



The Institute of Ismaili Studies

**SELECTED EXTRACTS FROM STRATEGIC PLAN: 2025 - 2035**

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## Introduction

This Strategic Plan has been developed by the Senior Management of The Institute of Ismaili Studies (IIS), under the leadership of the Director who was appointed in January 2023.

Earlier Board guidance and strategy papers approved by the Board informed the deliberations leading to this Plan. An overall guiding principle was to avoid substantial growth in material and human resources needed, while making internal adjustments as needed to strengthen areas where resources are lacking and support some new projects which respond to identified needs.

With a view to contextualising the remit and mission of IIS, the key stakeholders are listed here:

- The Global Ismaili community (Jamat) is the principal stakeholder for IIS. The Ismaili Tariqah and Religious Education Boards (ITREBs) are the primary interlocutors and are prioritised as a partner with respect to the Ismaili community.
- Academic communities, particularly those working in fields of relevance to IIS, are significant stakeholders.
- AKDN institutions involved in educational endeavours, including Aga Khan University (especially the Institute for the Study of Muslim Civilisations), University of Central Asia, Aga Khan Schools, Aga Khan Trust for Culture and the Aga Khan Museum are high-priority partners.
- Muslim communities, especially in parts of the world with significant Ismaili populations, are important in The Institute's consideration of its endeavours.
- The people working professionally at IIS, particularly our scholars and staff, as well as IIS governors, who volunteer their time and expertise, are key stakeholders.
- Current and prospective students as well as IIS alumni are strategically important constituencies.
- As The Institute operates in the United Kingdom, compliance with requirements of relevant regulatory bodies and maintaining relationships with relevant agencies of the UK government is important for IIS.
- The wider society, particularly institutions in the King's Cross Knowledge Quarter and the general interested public are also considered stakeholders.

This Plan projects The Institute's priorities over the next ten years (2025-2035) and has been organised around thematic areas which will facilitate cohesive efforts across departments. This proposal sets forth thematic and directional priorities but does not offer details of tactical actions, which will be presented in annual Operational Plans.

## **Mission Statement**

### **Who we are**

The Institute of Ismaili Studies (IIS) is a higher education, research and teaching institution dedicated to high-quality scholarship and education on Islam and Muslim societies, with a particular focus on Ismaili and broader Shi'i studies, encompassing their historical and geographical contexts. Our mandate is international in scope, and it is informed by a commitment to addressing the relevant needs of the diverse Ismaili Muslim communities, which are inter-linked with those of the societies in which they live as well as the wider Muslim community.

## **Guiding Values and Principles**

With a view to sustaining a vibrant intellectual community at the forefront of knowledge production, IIS has been guided by the following values and principles:

- Adherence to the highest standards of ethics and integrity in all our endeavours, staff relations and organisational management as well as in our interactions with external individuals and agencies.
- The promotion and prioritisation of inclusivity, fostering a compassionate and supportive environment where respect, fairness, equity and equal opportunities for professional growth.
- Commitment to openness that ensures transparency, integrity and a spirit of inquiry, encouraging freedom of expression and greater understanding within the institution.
- Cultivating a learning culture that empowers individuals, promotes equal access to educational opportunities and strives for excellence in all endeavours.
- Recognising and valuing our people, ensuring fair compensation, fostering connection and care, and promoting a sense of responsibility and mutual respect.
- Protecting the intellectual space for the expression of a diversity of views whilst avoiding coercive, polemical, didactic, exclusionary or de-legitimising rhetoric.
- Assuring high standards of fiduciary and environmental responsibility and prudence in the management and use of financial resources.

## **The Institute's Endeavours and Accomplishments**

IIS has achieved meaningful progress since its establishment in 1977. Over the years, it has emerged as a leading institution for Islamic and Ismaili studies, making notable contributions across various domains, which are detailed below. These contributions align with the goals set by our Founder in his inaugural message and reflect The Institute's ongoing commitment to serving the Ismaili community and the broader academic community.

## **Research Agenda**

The research agenda of IIS has been focused on advancing Islamic studies with a particular focus on Shi'i and Ismaili traditions, in particular, highlighting the plural heritages of Muslim communities. This agenda is broad, interdisciplinary, and has aimed to contribute to both academic scholarship and the religious formation of the Ismailis. Key research areas have included the following:

- **Ismaili Studies:** Since its inception, IIS has documented and analysed the rich history, philosophy, cultural and intellectual traditions of the Ismailis, greatly contributing to the understanding of their role in Islamic civilisations. This work has culminated in numerous publications, research projects and academic programmes that have brought greater awareness to the contributions of the Ismailis to Muslim thought and cultures.
- **Shi'i Studies:** A dedicated unit has been established to conduct in-depth research on Shi'i thought, law and spirituality, providing valuable insights into the historical development and contemporary relevance of these traditions. One of the most important aims of this work has been to enhance our understanding of the plurality of traditions within Shi'i Islam and the interactions between Ismaili intellectual thought and other Shi'i traditions.
- **Qur'anic Studies:** The Institute has sought to advance the study of the Qur'an by examining its interpretations, historical context and influence on Islamic thought. This research has focused on promoting scholarship on the diversity of traditions inspired by the Qur'an throughout Muslim history, contributing to the scholarly and public understanding of the diverse *tafsir* or interpretative traditions relating to the Qur'an in shaping Muslim societies.
- **Central Asian Studies:** Research in this field has focused on the study of Central Asian Muslim communities, with a particular focus on the Ismailis, examining their historical development, cultural contributions and interactions with broader Muslim societies. This research has illuminated the interconnectedness of Islamic civilisations and underscored the unique role of Central Asian Ismailis in the historical and intellectual landscape of Islam, particularly in, but not limited to, Afghanistan, Iran and Tajikistan.
- **Constituency Studies:** The Constituency Studies Unit has undertaken research focussing on the religious, social and ethical needs and issues of Muslim communities, including the Ismaili community, including a number of contemporary issues. Research in this area has provided valuable insights for community leadership on Ismaili ritual practices and doctrines as well as biomedical ethics.
- **South Asian Studies:** This is a more recent area of research focusing on South Asian Muslim communities, particularly the Ismailis and other Shi'i communities, to highlight the historical and cultural contributions of South Asian Muslims, with a special emphasis on the Ismaili experience in regions like Gujarat, Sindh and Punjab. The Institute's work in this area is expected to provide useful insights into the interactions between South Asian Muslims and other religious and cultural traditions.

## **Academic Publications**

IIS has produced high-quality academic publications that have garnered international recognition, and a growing impact in scholarship. With over 170 publications to its name, the Institute has contributed significantly to the field of Islamic studies, with a particular focus on Ismaili and broader Shi'i studies. Prominent amongst these are the following series of publications:

- The *Ismaili Texts and Translations Series* has, thus far, made 26 important Ismaili religious and philosophical texts more accessible by providing English translations and critical editions.
- The 15 publications in the *Ismaili Heritage Series*, focusing on various aspects of Ismaili history, culture and intellectual traditions, have presented Ismaili heritage in a comprehensive and scholarly manner.
- The *Qur'anic Studies Series* includes 22 works highlighting the plurality of traditions that were inspired by the Qur'an and developed throughout Muslim history.
- Eleven books have been published as part of the *Shi'i Heritage Series* intended to promote a better understanding of Shi'i Islam and its history, thought and practices.
- In the area of Central Asian Studies, IIS has published 25 books related to the history, intellectual traditions, cultural practices, oral history and written heritage of Central Asian Ismailis.
- IIS has published 15 volumes, comprising Arabic critical editions and English translations of 41 of the 52 epistles of the tenth century esoteric fraternity *Ikhwan al-Safa*, offering synoptic accounts of the classical sciences and philosophies of that age.
- Six of a projected 16 volumes of the *Encyclopaedia Islamica* have been published, with a seventh in production, providing entries on important themes, subjects and personages in Islam generally, including various dimensions of Shi'i Islam, the Persian contributions to Islamic civilisations and the spiritual dimensions of the Islamic tradition.

Beyond these publications, IIS has also published 138 translations in 18 languages to make these works accessible to non-English speaking audiences.

## **General Audience Publications**

With a view to providing IIS scholarship in a language suitable for non-specialists, two new series of publications have been launched:

- *World of Islam* series which is intended to provide non-specialist readers with an overview of the diverse manifestations of Islam, redressing misperceptions by offering a nuanced survey of the plurality of interpretations of Islam. Four books have been published in this series, which are also available in audio and digital formats.
- *Living Ismaili Traditions* series, specifically developed for Ismailis, which aims to bring together lived Ismaili histories, cultures and experiences, exploring what it

means to be an Ismaili across diverse Ismaili traditions. Three books have been published in this series.

Works in both series are also being translated into various languages spoken amongst Ismailis, including Arabic, Gujarati, Persian, Portuguese, Russian and Urdu.

### ***Human Resource Development Programmes***

IIS has prioritised the development of human resources within the Ismaili community through several residential and episodic training programmes. These initiatives have been developed in response to the specific needs of Ismaili communities and their institutions.

- **Postgraduate Programmes:** The Graduate Programme in Islamic Studies and Humanities (GPISH) and the Secondary Teacher Education Programme (STEP) are two of IIS' most prominent initiatives. Both are residential programmes offered at the postgraduate level, leading to master's level qualifications.

GPISH, validated by the School of Oriental and African Studies (University of London) is a two-year postgraduate programme providing education in the intellectual tools of the humanities and social sciences, with a focus on the intellectual and literary expressions of Shi'ism in general, and its Ismaili *tariqah* in particular. It has also offered to-date a third year during which students may acquire another master's degree at an institution of their choice. The third-year option is being reconsidered as part of an ongoing review of the programme.

STEP represents a pioneering collaboration between the Institute of Education (IoE), University College London's Faculty of Education and Society, SOAS and IIS. It was developed to address the need for professionally trained secondary teachers who can teach IIS Secondary Curriculum to Ismaili adolescents. To support these newly qualified teachers, IIS also offers training for teacher mentors and ITREB Academic Directors.

- **Doctoral Scholarship Programme:** The Doctoral Scholarships Programme was established in 1997 to address the research needs of IIS as well as to develop intellectual leadership and human resources for the communities amidst which the Ismaili community lives and the AKDN does its work.
- **Community Education Programmes: These comprise:**
  - **Postgraduate Research Fellowship Programme:** Intended to help IIS graduates working with ITREBs in an academic capacity to combine the academic standards of critical inquiry with their application to the religious formation of the Ismaili community.
  - **Primary Teacher Educators Development Programme:** Develops teacher educators to train and support volunteer teachers to deliver IIS' primary curriculum.
  - **International Waezeen Training Programme:** Trains individuals to develop and deliver inspiring waezes (sermons) and provide pastoral care to members of the Ismaili community.

- **Education for Leadership:** Offers 3-5-day residential orientation and training programmes, based on a curriculum that is adapted to take account of regional contexts to newly appointed senior leadership of Ismaili institutions.
- **Continuing Education Programmes:** Offers Continuing Professional Development (CPD) programmes for secondary teachers, primary teacher educators and waezeen, ensuring that all educators remain updated with the latest research and pedagogical insights developed at IIS.
- **Short Courses:** Offers short courses to leadership, educators and interested members of the Ismaili community, ranging from online to residential and field-based immersive programmes relating to the study of Islam and Muslim societies.

### ***Religious Education Curriculum Development***

IIS has been developing a comprehensive religious education curriculum that is now available in 10 (soon to be 11) languages. The substantial materials produced thus far are used by approximately 250,000 students across more than 25 countries. The Ta'lim curriculum, which covers primary and secondary education,<sup>1</sup> integrates faith with contemporary issues, fostering critical thinking and ethical reasoning. It presents a graded programme of instruction which examines Islam as both faith and civilisation, through time. To support the implementation of the curriculum, IIS has produced a range of educational materials and resources for use by teachers. Efforts are underway to review and rewrite the primary curriculum (which was originally completed over 25 years ago), to develop an Early Childhood Education (ECE) and an Adult Education framework for the Ismaili community.

### ***Heritage Preservation***

IIS has been very active in heritage preservation, particularly through initiatives like the Ismaili Heritage Project and the work of the Ismaili Special Collections Unit.

- **Ismaili Heritage Project:** The Ismaili Heritage Project is a collaboration between IIS, Aga Khan Trust for Culture and the Department of Jamati Institutions. Over the past nine years, this project has successfully identified and documented more than 1,600 historical Ismaili sites across 56 countries.
- **Manuscripts and other Materials:** The Ismaili Special Collections Unit (ISCU) has collected and catalogued nearly 3,000 rare manuscripts, making it one of the most comprehensive collections of Ismaili manuscripts globally. These manuscripts, which are mainly in Arabic, Persian and a variety of Indic languages, relate to the history, theology, law, doctrines and socio-religious practices of Ismaili and broader Muslim traditions. In addition, the ISCU has also collected rare, printed materials, historical photographs, coins from the Fatimid and Alamut periods, as well as artefacts relating to Aga Khan III and Aga Khan IV.

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<sup>1</sup> After completing the development of materials for primary levels, thus far, IIS has produced six modules for secondary levels, which are in the process of being translated into other languages. A further 2 modules remain to be developed.

- **Oral History Project:** The ISCU's Oral History Project, which has recorded over 350 interviews of individuals, from nine countries, largely with a high level of institutional engagement, is another critical initiative that preserves the histories of Ismaili communities worldwide.

### **The Institute's Strategic Priorities for the Future**

As we approach the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of IIS, it is evident that much has been achieved since 1977 to move us closer to the vision articulated by our Founder in his inaugural message. What is equally clear is that we live in a fundamentally transformed world, particularly as a consequence of geo-political and socio-demographic changes and technological advancements. In light of the above, we have proposed a set of priorities below that ought to inform the Institute's Strategic Plan for the next decade, bearing in mind the Board's direction not to grow IIS substantially in terms of headcount and current run rate.

Essentially, the proposal is to continue to engage in core academic research and publications, while elevating work focussed on addressing the needs of the Ismaili community and enhancing the capacity and effectiveness of The Institute. This will be achieved through rearranging the organisational structure to reduce silo thinking and working and increase cross-collaboration and efficiencies, while directing academics to also produce content (textual and audio-visual) for non-academic audiences. A key priority lies in adding human resource capacity where we are currently under-resourced – particularly in the areas of curriculum development, harnessing digital technologies, heritage preservation and senior management.

It should be noted that in keeping with our Founder's vision of The Institute as a high-calibre institution that would produce, preserve and propagate knowledge, the first three priorities are aimed at significantly strengthening The Institute's core capacity–endowment as it were—to continue to fulfil his vision for The Institute in ways that are relevant and meaningful to its key stakeholders.

#### ***Addressing Relevant Gaps in Scholarship:***

- While maintaining focus on the intellectual, cultural and spiritual aspects of Ismaili and broader Shi'i studies as well as Qur'anic studies, IIS will expand strategically its research and publications agenda by launching new series that highlight underexplored aspects of Ismaili and broader Shi'i traditions. Key priorities will include the establishment of a South Asian Studies series alongside a Central Asian Studies series to enhance understanding of Ismaili history and culture in those regions. Additionally, the publications agenda will be focused on producing books on understudied periods, such as the Alamut era, as well as critical editions and translations of important Ismaili texts beyond Arabic and Persian, extending into texts from Gujarati, Urdu and Pamiri languages, and comparative mystical traditions. IIS will also strengthen its academic capabilities through various forms of partnerships with scholars and institutions.

### ***Leveraging Knowledge Resources to Serve the Ismaili Community:***

- Recognising the diverse needs of the Ismaili community, The Institute aims to produce educational content that addresses the religious formation needs across all age groups, from pre-schoolers to seniors. This involves close collaboration with ITREBs to create materials in various formats – such as books, short booklets, videos, and podcasts – that are not only easy to understand but also deeply rooted in the Ismaili values and traditions. A critical aspect of this initiative is translating complex academic research into practical, jargon-free resources that can be readily used and enjoyed by non-specialists, thereby broadening the reach and impact of The Institute’s work.

### ***Heritage Preservation and Acquisition:***

- On heritage preservation, The Institute is prioritising the acquisition, preservation, and analysis of historic documents, particularly manuscripts from regions where there is insecurity as well as a heightened interest from external scholars and collectors. To address this, we will intensify efforts to catalogue, digitise, and translate these materials, and where possible, to acquire them, ensuring they are not only preserved but also made available for research and education. This initiative is not only about safeguarding heritage but also about unlocking the potential of these materials to contribute to a deeper understanding of Ismaili history, thought and culture within the context of Muslim and human civilisations. It allows us to tell our own history based on our own sources and, in some important cases, to correct long-held scholarly misperceptions.

### ***Integrating Education Programmes for Enhanced Learning:***

- Another key area of focus will be the integration of teacher education, curriculum development, and continuing education initiatives across all levels of religious education, from early childhood to secondary education. Feedback from students, educators, and ITREBs has highlighted the need for greater cohesion between these elements to enhance the overall educational experience. The Institute will undertake a strategic review, including reconfirming the purpose and validity, as well as restructuring of programmes like the Graduate Programme in Islamic Studies and Humanities (GPISH), the Secondary Teacher Education Programme (STEP), Primary Teacher Educators Development (PTED) programme, curriculum development from early childhood to adult education and Continuing Professional Development (CPDs) for secondary teachers and primary teacher educators to ensure that they work in harmony, fostering a more effective and integrated learning environment.

### ***Mainstreaming Contemporary Themes into IIS Endeavours:***

- In response to contemporary challenges, The Institute will be committed to incorporating critical themes such as mental health, environmental sustainability, biomedical ethics, pluralism, good governance and digital literacy into its curriculum, training programmes, research and publications. Understanding that the Ismaili community faces unique challenges, including the effects of migration and social change, IIS will develop educational strategies and

materials that address these issues in a way that is both relevant and sensitive to the Ismaili community's needs. This includes collaborating with institutions like the Aga Khan University (AKU) and University of Central Asia (UCA) as well as Aga Khan Schools (AKS) to develop environmental education initiatives and embedding principles of pluralism and inclusivity into our outputs.

### ***Digital Turn:***

- Recognising the evolving ways in which people learn, The Institute will make a strategic shift towards more effectively harnessing digital technologies to enhance its academic mission and global reach. In view of the transformative power of digital tools in research, teaching and public engagement, IIS aims to integrate cutting-edge technologies into its endeavours. This includes digitising its vast repository of manuscripts and historical resources, deploying AI-driven tools intelligently and with due regard to the associated risks to enhance teaching and learning experiences, and expanding online educational offerings. By leveraging these technologies, we will deepen our impact, foster more dynamic academic collaborations, and engage the global Ismaili community in new and innovative ways. This strategic shift reflects our commitment to stay at the forefront of scholarly excellence while embracing the opportunities of the digital age.

### ***Human Resource Development for Community Leadership:***

- The Institute remains deeply invested in human resource development within the Ismaili community, understanding that the community's future leaders must be well-equipped with the knowledge, skills, and ethical grounding to navigate an increasingly complex world. Through targeted training programmes and partnerships with other Ismaili and AKDN institutions, the Institute will work to integrate faith-based perspectives into leadership training, youth development, and conflict resolution initiatives. The Institute will continue to play a crucial role in shaping a generation of leaders who are not only professionally accomplished but also deeply rooted in the ethical and spiritual values of our faith and heritage.

### ***Augmenting Human Resource Capacity***

- One of the most significant and sensitive priorities relates to the people – senior management, scholars, administrative and support staff. Early in the Plan period, we will add capacity at the senior levels to strengthen the Director's capacity to lead and oversee the wide spectrum of The Institute's activities. We will also bring on board personnel to fill competency gaps that will need to be addressed to achieve the ambitious goals of this Plan. Careful planning will be required to enable effective succession planning, which has remained a challenge at IIS.

### ***Optimising Institutional Capacity:***

- Finally, another strategic priority is to optimise our institutional capacity to better fulfil our mission and achieve the ambitious goals of the Strategic Plan. We will accomplish this through an organisational restructure that will reduce a siloed approach to working, enhance operational efficiency, allow us systematically to monitor the impact of our programmes, foster inter-departmental exchange in creating and delivering programmes and outputs, as well as mobilise greater

efficiencies and applications of staff, student and alumni talent. By developing a robust communications and donor relations programme, investing in talent development and leveraging technology, we will aim to bolster our global reach and impact to serve our audiences more effectively.

### ***Achieving Degree-Granting Status:***

- A significant strategic goal for the future is transforming IIS into a degree-awarding institution, which would elevate its standing and influence within the global academic landscape. Achieving this milestone will require a comprehensive review and enhancement of existing graduate programmes, ensuring compliance with higher education regulations, establishing or strengthening robust academic structures such as the Academic Council, and expanding the capacity of the Teaching and Learning Centre. This transformation is not merely about gaining formal recognition; it is about positioning The Institute as a leader in the academic study of Islam, particularly its Ismaili and Shi'i traditions and related disciplines, thereby empowering its graduates with credentials that carry weight and prestige.

While focusing on the above priorities, IIS will continue its current portfolio of research and programmatic endeavours, adjusting them as necessary to better align with these priorities. Equally, we will ensure a working environment and culture which is equitable, inclusive and fosters a well-managed, engaged and high performing workforce, able to maintain a good work-life balance.

For our students, we will sustain and enhance an inclusive and supportive learning environment that enables them to develop academic and transferable professional skills to thrive in their future careers, while enhancing student well-being and their connection with IIS community. We will also commit to enhancing sustainability in The Institute's programmes and operations by working to minimise IIS' carbon footprint.

### **Financial and Human Resource Implications**

Financial and the likely human resource implication of certain initiatives which are part of the Strategic Plan will be reviewed and assessed during the plan period and accordingly will be presented as part of the annual operational plan and budget cycles. Some of the initiatives include the potential cost of additional hiring to build HR capabilities in various areas and resourcing gaps in the work areas where additional investment may be required. Review of Strategic Plan initiatives will continue to occur, and the plan will be revisited for reprioritisation during the annual budget cycle.