this final section will be on how the present Imam Shah Karim al-Husayni has devoted his Imamat and life to uplifting the quality of life of not only the Isma‘ilis but all communities.

When I assumed the responsibilities of the Imamat in 1957, I was eager — as I still am — to see that the countries where my followers live are sound and stable, that they are countries with clear development horizons, countries where, following my grandfather’s example, I could help to underwrite the integrity of the state and to contribute to improving the quality of life for all communities, not just my own. I hoped to help bridge the gulf between the developed and the developing worlds. This aspiration, I felt, was particularly appropriate to the Imamat because of its commitment to broad social objectives without political connotations, save in its concern for the fundamental freedom of its followers to practise the faith of their choice.

Imam Shah Karim al-Husayni Aga Khan IV
(Dinner hosted by the Council for Malaysia and Singapore, Singapore – January 9, 1983)

1967 – Imam Establishes the Aga Khan Development Network as embodying the Ethics of Islam
The present Imam established the Aga Khan Development Network in 1967 (initially called the Aga Khan Foundation) to raise the quality of life of all human beings and to manifest the Ethics of Islam through institutional endeavour. The central goal of the AKDN is to uphold the dignity of every human being as the vicegerent of God on earth and to relieve all peoples of suffering. In this respect, the AKDN is a living manifestation of the vision that Imam Sultan Muhammad Shah articulated as President of the League of Nations in 1937.
The ethics of Islam enjoin all believers, individually or through institutions such as the Ismaili Imamat, to assist the poor, the isolated, and the marginalised to improve their current circumstances and future prospects. Through the Imamat, I have tried to respond to this responsibility by creating a group of private, non-denominational agencies the Aga Khan Development Network – to respond to the needs and potential of people living in some of the poorest parts of the world, irrespective of their gender, ethnicity, or religion.

Imam Shah Karim al-Husayni Aga Khan IV,
We are honouring an exceptional man. We are honouring a great friend of humanity, a courageous visionary, a builder of bridges between religions and society."

(His Excellency Dr. Frank Walter Steinmeier, German Foreign Minister, on presenting the 2006 Tolerance Award of the Evangelical Academy of Tutzing, Germany – May 20, 2006)

Imam Shah Karim al-Husayni has been widely recognized for his efforts in providing spiritual guidance and material assistance to the Isma‘ilis, who are today spread over 25 countries, and for his vast contributions to human quality of life in various communities worldwide:

- 28 Title and State Decorations;
- 21 honorary degrees, from universities representing the US Ivy League, Canadian Group of 13, UK’s Russell Group, and others;
- 16 civic honours, representing 9 investures as Foreign Member to several state academies (for the creation of new knowledge – promoting research and stimulating the enhancement of thought, literature, language and other forms of national culture) and 3 Leadership posts at influential European Institutions to promote diplomacy, culture and development;
- 30 awards spanning domains such as architecture and the built environment, restoration and the revival of culture, education, health, diplomacy and peace, philanthropy, sports, corporate enterprise
- delivered over 70 high profile keynote addresses issued by 11 different National Philatelic Societies to mark the Aga Khan’s significant events and milestone.
Graphic timeline of awards and honours accorded to Imam Shah Karim al-Husayni Aga Khan IV. Click on image to download high resolution PDF from NanoWisdoms.

In most of his public addresses, speeches and interviews, the Isma‘ili Imam of the time has risen to the defense of all Muslims and called on the Western leaders to gain a better understanding of Muslim world. In one address delivered to the Commonwealth Press Union at Cape Town, Imam Shah Karim al-Husayni chastised Western journalists for their irresponsible media treatment of Muslims:
I refer to the superficial and misleading way in which much of the world’s media treats the world of Islam. Muslims now constitute nearly a quarter of the world’s people. They comprise a majority of the population in some 44 countries and no less than 435 million live in the Commonwealth. And yet, this vast and varied group is often viewed by the rest of the world as a standardised, homogeneous mass. If asked to characterise Islam, many non-Muslims would have little to say, except perhaps that the world of Islam seems to them a distant and different world, a strange and mysterious place, a world which makes them a bit uncomfortable, and perhaps even a bit afraid… Unfortunately, much of what the world thinks about Islam nowadays has been the result of crisis reporting. When terms like Shia and Sunni first entered the world’s vocabulary, for example, it was in the emotional context of revolutionary Iran. Similarly, recent press references to the Shari’a, the traditional Islamic system of jurisprudence, are illustrated by its manifestations in Afghanistan. Journalists learn to use these words — but how many of them know what they really mean?

Imam Shah Karim al-Husayni Aga Khan IV,

In his 1996 Baccalaureate Address at Brown University, where the Imam was the first Muslim to give such an address, the Imam represented and advocated for the entire world of Islam and called upon the West to improve its understanding of Islamic history and civilization.
This makes the occasion a very special honour for me. It also carries the considerable, even intimidating responsibility to speak about the place of Islam and of Muslims in the world today, about their hopes and aspirations, and about the challenges that they face. It is also my responsibility, and indeed a pleasure for me, to speak about what might be done, and some things that are being done, to respond to these challenges. My position, since 1957 as Imam of the Shia Ismaili Muslims bears no political mandate, it is an independent one from which I can speak to you openly. Today in the occident, the Muslim world is deeply misunderstood by most. The West knows little about its diversity, about the religion or the principles which unite it, about its brilliant past or its recent trajectory through history... Against this worrying global background it must be made utterly clear that in so far as Islam is concerned, this violence is not a function of the faith itself, as much as the media would have you believe. This is a mis-perception which has become rampant, but which should not be endowed with any validity, nor should it be accepted and given credibility.”

Imam Shah Karim al-Husayni Aga Khan IV,
(Brown University Commencement Address, May 26, 1996, Read on NanoWisdoms (http://www.nanowisdoms.org/nwblog/5089/))

2014 – Imam Shah Karim al-Husayni Addresses the Parliament of Canada

On February 27, 2014, Imam Shah Karim al-Husayni became the first Muslim faith leader to address the Parliament and Senate of Canada. In this historic public address, the hereditary Imam of the Isma‘ili Muslims boldly declared himself as the successor to the Prophet Muhammad, the rightful authority for the interpretation of Islam, and the only remaining living Imam of the Shi‘a Muslims (see this Timeline
for a summary of the divisions and lineages of the Shi‘a Imamat (http://ismailignosis.com/2014/11/06/the-shia-imamat-a-timeline-of-major-divisions-and-developments/)).

The Aga Khan, spiritual leader of the Ismaili Muslims, is applauded as he arrives to deliver an address in the House of Commons on Parliament Hill in Ottawa on Thursday, February 27, 2014. THE CANADIAN PRESS/Sean Kilpatrick ORG XMIT: POS20140222714475975
The Ismaili Imamat is a supra-national entity, representing the succession of Imams since the time of the Prophet. But let me clarify something more about the history of that role, in both the Sunni and Shia interpretations of the Muslim faith. The Sunni position is that the Prophet nominated no successor, and that spiritual-moral authority belongs to those who are learned in matters of religious law. As a result, there are many Sunni imams in a given time and place. But others believed that the Prophet had designated his cousin and son-in-law, Ali, as his successor. From that early division, a host of further distinctions grew up, but the question of rightful leadership remains central. In time, the Shia were also sub-divided over this question, so that today the Ismailis are the only Shia community who, throughout history, have been led by a living, hereditary Imam in direct descent from the Prophet.

Imam Shah Karim al-Husayni Aga Khan IV,

(Address to both Houses of the Parliament of Canada, February 27, 2014, Read on NanoWisdoms (http://www.nanowisdoms.org/nwblog/10724/))

**Conclusion: Past Persecution to Present Pluralism**
The Present Imam embodies the history and memory of the previous Imams and the murids of their times.

“Often persecuted and oppressed, the faith of my ancestors was never destroyed; at times it flourished as in the epoch of the Fatimite Khalifs, at times it was obscure and little understood.” (Imam Sultan Muhammad Shah Aga Khan III)

It is indeed remarkable and immensely moving to see how the Shi‘i Isma‘ili Muslim lineage of hereditary Imams of the Ahl al-Bayt of the Prophet and their devoted followers, have gone from being oppressed, persecuted, hunted down, murdered, slaughtered, and massacred in centuries past, to becoming a modern, progressive,
and pluralistic community in the present. The historian Wladimir Ivanov, upon first meeting the Nizari Isma‘ilis of Iran, was simply shocked that the Community still existed.

My learned friends in Europe plainly disbelieved me when I wrote about the [Ismaili] community to them. It appeared to them quite unbelievable that the most brutal persecution, wholesale slaughter, age-long hostility and suppression were unable to annihilate the community. Only later on, however, when my contact with them grew more intimate, was I able to see the reasons for such surprising vitality. It was their quite extraordinary devotion and faithfulness to the tradition of their ancestors, the ungrudging patience with which they suffered all the calamities and misfortunes, cherishing no illusions whatsoever as to what they could expect in life... They with amazing care and devotion kept through ages burning that ‘light’, mentioned in the Koran, which God always protects against all attempts of His enemies to extinguish It.

(Wladimir Ivanov, My First Meeting with the Ismailis in Persia, Ilm 3, no. 3 (December 1977): 16–17)

The survival of the Isma‘ili Imamat and Community was due to their sheer faith and devotion to the truth of the Imamat. As Imam Sultan Muhammad Shah notes, the past atrocities and hardships – no matter how brutal – were never able to extinguish the Isma‘ili Muslim faith:
Often persecuted and oppressed, the faith of my ancestors was never destroyed; at times it flourished as in the epoch of the Fatimite Khalifs, at times it was obscure and little understood.

Imam Sultan Muhammad Shah Aga Khan III,
(Memoirs of the Aga Khan – Islam: The Religion of My Ancestors, Read on NanoWisdoms (http://www.nanowisdoms.org/nwblog/1225/))

In one of the great ironies of human history, one must note that great powers who consistently persecuted and tried to wipe the Isma‘ili Muslims out of existence are the ones that no longer exist today: the Umayyads, the ‘Abbasids, the Saljuqs, the Ayyubids, the Mongols, the Timurids, and the Safawids, are physically no more and only remain in the pages of history books. Meanwhile, the Isma‘ili Imams, present and living in the world of today, work tirelessly to ensure the welfare of all Muslims, and uplift quality of life for all peoples of the world. In an interesting turn of fate, the Imams are actually restoring the intellectual and cultural heritage of the past Muslim Caliphates and dynasties once responsible for persecuting them. Indeed, it is the unity of the human race which motives the work of all the Imams and especially present and living Imam, Mawlana Shah Karim al-Husayni Aga Khan IV as he explains:
Let me end with a personal thought. As you build your lives, for yourselves and others, you will come to rest upon certain principles. Central to my life has been a verse in the Holy Qur’an which addresses itself to the whole of humanity. It says: ‘O’ Mankind, fear your Lord, who created you of a Single Soul, and from it created its mate, and from the pair of them scattered abroad many men and women...’ I know of no more beautiful expression about the unity of our human race, born indeed from a single soul.

Imam Shah Karim al-Husayni Aga Khan IV,
(Address to both Houses of the Parliament of Canada, February 27, 2014, Read on NanoWisdoms (http://www.nanowisdoms.org/nwblog/10724/))

Today, the Isma‘ili Imams and the Community have emerged from the veil of taqiyyah and emerged into the light of the cycle of qiyamah (http://ismailignosis.com/2012/12/24/esoteric-apocalypse-qiyamah-ismaili-muslim-perspectives-on-the-end-of-the-world-part-1/). The Imam, in exercising the office of supreme hujjah or pir in addition to the Imamat, now enunciates his Imamat before the entire world. Every Isma‘ili Muslim, to the best of one’s ability, must follow suit by being an “ambassador” in the way Prince Sadruddin had described:
I want you to be active ambassadors. I want you to explain to your Canadian friends, to your neighbors, to the people that you work with, that you live with, the people that entertain you, or that you will be entertaining, what you are, where you come from, about your traditions, about your culture, about your religion, about the way in which the community functions...Explain the role of the Imam, not only his religious functions but also the economic and social advice that you receive from the Imam and what has happened to the community as a result of its unity in other parts of the world.

Prince Sadruddin Aga Khan,
(Vancouver, Canada, January 22, 1975)

In a message sent to the Isma‘ili Muslims when he was just twelve years old, Prince Sadruddin wrote the following inspiring words:

The future of the Ismaili Faith rests in the hands of the youths of your age and mine. Are we to follow the example of those, who in Egypt, Iran and Sind raised the flag of Ismaili Imams high enough for the world to see its glory? I say, ‘Yes’. We should not fail where our ancestors achieved glorious success.

Prince Sadruddin Aga Khan

Indeed, the Isma‘ili Imams will continue to be present and living in the world until the end of time as the fulfillment of God’s covenant with humanity to provide His guidance in every age. This is why the present Imam Shah Karim al-Husayni Aga Khan IV has explained how he is but “a link in a chain” which shall continue in the next Imam and all of the Imams to come:
The Imam is a transitory being, who forms a link between the past and the future. For this reason, ensuring the continuity of the institution and its ability to fulfill its role is what my life is all about.

Imam Shah Karim al-Husayni Aga Khan IV,
(Translation, Paris Match Interview No. 2907, February 3, 2005. Read on NanoWisdoms (http://www.nanowisdoms.org/nwblog/7190/))
When you inherit an office, which is a life office, you are simply a link in the chain. And you therefore look at life somewhat differently than if you were, I suppose, a professional who moves around and is free to do what he wishes. Now some things are impossible to achieve. I well know that. And if that is the case, I simply have to try and move the issues forward as much as I can. The next Imam will then decide how he wishes to handle the issues. But, it is the continuum which is at the back of my mind. And that’s why perhaps my time dimension appears different than it might for other people.

Imam Shah Karim al-Husayni Aga Khan IV,