



The Institute of Ismaili Studies

## Nizari

[Professor Azim Nanji](#)

**The [Nizari](#) or more properly the Nizari Isma‘ili Muslims, like other Shi‘i communities, acknowledge ‘Ali as [imam](#) after the Prophet. The Nizari Ismailis have continued to give allegiance to imams descended from Imam ‘Ali, on the basis of the principle of designation ([nass](#)) by the imam of the time. As of 2002, His Highness the [Aga Khan](#), Shah Karim al-Hussaini, is the forty-ninth hereditary imam of the Nizari Ismailis.**

Following the decline of the Fatimid Ismaili dynasty and the death of Imam-[caliph](#) al-Mustansir Billah in 1094 CE, one group of [Isma‘ilis](#) continued to give allegiance to the previously designated imam, al-Nizar (hence their name), and moved their headquarters to Iran and Syria, where they established independent principalities. Though under constant threat, their centres flourished under the imams as important places of learning, international trade, and diplomacy for almost two hundred years, before being destroyed during the Mongol invasion of the thirteenth century.

Faced with new challenges of reorganisation, often in the face of hostile opposition, the [Nizaris](#) gained control of several strategically located mountain centres in Iran and Syria led, respectively, by Hassan-i Sabbah and Rashid [al-din](#) Sinan, two leading dais (representatives of the imam) of the time. These provided defensible centres from where to organise a decentralised and scattered community. They were contentiously attacked by successive [Seljuk](#) rulers but were able to offer strong defence from their inaccessible castles. One legend that labelled them “assassins,” which was developed by their enemies and embellished by Marco Polo, became current in popular writings. However, modern scholarship has shown these stories to be largely fabrications that owed more to religious bigotry, prejudice, and sheer invention than historical reality.

During the next five centuries after the destruction of the centres in Iran in 1258 CE, the Nizaris, though scattered and often persecuted, sustained their religious, intellectual, and community traditions in Iran, Syria, Central Asia, and the Indian subcontinent. They maintained contacts



The Institute of Ismaili Studies

with the imam of the time living in Iran, and they further developed the Ismaili intellectual heritage in Arabic, Persian, and the vernacular Central Asian and Indian languages that has survived in written as well as oral forms.

In the nineteenth century, the Nizari Isma‘ili imamat moved from Iran to India and then to Europe. Many followers migrated in the latter half of the nineteenth century to Africa and in the late twentieth century to Europe and North America where they have also been joined by a small number of Nizari Isma‘ilis migrating from Afghanistan, Iran, and Syria. In the early twenty-first century, this community of diverse backgrounds is found in five continents and some thirty countries.

The imamat (office of the imam) and the heritage of Islam, as expressed within Nizari Ismaili Shi‘ism, continues to be at the heart of the modern emergence of the community. It is guided in the respective national contexts by a Constitution that brings a common pattern of practice and governance, and a strong ethos of voluntarism and development in social, educational, and economic spheres. Spiritual and devotional life is maintained in the Jamatkhana, spaces of gathering, in each major place of Ismaili settlement, which in some cases are buildings of outstanding Muslim design and architecture.

### **Bibliography**

Nanji, Azim. *The Nizari Ismaili Tradition in the Indo-Pakistan Subcontinent*. New York: Caravan Books, 1978

Jamal, Nadia Eboo. *Surviving the Mongols: Nizari Quhistani and the Continuity of Ismaili Tradition in Persia*. London: I.B. Tauris, 2002

This is an edited version of an article that was originally published in the *Encyclopaedia of Islam and Muslim World*, Vol. II, p.511-512, ed. Richard C. Martin, MacMillan Reference Books, New York, 2003