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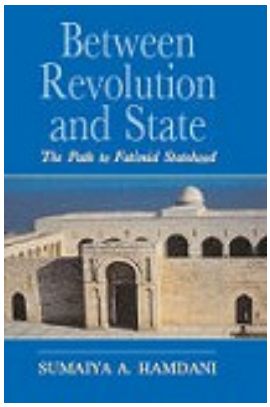

Between Revolution and State:
The Path to Fatimid Statehood

By Sumaiya A. Hamdani

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To view Shi'ism merely as a consequence of political fragmentation and a reflection of ideological rigidity in Islam, however, is to ignore other causes for the disintegration of the empire under the 'Abbasids, and to assume that the process of ideological crystallization in Islam was a straightforward movement completed by the 4th/10th century.

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Introduction

Al-Qadi al-Nu'man, characterised as "the greatest Ismaili jurist of all time" is undeniably one of the most outstanding figures in Ismaili history. From about the year 312/924 until his death in 363/974, al-Qadi al-Nu'man served the first four Fatimid Imam-caliphs in various capacities. During his half a century of service to the Fatimids, he produced numerous important legal works, among which the *Da'a'im al-Islam* (*The Pillars of Islam*) commissioned by the fourth Fatimid Imam-caliph, al-Mu'izz li-Din Allah (d. 365/975), became the official code of the Fatimid state and remains the greatest authority on Ismaili law for the Tayyibi Ismailis, including the Ismaili Bohras of India, today. Apart from works on law, al-Qadi al-Nu'man wrote numerous works on history, the esoteric interpretation of scripture (*ta'wil*), biographies of the Fatimid Imam-caliphs, protocol and a broad range of other subjects.

Al-Mu'izz li-Din Allah, during whose reign al-Nu'man produced most of his works, regarded the latter as the religious scholar (*'alim*) upon whom it was incumbent to make knowledge manifest (Hamdani, 64). Al-Nu'man re-articulated pre-Fatimid Ismaili teachings which had expressed revolutionary and exclusivist ideologies and realigned them for the purposes of the multi-confessional Fatimid state and its inclusive policies. This was a significant transformation which accompanied the transition from the earlier revolutionary period of concealment (*satr*) to the era of manifestation (*zuhur*). This transition occurred during the North African phase of Fatimid history (297-358/909-969).

Although this critical period has attracted the attention of numerous scholars and many articles and books have recently been written on it, no one has focussed on al-Qadi al-Nu'man's role in the Fatimid transition from a revolutionary movement to statehood.

Sumaiya Hamdani redresses this issue in her eminently readable and well-researched work, *Between Revolution and State: The Path to Fatimid State* by exploring the crucial role of al-Qadi al-Nu'man's exoteric (*zahiri*) works in "the transition from revolution (*da'wa*) to state (*dawla*), or from a Shi'i opposition movement to an Islamic empire" (Hamdani, xxvi). *Between Revolution and State* is an insightful analysis of al-Nu'man's *Da'a'im al-Islam* (Pillars of Islam), *Ikhtilaf usul al-madhahib* (Differences Among the Schools of Law), *Kitab iftitah al-da'wa wa-ibtida' al-dawla* (The Beginning of the Mission and Establishment of the State), *Kitab al-majalis wa'l-musayarat* (The Book of Sessions and Excursions) and *Kitab al-himma fi adab atba' al-a'imma* (The Book of Etiquette Necessary for the Followers of the Imams) (Hamdani, xxvi). In studying these works, Hamdani considers the scope and role of the Fatimids within the broader context of Islamic history and thought.

Structure and Content of the Book

The book is divided into five chapters with an introduction and a conclusion. In the introduction entitled, 'The Fatimids and the Ismaili Shi'i Century', readers are provided with a general overview of the political and ideological milieu of the 4th/10th century, which some scholars have categorised as a period of political fragmentation under Abbasid rule and a time of rupture in the Islamic community. Hamdani does not accept this explanation and argues that this view is in part the result of scholars' focus on presenting Sunni Islam as normative, consequently, marginalising Shi'i Islam. She argues that if Shi'ism is viewed as a mere consequence of political fragmentation, other significant causes for the disintegration of the Abbasid empire are cast aside. She also challenges the view that the process of ideological crystallization in Islam was completed by the 4th/10th century and argues that the canonisation of religious and legal traditions evolved over a longer period of time.

The Fatimids contested with the Abbasids over the leadership of the Muslim world. By examining the establishment of the Fatimid state, *Between Revolution and State* offers an exploration in which the role of Shi'ism within the multiple interpretations of Islam could be re-examined and better appreciated. Seen in this perspective, the Fatimid experience is the culmination of a historical process.

After a brief survey of the origins of Shi'ism and its analysis in the evolving political and religious contexts, the author proceeds to discuss works on the Fatimids by modern scholars. She argues that although many scholars have published works on the history of Ismaili communities and complemented our knowledge of Fatimid doctrines, economy, society, institutions, military organisations, etc., assessing the place or role of Ismaili Shi'ism within the broader context of Islamic history and thought has been largely eschewed. Although many Fatimid texts have been discovered and numerous studies have been devoted to them, Hamdani states that, "little attention has been given to assessing them, as part of the Fatimid effort to consolidate power and make the transition from a revolutionary state, or from a Shi'i opposition movement to rulers of an Islamic empire" (Hamdani, xxvi).

Towards the end of the Introduction, the author states that in the revolutionary period the Fatimid mission (*da'wa*) relied on the Shi'i doctrine of imams in concealment. However, after coming to power, the Fatimid state (*dawla*) needed new legitimizing narratives which resulted in an important re-articulation of the Ismaili doctrine of *imama*, or rule of the Fatimid imams from the *Ahl al-Bayt* (People of the House, i.e. household of the Prophet), that was intended to provide a universalist basis for the Fatimid rule. She reiterates that these narratives were legitimised by al-Qadi al-Nu'man.

From Revolution to State

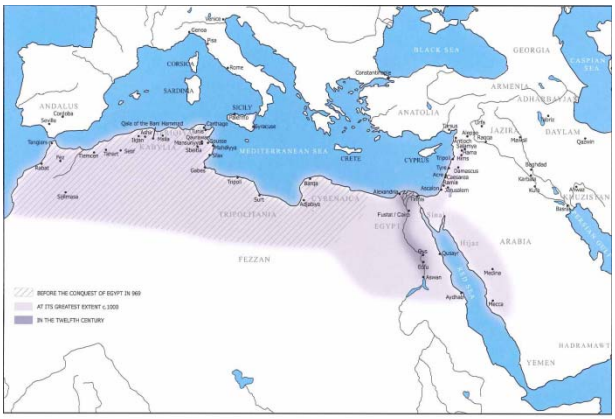
The first chapter, entitled, "From Revolution to State", reviews the origins and history of the early Ismailis until the establishment of the Fatimid state in North Africa in the 4th/10th century. This overview provides the

background necessary for understanding the circumstances that resulted in the *zahiri* literature of the North African period. It provides information on the major events that brought the Fatimids to power. The chapter begins with the succession crisis after the death of the Imam Ja'far al-Sadiq in 148/765. Hamdani reminds us that the group who supported the imamate of Muhammad, the son of Isma'il b. Ja'far al-Sadiq, eventually emerged as the nascent Ismaili community. Relying on the authority of renowned scholars of Ismaili history, she presents the subsequent history of the Ismailis, who survived in rather obscure circumstances before 'Abd Allah al-Mahdi claimed the imamate in 286/899 and was proclaimed the first Fatimid caliph in 297/909.

As the chapter progresses, the author examines the activities of the Ismaili *da'i* Abu 'Abd Allah al-Shi'i in North Africa focussing on his religious and political achievements. The chapter briefly mentions Imam al-Mahdi's escape from Syria to the Maghrib, where he was placed under house arrest at Sijilmasa, his subsequent rescue and the foundation of the Fatimid state in 296/909 at Raqqada, in modern day Tunisia.

A number of reasons for the success of the Fatimids in North Africa are explored in the remaining parts of the chapter, among which the measures taken by Da'i Abu 'Abd Allah to persuade the people of the region to adopt his cause are noteworthy.

Using a number of Sunni sources, Hamdani demonstrates how Sunni notables in major cities such as Qayrawan blessed and congratulated Imam 'Abd Allah al-Mahdi at his accession to the caliphate and sought his protection. However, threatened by Fatimid rule and the position of the Imam as the source of religious and political authority, local Sunni leaders who had enjoyed a more favourable position under the Aghlabid dynasty, which ruled prior to the Fatimids, were hostile. As the Fatimids ruled as a minority religious group over a Sunni majority, they devised a more pluralistic religious policy. As Hamdani observes, the Fatimids institutionalised the principle of religious freedom and developed a public (*zahiri*) discourse acceptable to the Sunni majority. At the same time esoteric (*batini*) principles continued to be disseminated to the Ismaili community.



2. Map of North Africa and south-west Asia showing sites mentioned in the text as well as the Fatimid realm

Map of North Africa and south-west Asia showing sites mentioned in the text as well as the Fatimid realm in *Arts of the City Victorious: Islamic Art and Architecture in Fatimid North Africa and Egypt* by Jonathan M Bloom, p. 2.

From Batin to Zahir

The second chapter examines the socio-political environment that informed al-Nu'man's writings. Hamdani briefly reviews the period of concealment (*satr*), which began with Imam Muhammad b. Isma'il's disappearance, and discusses the necessity of the Imam's manifestation (*zuhur*) before identifying several challenges that Imam 'Abd Allah al-Mahdi had to confront upon his succession. These challenges were dealt with through subtle changes to messianic expectations, genealogical disclosures and the removal of political and religious opposition.

The chapter moves on to explore several debates between Sunni communities, both Malikis and Hanafis, and members of the Ismaili *da'wa*. It contends that in asserting the legitimacy of the Fatimids, the *da'is* did not refer to the messianic arguments of the *satr* period, but grounded their debates in the commonly accepted *hadiths,* Qur'an and historical events such as Ghadir Khumm. The debates show that the *da'wa* "found it necessary to structure its inquiry around issues

and questions of *usul al-fiqh* and the history of the first Islamic state, as distinct from the more spiritual and esoteric concerns reflected in, say, the *Kitab al-'alim wa'l-ghulam* of Ja'far b. Mansur al-Yaman in order to ensure that the political authority of the Fatimid state was accepted" (Hamdani, 46).

The next three chapters look at al-Nu'man's *zahiri* works. The author states that these works "represent three genres of literature that are quintessentially *zahiri* in nature…the *Da'a'im…*is an example of *fiqh*, the *Majalis…*is a compilation of *hadiths…*and the *Kitab al-himma,* is a manual of duties and conventions of obedience to the imam" (Hamdani, 53). Each of these provides an insight into how *batini* issues came to be addressed in a *zahiri* context.

The *Zahiri* Framework

The third chapter explores central themes in al-Nu'man's *Da'a'im al-Islam*, which express the Fatimid policy of conciliation and ideological accommodation of Sunni and other Shi'i communities with a view to establish a consensus for the legitimacy of the Fatimid state. Hamdani reviews the attempts of the Fatimid Imam-caliph al-Mu'izz, who commissioned the *Da'a'im,* to accommodate dissident Ismailis within his community. The chapter on *walaya*, represents, "the culmination of the development of al-Nu'man's legal thought and reflect[s]…the transition from Shi'i revolution to a major Islamic state" (Hamdani, 63).

In discussing the rightful claim of Imam 'Ali b. Abi Talib and his descendants to the leadership of the community he uses arguments rooted in Qur'anic verses, Prophetic *hadiths*, historical evidence and *hadiths* from Imams Ali b. Abi Talib, Muhammad al-Baqir and Ja'far al-Sadiq. For instance, al-Nu'man's definition of *iman*, which consists of intention (*niyya*) as well as acts and professions of faith, is based on the authority of the Imam Ja'far al-Sadiq, who as Hamdani states, "established a reputation among the Sunni scholars of his day, as he did among his own circle and within Shi'i legal tradition" (Hamdani, 75). Hamdani goes on to state that "al-Nu'man's reliance on the teachings of al-Baqir and al-Sadiq thus aided the acceptance of the *Da'a'im* in Twelver Shi'i legal tradition…and even won the respect of Sunnis" (Hamdani, 75).

Shi'i principles such as devotion to the Prophet's family are explained on the authority of Imams al-Baqir and al-Sadiq and are similarly rooted in Qur'anic verses. For example, the Qur'anic verse 42:23 "Say, I (the Prophet) ask of you (the people) no fee except love of kin (q*urba*)" is interpreted as textual proof of the preference for the Prophet's family, the *Ahl al-Bayt* (Hamdani, 80-81).

Towards the end of the chapter, the author examines al-Nu'man's critique of Sunni jurisprudence (*fiqh*) and his attempts to establish the superiority of Ismaili law, which is based on the Qur'an, the *hadiths* of the Prophet on the authority of the *Ahl al-Bayt* and interpretations made by the ruling imams. Al-Nu'man quotes *hadiths* to support arguments for the superiority of the knowledge of the Imam in interpreting law. Similarly, he provides *hadiths* from Sunni scholars, such as the Hanafi Ibn Abi Layla, who recognized the higher authority of Ali b. Abi Talib's opinions against those of the other Companions of Prophet Muhammad. (Hamdani, 84).

The *Da'a'im* sought to establish the legitimacy of Fatimid sovereignty, "through arguments that could be historically and doctrinally defended to a larger audience, including the Sunnis" (Hamdani, 92).

***Zahiri* Paradigms**

The fourth chapter explores al-Nu'man's two historical works, the *Iftitah* and *Kitab al-majalis.* The *Iftitah* explores the spread of the Fatimid *da'wa* and conquests of *Da'i* Abu 'Abd Allah al-Shi'i in North Africa until the establishment of the Fatimid state in 297/909. The *Kitab al-majalis* recounts courtly events of Imam al-Mu'izz based on al-Nu'man's own personal experiences. Hamdani compares the form in which *Iftitah* was composed with

that of Sunni conquest literature (*futuh)* and draws comparisons between the *Kitab al-majalis* and the hagiographical *akhbar* tradition regarding the imams in Twelver Shi'i literature. She points out that al-Nu'man, "charted a course between Sunni and Shi'i literary and historiographical traditions, modifying and developing from them important Ismaili contributions to Islamic historiography" (Hamdani, 93).

The author goes on to say that the Sunni *futuh* literature is permeated with "the heroic and sentimental", serving as a paradigm of virtues of the Prophet, his Companions and the earliest Muslims (Hamdani, 95). In this sense Al-Nu'man's *Iftitah* is an example of Ismaili *futuh* work presenting the heroic ventures of al-Shi'i and recording Fatimid conquests. "Just as early *futuh* constructed a paradigm of Islamic triumph", states Hamdani, "so also did the *Iftitah* of Ismaili Shi'i triumph" (Hamdani, 95). However, the *Iftitah* differs from Sunni *futuh* literature in many ways and the fact that al-Nu'man "liberates the narrative of the *Iftitah* from the cumbersome apparatus and form of *hadith*-based history" is one of the major differences (Hamdani, 95). At this juncture, the author observes that the book also differs from Twelver Shi'i literature in terms of its content. She states that "having often been excluded from power and frequently oppressed, they [the Twelver Shi'is] were more inclined to develop a hagiographical rather than a historical literature to assert and commemorate their imams and their own community of followers" (Hamdani, 96). The *Iftitah*, on the other hand, contributes to the construction of a historical image of the imams.

According to al-Nu'man, the purpose of writing the *Majalis* was to, "impart some of the knowledge and wisdom of the imams as [al-Nu'man] had experienced it, and to relay what he had heard, seen and understood to future generations" (Hamdani, 98). Hamdani argues that the *Majalis* is not mere hagiography, but that its historical reports "were intended to celebrate the example of an imam-caliph, or to establish a paradigm for the just rule of an imam" (Hamdani, 98). The *Majalis* describes the life and times of al-Mu'izz and the range of his knowledge and wisdom, which explains the religious and extends to the mundane and even the scientific. It explores issues of the relationship between al-Mu'izz and his *da'wa*, whose doctrines he sometimes found to be extreme. In addition to these, the work reveals aspects of the relationship between al-Nu'man and al-Mu'izz. Importantly, the *Majalis* provides accounts and reports that describe al-Mu'izz's relationship with the Umayyads of Spain, the Byzantines and the Abbasids, all of whom vied for control over the Mediterranean. Hamdani concludes that:

> The image the *Majalis* provides of al-Mu'izz's political career is impressive and consistent with the Islamic ideal of the just ruler: triumphant yet tolerant, knowledgeable and wise, able to provide the moral and political guidance that was exemplified by the Prophet and his family. The traditional and often mythic expressions of Twelver Shii hagiography, preoccupied with the eschatological and soteriological function of an imam in occultation, are here countered by a very human and accessible portrait of a real historical figure. (Hamdani, 111).

Kairouan Mosque in *Arts of the City Victorious: Islamic Art and Architecture in Fatimid North Africa and Egypt* by Jonathan M Bloom, p. 20.

Fatimid achievement of power reflects the shift from hagiography to history and from a revolutionary movement to a major Islamic state.

The *Zahiri* Order

The fifth chapter explores the theory of social order in al-Nu'man's *Kitab al-himma* and a treatise on governance in the *Kitab al-jihad,* which is the first volume of the *Da'a'im*. *Kitab al-himma* provides a blueprint for the ideological underpinnings that informed the relationship between the Fatimid imam-caliph and his subjects. It centres on obedience to the imam within a religio-political framework and discusses the responsibilities of different groups amongst the imam's subjects. The work also deals with the issues of protocol that governed behaviour in the presence of the imam during processions, banquets, special occasions, etc. Al--Nu'man composed the work because, "the imams had made themselves manifest" and it was "necessary for their followers to have a book that would tell them about what acts it was appropriate to perform out of respect and obedience" (Hamdani, 115).

The most significant aspect of the work is its articulation of a social order which does not give a privileged position to the Ismailis at the expense of a non-Ismaili majority. In fact, as Hamdani points out, al-Nu'man's purpose was to, "instruct all the followers and subjects of the state in the proper forms of obedience to the imam" (Hamdani, 116).

According to al-Nu'man, the imams are entitled to *amanat* (here: a tithe), deposits which God has decreed must be returned to their rightful owners (Q.4:58, 2:283, 8:27) (Hamdani, 116). *Amanat* are property owed to the imams, as part of God's bounty towards humankind, which the imams accept from people on behalf of God. This applies to non-Ismailis as well. "Situating the imam's rule within the *Sunna* of the Prophet", Hamdani states:

> is an attempt to ... redefine obedience, changing it from a matter of coercion into a religious act ('to obey the imam is to obey God and His Prophet'), so that in paying *amanat* even the non-follower acknowledges the imamate of the Fatimids. (Hamdani, 117).

Members of the Ismaili community additionally take the pledge (*mithaq*) of allegiance to the imam. Their obligations include informing the imam truthfully about themselves and seeking his intercession. Among many virtues, the true followers should cultivate patience, humility, forgiveness, forbearance and should demonstrate their solidarity with each other. Their status does not entitle them to preferential treatment nor to a more privileged status over non-Ismaili Muslims or even Jews and Christians, known as the *Ahl al-Dhimma* (the protected communities) (Hamdani, 121). This indicates that Ismailis and non-Ismailis held equal status before the state and is a clear indication of the departure from pre-Fatimid revolutionary Ismail ideals. "The move to consolidate the power and authority of the Fatimids obviously necessitated the identification of the interests of the state with those of non-Ismaili communities as well as their own constituency" (Hamdani, 121).

The relatives of the imam, the officers of the state and members of the *da'wa* organization were not entitled to exemptions. They were held accountable and had to demonstrate complete obedience and loyalty to the imams. This kind of instruction in *Kitab al-himma* is further evidence of changes that took place.

> Prior to the establishment of the Fatimid state, the Ismaili community defined itself as autonomous and distinct from others through mechanisms such as *dar al-hijra* ['the place of exile']. This autonomy was abandoned with the foundation of the state and as the boundaries, physical as well as religio-political, separating the Ismailis from others became obscured (Hamdani, 123).

The treatise on governance (called an '*ahd*) in the *Kitab al-jihad* similarly reflects the process of transformation from revolution to state and is analysed as such in the remaining parts of the chapter. Documents such as the *ahd* were a "blueprint for governance in those areas where governors had...[been] given increased powers of supervision and greater authority" (Hamdani,

126). This was the case in Egypt, which was governed by the Fatimid general Jawhar al-Siqili for four years while al-Mu'izz was still in Ifriqiyya. "The *ahd* exhorts its addressee, a king/governor (*malik*) to exercise a policy of ethical governance by paying heed to his subjects and ruling wisely, mercifully and justly" (Hamdani, 126). The addressee of the treatise is, "advised to rely on the support of the people (appearing before them as an upholder of good works, restraint and humility) and seek their contentment above that of his retainers" (Hamdani, 127-128).

Among other things, the treatise advises the addressee to lighten the people's burden by relieving them from taxes, pay heed to the needs of the poor, remain accessible to the people and avoid unnecessary warfare and bloodshed. Hamdani demonstrates that Jawhar's policies as governor of Egypt seem to have reflected the advice of the '*ahd*. For example, in addition to guaranteeing the safety of the Egyptians and promising to protect Egypt from the Byzantine Empire, Jawhar also promised to restore pilgrimage, abolish illegal taxation, enhance the value of the currency, build new mosques and renovate old ones and uphold religious rites common to all Muslims (Hamdani, 129). Hence, the *ahd*, provides a blueprint for furthering, "the prosperity and well-being of the state and all its subjects, rather than conformity to a particular creed or ideological construct of the rulers" (Hamdani, 130).

Conclusion: Between *Zahir* and *Batin*

Hamdani notes that in focusing on the *zahiri* works of al-Nu'man in *Between Revolution and State*, she did not intend to marginalise the significance of his esoteric (*batini*) works, or the importance of esoteric discourse in Ismaili Shi'ism in general. In fact, the author indicates that, "the esoteric and spiritual aspect of Isma'ilism continued to engage the *da'wa* throughout the Fatimid period" in the instructional sessions, *majalis al-hikma, which* facilitated the dissemination of esoteric knowledge within the Ismaili community (Hamdani, 131). After the death of al-Nu'man in 363/974, prominent Ismaili *da'is* such as Hamid al-Din al-Kirmani (d. after 411/1020), al-Mu'ayyad fi'l-Din al-Shirazi (d.470/1078) and Nasir-i Khusraw (d. after 462/1070) made significant contributions to Ismaili esoteric thought.

Between Revolution and State demonstrates how the process of transformation from *da'wa* to *dawla* necessitated the emergence and development of *zahiri* discourse of Fatimid Ismaili doctrines. The multi-confessional communities which the Fatimid imam-caliphs found themselves ruling required them to abandon the *dar al-hijra* model of the revolutionary period in order to establish common ground with their non-Ismaili, particularly Sunni, subjects.

> This was possible insofar as these were undertaken by al-Qadi al-Nu'man who was particularly able in his works to negotiate the transition from a minoritarian position, previously based on a predominantly esoteric doctrine, to a more universal or majoritarian and discursive universe that maintained both the *zahir* and the *batin* as necessary and complementary aspects of Ismaili Shi'ism, and by extension of the Islamic faith as a whole (Hamdani, 132).

Between Revolution and State is a significant contribution to Fatimid history and a valuable addition to both Ismaili and Islamic studies.

Mahdiyya, mosque, portal, completed 921 in *Arts of the City Victorious: Islamic Art and Architecture in Fatimid North Africa and Egypt* by Jonathan M Bloom, p. 27.