

# The Eagles' Serene Palace of Symmetric Wisdom:

A Historical and Intellectual Genealogy of the Nizaris of Alamut

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“Fear, and be slain.”

(‘Richard II’, William Shakespeare)

## Introduction

With the decline and fall of the luxurious Fatimid Empire, the first Isma'ili 'civilizational-state' and the scholastic throne of Shi'i Isma'ilism, the Sunni Muslim world's enduring lust for the eradication of the Shi'i religio-political philosophy in general and the Isma'ili doctrines in particular seemed relatively fulfilled. The Fatimid caliphate (910-1171) once included all of North Africa, Sicily, Egypt, the Red Sea coast of Africa, Yaman, the Hijaz (including the ideologically strategic cities of Mecca and Medina), Syria and Palestine. It had exemplified a Shi'i doctrinal antithesis of the Sunni Muslim world as led by the Abbasid caliphate: in urban structure, the Fatimid capital, Cairo, rivalled Abbasid Baghdad as the international metropolis of the Islamic world; in doctrines, the philosophical Fatimid Isma'ilism challenged the conservative Sunni theology by inserting Neoplatonic and Aristotelian intellectual trends in Isma'ili metaphysics and cosmology; and in political administration, it emphasized the inalienable right of a certain lineage to the caliphate of the entire Muslim community. The ideological rivalry between the two opposing branches of Islam, the unadventurous Sunni and the dramatic Shi'a, had never been so meticulously manifested as in the mutual belligerence of the Fatimid and Abbasid empires towards each others' interpretations of Islamic theology, cosmology and, perhaps most importantly, Islamic political philosophy. In this context, domestic disintegration of the Isma'ili state, the Fatimid disastrous military defeat in 1171 by the victorious Abbasid forces and the subsequent systematic reconstruction of the religious identity of the conquered population from Shi'a Isma'ilism to Sunnism was unanimously, and gladly, regarded by Sunni polemicists and theologians of Abbasid Baghdad as the concluding chapter in the history of Isma'ili 'heretical' religious adventurism. While such hopes faded with the immediate phoenix-like rise of Nizaris from the ashes of the Fatimid state, and despite the multi-layered complexity of the multi-dimensional Fatimid-Abbasid relations, the nature of their dramatic military and doctrinal conflicts was in fact reflective of the elemental historical and theological dispute between Shi'i and Sunni schools of thought, originated in the first tumultuous century of Islamic history.

Correspondingly, the post-Fatimid champions of the banner of Isma'ilism, the legendary mediaeval Nizari Isma'ilis of Persia and Syria (i.e. Assassins, also Hashshāshīn), one of the most enduring components of the myths of the mediaeval world, emerged within a relatively similar pattern as a Shi'i sect against the totality of an extremely hostile Sunni Muslim world which observed Isma'ilis as heretics, as Jewish magicians in disguise, with strictly atheistic philosophies, plotters to destroy Islam itself, incest being their common practice. While the Syrian Nizaris later found themselves also locked in an inevitable conflict with Crusaders, especially the military order of Knights Templar, the historical genealogy of the origins of the mediaeval Nizari Isma'ilis is simply a chronological account of the evolution of a multi-faceted struggle between pre-Nizari Isma'ilism (765-1090) and Sunnism, itself being an extension of the greater conflict between the two divisions of Islam, the Shi'i and Sunni schools

of thought. Yet, while reviewing the chain of events that contributed to the creation of Nizari Isma'ilism is essential for comprehending the origins of the early Nizari intellectual heritage(s), it fails in shedding any light on the mysterious corridors of Nizari thought and secret history, almost surrealistically shrouded in obscurity and shadows of fantastic myths. Such a task requires a systematic investigation of the intellectual traditions of the Assassin Order in its historical context, and according to the original texts produced by Nizari Lords and scholars. Surprisingly, while the eastern folklore sources depicted Assassins as 'unclean shades of heresy and death and doom',<sup>1</sup> the 'black myths' of Assassins (e.g. the paradise gardens of Assassin fortresses, the hashish-addicted blood thirsty devilish killers, etc) dominated western scholarship as well, hence overlapping the blurred borders of factual and fictional history. Yet, beyond the fantastic horizons of fictitious tales of western orientalist and mediaeval Islamic and Christian scholarship lays the historical Nizaris, the most astonishing sect in all Islam, whose doctrines are still shrouded in mystery.

This paper attempts to investigate, outline and discuss the Nizari doctrines from the establishment of the Nizari state in 1090 until its demise and downfall in 1256, a period referred to as the Alamut era, named after the fortified Nizari seat in Alamut, Persia. In order to provide a cohesive account of Nizari religio-philosophical doctrinal evolution, the paper first provides an indispensable historical account of the eventful origins of Nizari Isma'ilism. It then discusses the general framework of the Fatimid philosophic tradition and theological thought to establish a theoretical basis for assessing the pattern of doctrinal evolution of a post-Fatimid era of early Nizari Isma'ilis. In this context, the paper divides the intellectual history of the Alamut-era Nizaris into two parts: first, from the establishment of the Nizari state under the strict supervision of the first 'Lord of the Assassins', the legendary Hassan-i Sabbah and his successors until the beginning the reign of Ismaili-Imam Hassan II (1090-1164); and second, from the age of the fundamental doctrinal revolution of Hassan II until the succession of Hassan III (1164-1210). Each of these sections begins with a brief historical account of Nizaris' policies and conditions in each stage, followed by a comparative analysis of their religious and philosophical doctrines. Through this structure, the paper aims at presenting an inclusive account of the intellectual life of Nizari Isma'ilis through their most celebrated revolutionary phase of existence.

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<sup>1</sup> Joseph Von Hammer-Purgstall, 'Sur le paradis du Viueux de la Montagne', *Fundgruben des Orients*, 3 (1813), pp. 203-6.

## I. A Historical Discussion on the Origins of the Nizaris

### *Early Division in Islam and Shi'a-Sunni Politics*

Contrary to certain ideologically-motivated discourses present in Islamic historiography,<sup>2</sup> the original schism in Islam, producing the divergent religious syntheses of Shi'i and Sunni, was, in fact, the result of a predominantly power-oriented debate over the question of the succession of Prophet Mohammad (d. 632 AD) rather than any initial ideological dispute. Following the death of the Prophet, apparently departed without directly designating a legatee, the Islamic community sought a successor to assume the Prophet's function as leader of the nascent Islamic state; a state institutionally dependent upon a set of foundations laid in the last decade of the Prophet's rule, hence requiring the installation of a semi-prophetic office to maintain its identity. As the result of such a quest, and similar to the pattern of the Roman Empire's politics of succession, the leaderless Muslim community was instantly plunged into a series of secretive political alliances and civil mobilizations to fill the power void: on one side, the prominent members of the most prosperous Arab tribes and Mohammad's inner circle of the pious, all hastily searching for a qualified candidate; on the other side, a relatively small faction of Medina's middle-class faithfuls, disinclined towards the traditional elites, already in favour of the Prophet's cousin and son-in-law, Ali b. Abi Talib, as Mohammad's legatee and legitimate successor. The crux of the latter camp's emerging allegiance was based upon this belief that the Prophet had in fact designated Ali as his successor in his last public pilgrimage to Mecca, a designation that had been instituted (or consented to) by the divine command.<sup>3</sup> The certainty of the indisputable legitimacy of the right of Ali to political leadership of the Islamic state, held by the pro-Ali campaigners, known as *Shi'a Ali* (Companions of Ali), gradually evolved as the central component of the entire Shi'i tradition, shared by all later branches of Shi'ism including Isma'ilis.

With the failure of the enthusiastic yet ineffective pro-Ali activists to immediately install their desirable candidate as the successor, the Shi'a political perspective gained an additional yet decisive dimension during the reign of the first three caliphs of Islam. The communal choice had fallen on Abu Bakr (d. 634), installing him in the newly constructed office of *khalifat rasul Allah* (simplified as *khalifa*, thus the term 'caliph'), the Successor to the Messenger of God. To the great frustration of the Shi'a, the position was twice denied to Ali in subsequent succession bids, as the office passed to Ummar (d. 644) and later to Uthman (d. 656). Eventually, when after more than two decades and much Shi'i melodramatic outcry the Muslim community elected Ali as the fourth caliph, the Shi'a, now frustrated by witnessing the Arab upper-class's gradual infiltration of the tribal political system of the Islamic state, developed its exclusive genealogical theory of succession: this characteristic Shi'i theory was formulated by adding a

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<sup>2</sup> See for example: Muhammad T. Misbah, *An Early History of Islam*, tr. R. Alavi (Tehran: Badr Press, 1996)

<sup>3</sup> For a modern elucidation of the Shi'i view on the origins of Shi'ism see, for example: Muhammad Husayn Tabataba'i, *Shi'ite Islam*, ed. and tr. S. H. Nasr (London: SUNY Press, 1975), pp.39-50.

critical amendment to its previously Ali-centrism stating that the leadership of the Muslim community was not only the exclusive right of Ali but also all his descendants, the Alids, as the members of the Prophet's family or *ahl al-bayt*, and none outside this closed cycle. On the basis of this cunningly constructed principle, the rules of the first three caliphs as well as the successive reign of the non-Alid dynasties of the Umayyads and the Abbasids would have constituted an arbitrary usurpation of the inalienable right of Ali and his descendants and thus contrary to the Divine Will.<sup>4</sup> While the systematic implications of such principle did not instantly alter the Shi'a cause to a revolutionary faction, it prepared an extremely fertile ground for such a transformation.

#### *The Formation of Shi'i Perspective*

The origins of the Shi'i central notion of religio-political leadership, as the concept strategic to the general framework of Shi'i thought, are to be located in Shi'ism's unique conception of spiritual and religious authority. The Shi'i argument is based upon notions of necessity, originality and spirituality: since the Islamic message emanated from divine sources of knowledge, a revelational knowledge, and such knowledge is far beyond the comprehension of the common man, thus the exposition of Islamic codes and principles in the post-Prophet era is the fundamental challenge facing the Muslim community. In the absence of the Prophet's 'encompassing mind' as the one endowed with the divine knowledge to perceive the essence of God's message, the need for a religiously authoritative figure, an *Imam*, to perceive and interpret the apparent and hidden meaning of the Quran is vital for the survival and continuation of the spiritual essence of Islamic community. Without such spiritual impulse, there can be no Islamic community due to the absence of the Islamic ethical code in the layers of society. It is worth mentioning that the early Shi'i peripheral notion of the distinction between the apparent and the hidden meaning of sacred scriptures was later fully elaborated by Isma'ilis to formulate the Isma'ili hermeneutical theory of the exoteric (*zahir*) and the esoteric (*batin*). Nevertheless, in an unintended reflection of Platonic elitist political philosophy, Shi'a theorists argued that such authoritative (and interpretive) knowledge of Islamic message could only belong to the bloodline of the Prophet, beginning with Ali, and upon his marriage with the Prophet's daughter Fatima, all their direct descendants as the inheritors of the Prophet's spiritual wisdom.<sup>5</sup>

The general framework of the classic Shi'i theory absorbed two further extremely important conceptual additions as the Shi'i history continued to unfold. After the murder of Ali in 661, the Umayyads occupied the office of caliphate and in order to consolidate their grip on power, skilfully induced Ali's elder son, Hassan (d. 669), to abdicate from the caliphate and later, unskilfully, murdered Husayn, the second son of Ali and Fatima on 10 October 680. This historical turning point, while infusing an entirely

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<sup>4</sup> Farhad Daftary, *The Assassin Legends: Myths of the Isma'ilis* (London: I. B. Tauris & Co Ltd Publishers, 2001), pp.9-11.

<sup>5</sup> Abu Abd Allah Muhammad b. Muhammad al-Mufid, *Kitab al-Irshad*, tr. I. K. A. Howard (London: 1981), pp. 34-41.

religious and revolutionary fervour into the Shi'i movement, introduced the tragic concept of martyrology into Shi'i thought. More importantly, as the dramatic massacre of the Prophet's grandson and his family triggered various Shi'i rebellions against the Umayyads' aristocratic tyranny, the leader of one of these avenging revolts, Al-Mukhtar b. Abi Ubayd, proclaimed the descendants of Ali as *Mahdi*, 'the divinely guided one', the messianic restorer of Islam and bringer of ultimate justice. The introduction of the notion of Mahdi as the Shi'i eschatological concept added a potentially-mystic dimension to the already revolutionary Shi'i perspective. Naturally, while such fanciful religious doctrines, combined with a strong taste of political defiance, were in stark contrast with the beliefs of the non-Shi'a Muslim community, the Shi'i revolutionary movement was observed as a political and theological existential threat to the established order of Islamic state. It was within such religio-political settings that Isma'ilism eventually emerged as major sect of Shi'ism in 765.

### *The Genealogy of Isma'ilism*

The chronological account of the emergence of Isma'ilism is, in fact, linear and simple: after various developments and minor yet complex divisions within the original Shi'i movement, the sixth descendant of Ali and Fatima, Ja'far al-Sadiq (d.765) emerged as the rallying point for the allegiance of the scattered Shi'i community. He initiated an intensive intellectual effort to develop a distinctive legal and theological school of thought, connecting the previously separated two concepts of messianic Mahdi and the spiritual imam to produce a unified notion of a divinely guided, infallible and sinless imam as the authoritative spiritual leader of all Muslims. Ironically, while his sophisticated theological arguments sought to unite the Shi'i groups, his death triggered further schism in the Shi'i community. Minor and insignificant sub-branches apart, the question of Imam Sadiq's succession led to the formation of Shi'a's most important branches, the Twelvers and the Isma'ilis, each following a different line of succession. The Twelvers ignored the deceased imam's explicit designation of his eldest son as the heir and instead held Sadiq's living younger son Mousa as the one true imam and inheritor of the Prophet's wisdom. The second faction, however, opposed the Twelvers' 'deviation' and remained faithful to Sadiq's eldest son, Isma'il, who was originally appointed by the imam as the successor, although he predeceased his father. Fortunately he left a son, Mohammad b. Isma'il. Since the second group upheld Mohammad b. Isma'il as the rightful imam, they became known as *Ismayyilia*, or the Isma'ilis, the followers of Isma'il. Fascinatingly, the mysterious sudden vanishing of Mohammad b. Isma'il soon afterwards (possibly murdered) was seen as the imam's occlusion by the early *Ismayyilia*, a notion that ideally matched the Shi'i messianic conception of a Mahdi who resides in unknown location until an unknown time, accidentally reinforcing the early Isma'ilis' ideological coherence.

Not much is known about the history and intellectual life of the earliest Isma'ilis, after their emergence as a well-organized revolutionary religious community with an elaborate doctrinal system in the mid-9<sup>th</sup>

century. Through the adoption of a cyclical view of religious history and a distinctive perception of the cosmological system, the Isma'ili movement preached in the name of the absent Mohammad b. Isma'il, now viewed as the Mahdi, the one whose imminent appearance would establish ultimate justice in the world and initiate the seventh era of human history.<sup>6</sup> For decades the movement remained stateless but engaged in clandestine political activity: a secret group of central leaders, descendant of Mohammad b. Isma'il who succeeded to the leadership of the movement on a hereditary basis, activated a covert network for the creation of a unified Isma'ili movement. Resorting to Imam Sadiq's principle of *taqiyya* or dissimulation to conceal their true identities, the leaders assumed the title of *hujjas*, representatives of Mohammad b. Isma'il and not his descendants. The details of such clandestine organizational arrangements are explained by Abd Allah al-Mahdi, the future founder of the Fatimid dynasty, in a letter to the Yemeni Isma'ilis.<sup>7</sup> At any rate, the last of the secretive Isma'ili leaders emerged from the shadows when Abd Allah al-Mahdi, the absent imam's direct descendant, appeared and made his historic triumphant entry into Raqqada, the former capital of Tunisia and a major Isma'ili centre. He was proclaimed Caliph in January 910. The new caliphate was named *al-Fatimiyyun*, after the Prophet's daughter Fatima whom Abd Allah al-Mahdi and his successors claimed as ancestress, hence the establishment of the Fatimid caliphate as the first Isma'ili state.<sup>8</sup>

*The Rise and Decline  
of the Fatimid Isma'ilis*

Scholars of Isma'ili history unanimously concur that the Fatimid period (910-1171) was, without any doubt, the 'golden age' of the Isma'ili movement. The Isma'ili literature in this period resembles an inclusive and colourful spectrum consisting of various intellectual trends: from Indian mathematics and Neoplatonic cosmology, to Aristotelian political philosophy and Isma'ili poetry and hermeneutics. Isma'ili doctrines were now preached openly throughout the vast Fatimid territories and Isma'ilis could now live without fear of prosecution or repression. In addition, initiating the enduring tradition of Isma'ili states, the Fatimid state assumed a pluralist model of organic government through appointing Jews as vizier, Armenians as military commanders, and Sunni scholars as librarians. Interestingly, due to the absence of the forced conversion policy, the Isma'ili population was never in a decisive majority throughout the Fatimid dominion.<sup>9</sup>

The economic and military prowess of the Fatimid caliphate marked the peak of the Isma'ili challenge to Sunni Islam, then led by the flourishing Abbasid caliphate. Recognizing the threat of the Fatimids,

<sup>6</sup> H. Halm, 'The Cosmology of the Pre-Fatimid Ismailiyya', in *Mediaeval Isma'ili History and Thought*, ed. by F. Daftary (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), pp. 80-83.

<sup>7</sup> For the English translation of the letter see: Husayn al-Hamdani, *On the Genealogy of Fatimid Caliphs* (Cairo: 1958), pp. 6-9.

<sup>8</sup> Daftary, pp. 19-20.

<sup>9</sup> Yaacov Lev, *State and Society in Fatimid Egypt* (London: Brill Academic Pub, 1991), pp. 60-69.



Baghdad organized a systematic anti-Isma'ili intellectual response to Shi'a doctrines in general and Isma'ili doctrines in particular. Muslim heresiographers and polemicists, such as Ibn Rizam-Akhu Mushin and the celebrated Muhammad al-Ghazali (d. 1111), were called upon to develop an Isma'ili 'black legend' based upon three trends: first, the systematic categorization of the Fatimid Isma'ili doctrinal grounds as arch-heresy and atheistic; second, genealogic studies for the refutation of the Fatimid caliphs' claim of being the descendants of the Prophet's family; third, developing conspiracy theories labelling Fatimid Isma'ilis as non-Alid imposters or even Jewish magicians disguised as Muslims intent on destroying Islam from within.<sup>10</sup> Among the astonishingly vast anti-Isma'ili literature of the Abbasids, and later the Saljuqs, al-Ghazali's philosophical treatise, *al-Mustazhiri*, directly commissioned by the Abbasid caliph, is perhaps the most prominent, written in refutation of the Isma'ilis and their imams while upholding the legitimacy of the Abbasid caliphs. As the result of such systematically-organized anti-Isma'ili defamation campaigns, 'black legends' of the Fatimid Isma'ilis were perceived by the Sunni world's public opinion as irrefutable facts.<sup>11</sup>

External hostility aside, the Fatimid caliphate had already begun its general decline throughout the long reign of al-Mustansir (d.1094). Domestic instability, institutional disintegration, constant nomadic raids and vicious enmity among the middle-rank officials of the empire pushed the caliphate to a final stage of fatigue. In a dramatic repetition of the old patterns, the dispute over al-Mustansir's succession in 1094 split the Isma'ili world into two rival branches, the Nizaris and the Musta'lians. Upon the death of the caliph al-Mustansir in 1094, Badr al-Jamali, the all-powerful Armenian general of the Fatimid army, opposed the deceased caliph's designation of his eldest son Abu Mansur Nizar as the successor and promptly arranged a silent coupe d'etat in favour of the caliph's youngest son Abd'l-Qasim Ahmad who was entirely dependent upon the powerful general. The operation succeeded in placing Ahmad on the Fatimid throne with the title of al-Musta'li billah as well as obtaining the endorsement of the Fatimid state's notables. The dispossessed Nizar who had fled to Alexandria was captured soon after and executed by the order of al-Musta'li.

In response to these chaotic developments, or more accurately deteriorations, the eastern Isma'ili communities in Persia, Iraq and Syria, regions with minimal Fatimid political influence and under de-facto administration of Persian Isma'ilis led by the legendary Hassan-i Sabbah, showed no sign of hesitation in supporting Nizar's position in the Nizari-Musta'li succession conflict. Hassan who previously preached the Fatimid message within the Saljuq Turks' dominion of Persia had emerged as the indisputable leader of the Persian Isma'ilis after his seizure of the mountain fortress of Alamut in 1090. Already in a stage of open revolt against the Sunni Saljuq rule, Hassan instantly severed all

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<sup>10</sup> For a detailed account of anti-Isma'ili heresiographies see, for example: W. Ivanow, *The Alleged Founder of Isma'ilism* (Bombay: 1946), pp. 54-72.

<sup>11</sup> Farhad Daftary, *The Isma'ilis: Their History and Doctrines* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2007), pp. 106-7.

relations between the Persian Isma'ilis and the Fatimid headquarters in Cairo.<sup>12</sup> The dual religio-political implications of such a bold decision were, first, the founding of an independent Isma'ili movement, separated from the Fatimid institutions; and second, preparations for the establishment of a Nizari state, on behalf of the Nizari imam who was then inaccessible, as a political entity with the ambitious revolutionary goals of overthrowing the Sunni Saljuq's and challenging the religious authority of the Muslim world. The subsequent seizure of a network of strategically vital, and militarily unconquerable, mountain fortresses as well as the establishment of Isma'ili libraries in each of these castles and the concentration of Persian Isma'ili community in the adjacent territories, marked the consolidation of the Nizari Isma'ili state of Persia and concluded a lengthy chapter in an adventurous Shi'i history that had contributed to the emergence of Persian Nizaris. In spite of its new political independence, however, the Nizari movement inherited a set of theological and philosophical doctrines from the Fatimid predecessors. As the subject of Nizari ideologies during the Alamut era has been the source of almost all Assassin legends and myths, a study of the Fatimid intellectual heritage will establish a theoretical groundwork to assess the subsequent process of Nizari doctrinal evolution.

## **II. The Early and Fatimid Isma'ili Doctrines: An Overview**

In spite of the intrinsic complexity of the Fatimid religio-philosophical system, reviewing Isma'ili pre-Nizari literature reveals the two inter-related general intellectual traditions of Isma'ili theology and philosophical Isma'ilism as the pillars of the Fatimid thought, each containing its own doctrinal components. Analysing each of these intellectual traditions, initially developed by the early Isma'ilis and later fully elaborated by Fatimid scholars and missionaries, provides a comprehensive framework of Isma'ili doctrines prior to the emergence of Nizaris; a framework fit for a comparative study of Nizari doctrinal evolutions, if any.

*The Early Isma'ili Doctrines:  
Imamate, Esoteric Exegesis and Revelational History*

Isma'ili theology in the Fatimid era is primarily an elaborate expansion of the earliest Isma'ili doctrine of the fundamental distinction between the exoteric and the esoteric dimension of sacred scriptures and religious instructions.<sup>13</sup> The implication was that the contents and commandments of all monotheistic revealed scriptures and especially the Qur'an resemble a multi-layered structure of religious meaning, consisting of a literal or apparent meaning (exoteric) and an inner meaning or spiritual truth that is

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<sup>12</sup> Farhad Daftary, *A Short History of The Isma'ilis: Traditions of a Muslim Community* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1998), pp. 106-8.

<sup>13</sup> F. Daftary, 'Intellectual Life among the Isma'ilis: An Overview', in *Intellectual Traditions in Islam*, ed. by F. Daftary (London: I. B. Tauris & Co Ltd, 2000), p. 90.

concealed in the esoteric. In sharp contrast with Sunni thought, while the Isma'ili system of theological categorization observed the Islamic religious law (*sharia*), enunciated by the Prophet himself, to be the exoteric, thus alterable and subject to periodic incremental or fundamental change, it held the esoteric dimension of religious experience, containing the spiritual realities, to be unchallengeable and everlasting. In order to extort the elusive hidden realities from the apparent Qur'anic scripture, Isma'ili theology devised *ta'wil* (esoteric exegesis), a hermeneutical process of extracting the esoteric from the exoteric. The Isma'ili theory of exegesis challenged two of the most ideologically-formidable concepts shared in the Sunni and the Twelver theologies: first, the primarily Sunni notion of *tanzil*, the revelation of scriptures through angelic intermediaries; and second, the Twelver concept of *tafsir*, explanation of the philological meaning of the Qur'an.

The Isma'ili alternative of *ta'wil* strategically linked the two Shi'i notions of political leadership and spiritual authority via an imaginative argument: as the Prophet was appointed by the Divine Will to deliver the Islamic revelation through angelic liaison, Ali, 'the master of *ta'wil*', was charged by the Prophet with the task of deciphering the message's concealed inner truth for the Muslim community; since it would be illogical to assume that such a function could be fulfilled without Ali inheriting the Prophet's undivulged knowledge of the Islamic message's true interpretation. And, as God's universal and the Prophet's semi-universal wisdom would have not abandoned Muslims without an interpreter of divine revelation, therefore Ali's mind was in fact elevated by the Universal Intellect itself to function as the repository of the Prophet's revelational insight, a quality that his descendants (i.e. the Alid imams) retained in accordance with the Prophetic arrangements. Hence, upon such theological basis, the primary function of the Isma'ili imams was to initiate and supervise a transitional paradigm shift in human intellectual existence through three subsequent intertwined stages: a) the transition from exoteric to esoteric, instantly initiating b) the transition from religious law to spiritual reality that would eventually mark c) the initiation into the world of true reality.<sup>14</sup> In most radical departure from the conservative *shari'a*-based Islam, Isma'ilism placed human spiritual salvation upon a gnostic process of evolutionary perfection of spiritual perception rather than mere compliance with the Islamic law.<sup>15</sup> Fascinatingly, and in continuation of the early Isma'ilis' tradition, the pluralist Fatimids extended the possession of the eternal truths to all three Abrahamic religions, arguing that the concealed supreme spiritual truths represented the common message of Judaism, Christianity and Islam. This last, and dangerously pluralist belief, while provoking a legion of furious Sunni heresiographers and polemicists to condemn the Isma'ili inclusive inter-faith perspective, incrementally pushed the Isma'ili doctrinal framework towards a relatively gnostic system of thought. As overtly complex the new Isma'ili gnostic theology was, the two main components of the evolved Isma'ili system of truth were the cyclical history of revelation and a cosmological doctrine. While the doctrine of cyclical history formed the theoretical structure of

<sup>14</sup> M. Ghalib, 'Kitab al-'alim wa'l-ghulam', in *Arba' Kutub Haqqaniyya*, ed. by M. Ghalib (Beirut: 1983), pp. 59-63.

<sup>15</sup> Mu'ayyad fi'l-Din al-Shirazi, *al-Majalis al-Mu'ayyadiyya*, ed. by M. Ghalib, 3 vols (Beirut: 1974-84), I, pp.349-58.

Isma'ili gnostic theology, the doctrine of cosmology later evolved to develop the Isma'ili philosophical theology, also designated as philosophical Isma'ilism.

The Fatimid Isma'ili gnostic theology inherited the fabric of its cyclical interpretation of time from the early Isma'ilis. The pre-Fatimid Isma'ilis adopted a distinctive cyclical view of revelational history that recognized seven prophetic eras of various durations through which the religious history of mankind had gradually evolved. Drawing its chronological account from Qur'anic sources, the early Isma'ilism argued that each of these eras associated a messenger-prophet with a divinely revealed message that in its exoteric aspect contained a religious law.<sup>16</sup> The first six eras were thus respectively inaugurated by Adam, Noah, Abraham, Moses, Jesus and Mohammad. Each was succeeded by a successor (or legatee) whose mind contained the esoteric dimension of his era's inner spiritual truth, Ali b. Abi Talib being Mohammad's in the sixth era. Adding the cyclical aspect to their religious historiography, the early Isma'ilis further argued that each legatee was succeeded by seven imams, the seventh imam of an era would eventually rise to become the next era's messenger-prophet, abolishing the religious law of the previous era and establishing a new one. However, as discussed before, as the early Isma'ilis were influenced by the sudden disappearance of Imam Mohammad b. Isma'il, associated with the romantic Shi'i eschatological concept, they held that the seventh imam of the sixth era, the absent Isma'ili Imam, would return not to establish a new code of religious law but to initiate the final eschatological age in the religious history of humankind as the last of all imams. One could adopt a Platonic metaphor to explain the Isma'ili messianic world: the appearance of the Mahdi would emancipate the enchained men from the Platonic cave of shadows by removing the esoteric/exoteric distinction and reveal to all mankind the concealed esoteric spiritual truth beyond the cave's walls. The early Isma'ili notion of the seventh concluding Imam was, however, abandoned by the Fatimid Isma'ilis who instead recognized the continuity in the imamate, making the commencement of the eschatological age contingent upon the divine reason itself which would designate one future Isma'ili imam as the Mahdi in due time. Obviously, the Fatimid doctrinal alteration of the cyclical view of revelational history would preserve the Shi'i concept of the political legitimacy of the Fatimid caliph-imams, thus maintaining the religio-political coherence of the caliphate.

#### *The Isma'ili Cosmology*

The second essential component of the pre-Nizari Isma'ili world-view was Isma'ili cosmological doctrine, elaborated by the early Isma'ilis and the Fatimids in two separate styles, gnostic and philosophical, respectively. The early Isma'ili cosmology represents the classical Isma'ili philosophical theology that remained mainly revelational rather than rational. According to Samuel Stern's investigation of the early Isma'ilim's obscured literature on cosmology, the Isma'ili cosmological system was a representation of Isma'ili soteriology, the doctrine of salvation. The sole emphasis of

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<sup>16</sup> Daftary, *Intellectual Traditions in Islam*, p. 92.

Isma'ili soteriology was upon the notion of knowledge as being made accessible to man by the messenger-prophets and their successors: knowledge of God, the universe, creation, the mind and mankind's origins. In this doctrine, salvation ultimately depended on the quality and quantity of overall knowledge. The exponential enhancement of human knowledge, resembling the quest for penetrating through the veils of the exoteric, would increase the possibility of salvation. Therefore, the ultimate objective of human salvation is the soul's progression through the exoteric world of appearances towards a realm of spiritual truth where the mind of God itself can be sensed. The ascending quest for spiritual salvation which involves the purification of the soul requires guidance provided by an authorized hierarchy of teachers who may reveal the true meaning of the revelation. These teachers, or 'wellsprings of wisdom', are in fact the Prophet, Ali and his successors.<sup>17</sup> Such descriptions show that the pre-Fatimid cosmological doctrines, primarily based upon a gnostic cosmogonic myth, resembled the early Isma'ilis' attempt to interrelate the doctrines of cyclical revelational history and the Shi'i notion of imamate, hence the Isma'ili gnostic 'imam-centric' world-view.

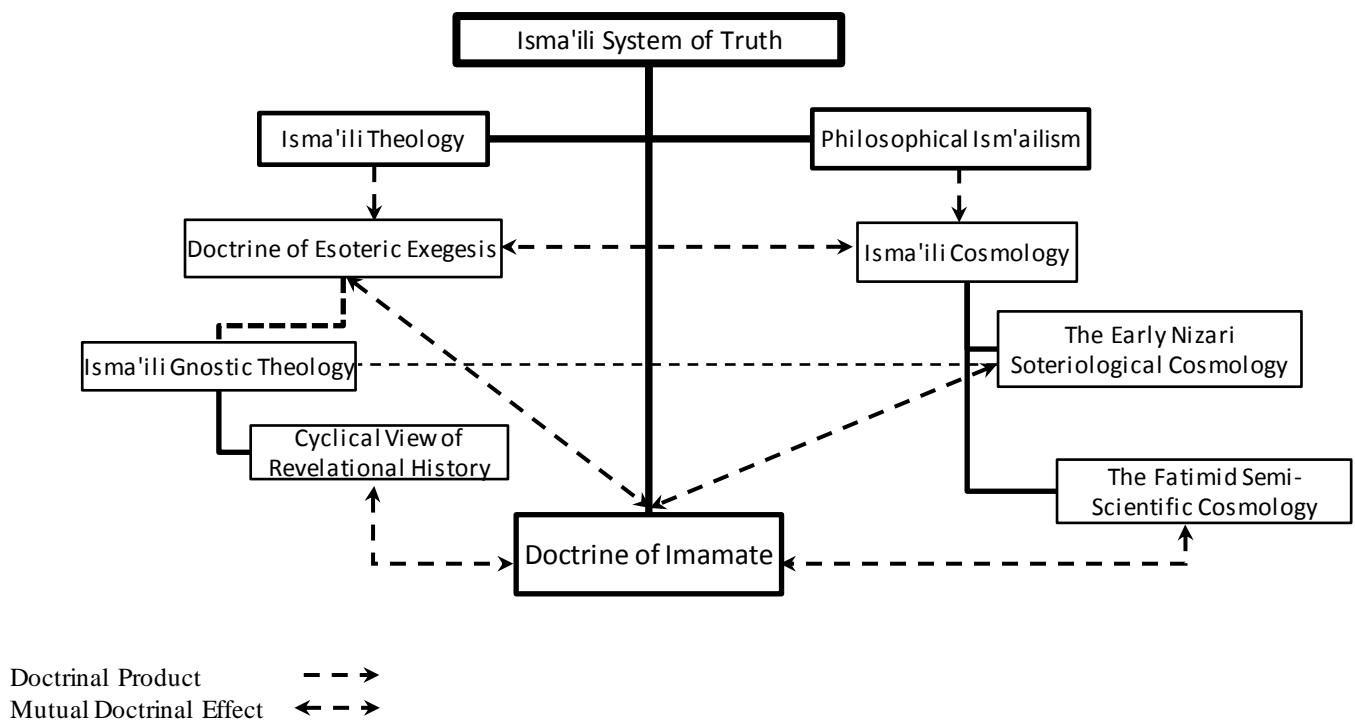
In contrast to the early Isma'ili linear cosmological doctrine, the Fatimids elaborated a sophisticated semi-scientific system of cosmic order, influenced by Neoplatonic doctrines. By the advent of the Islamic translation movement in the beginning of the 10<sup>th</sup> century, the intellectual heritage of the classical Greek, including logic, metaphysics and philosophy, were introduced to the Fatimid Isma'ilis who instantly and feverishly immersed themselves in the study of Plato, Aristotle and especially Plotinus. As Neoplatonic philosophy proved exceedingly attractive to the Persian Isma'ili scholars, a systematic attempt was initiated to harmonize the classical Isma'ili theology with Neoplatonic doctrines. The result was a modified Fatimid cosmology that, as proposed by Marshall Hodgson, resembles an astronomical model of reductionism both in method and content.<sup>18</sup> Similar to scientific method of discovering the pattern of celestial entities' spatial distribution via a retrospective extrapolation of their present tendencies, the Fatimid Isma'ilis attempted to trace back the complexity of all existence through a principle of logical priorities to a primeval simplicity. The Fatimid Isma'ili cosmological conception of rational order explained the logical sequence of the hierarchy of natural universe in the following reverse order: the orders of the earth creatures (i.e. animal, vegetable, mineral) were formed by the mixing of the four classical elements (i.e. air, water, earth, fire); the four elements were derived from the principles of wet/dry and hot/cold; these principles were formed by more ultimate principles of time and space and Ptolemaic system's of planetary spheres; the motion of such quintessential forces and celestial bodies occurs within the consciousness of the *nafs al-kull* (the Universal Soul), itself being the extension of *aql al-kull* (the Universal Intellect). Even as the Universal Intellect represents the final principle of reason, logic and order, it yet must be commanded by an absolute logic, unknowable, self-sufficient, self-

<sup>17</sup> S. M. Stern, 'The Earliest Cosmological Doctrines of Isma'ilism', in *Studies in Early Isma'ilism*, ed. by S. M. Stern (Jerusalem: 1983), pp. 9-16.

<sup>18</sup> Marshall G. S. Hodgson, *The Secret Order of Assassins: The Struggle of the Early Nizari Isma'ilis Against the Islamic World* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2005).

contained, ultimate source of being, beyond time and space, effected by and effecting nothing: that, the Fatimid cosmology concluded, is God.<sup>19</sup> On this basis, the learned Persian Isma'ili scholar, Abu Yaq'ub al-Sijistani, refuted the Sunni notions of anthropomorphism and divine attributes through a dialectic of double negation, thus abolishing the premises of the Sunnis doctrine that emphasized on the philological analysis of the sacred scriptures as a method to perceive God.<sup>20</sup>

The Neoplatonized Isma'ili cosmology eventually replaced the earlier mythological cosmology of classical Isma'ili theology. The methodology used in the Fatimid cosmology was later applied to the early Isma'ili thought to develop the pre-Nizari distinctive system of thought; a system that successfully maintained the balance between the rational and gnostic elements. The eventual structure of Fatimid philosophical theology as the Isma'ili system of truth is intertwined, beautifully symmetric, well-balanced and theoretically self-sufficient. Within the interactive structure of this doctrinal system, the centrality of the doctrine of imamate is systematically maintained (See Author's Figure I). Perhaps it was because of such merits that the Isma'ili intellectual tradition appealed not only to the non-Isma'ili Muslim but also a variety of non-Islamic religious communities. Nevertheless, with the eventual demise of the Fatimid dominion, the early Nizari Isma'ilis under the leadership of Hassan-i Sabbah inherited this sophisticated doctrinal pattern as the religio-political framework.



**Figure I. The Pre-Nizari Isma'ili Doctrinal System**

<sup>19</sup> Hodgson, pp. 15-16.

<sup>20</sup> W. Madelung, 'Aspects of Isma'ili Theology: The Prophetic Chain and the God Beyond Being', in *Isma'ili Contribution to Islamic Culture*, ed. S. H. Nasr (Tehran: Tehran University Press, 1977), pp. 55-62.

### III. Nizari History and Doctrines in the Alamut Era: Phase I (1090-1164)

By the time of the Nizari/Musta'li crisis of 1094 and the subsequent religio-political schism in Isma'ili movement, the socio-religious foundations of what was to become the Nizari Isma'ili state of Persia and Syria had already been constructed by Hassan-i Sabbah, a Persian *da'i* (Isma'ili missionary) appointed by the Fatimid headquarter of Cairo to preach the Isma'ili message in Persia, then under the widely detested administration of the Saljuq Turks. Parallel to the decline of the Fatimid power, Hassan, the future first of the Three Lords of Alamut, had emerged as the unrivalled leader of Persian Isma'ilis. Via developing a complex covert pro-Isma'ili operational network for attracting public support and gaining strategically-sensitive political allies in the ruling system, he triggered a 'nation-state' building process even prior to the 1094 succession dispute. As Hassan's greater strategies later transformed the societal-level 'process' to a geopolitical-level 'project', the historical account of the political and intellectual activities of Hassan forms the very cornerstone of the entire Nizari establishment in the Alamut Era.

In contrast to the availability and abundance of Fatimid resources, accessing Nizari historical and doctrinal literature produced during the Alamut period is perhaps the most difficult task in Isma'ili studies. Contrary to their Fatimid predecessor, Nizari Isma'ilis were predominantly concerned with the survival of their community and occupied with continuous military campaigns against various regional and trans-regional foes. As the result, while the Fatimids produced capable theologians and philosophers for the sake of intellectual competition with the Abbasids, the Nizaris had to produce distinguished military commanders and strategists fit for constant armed conflicts and complex games of political alliances. Moreover, the adoption of Persian as the religious language of the Nizari institution effectively limited Persian Nizaris' access to the Fatimid Arabic texts, thus reducing Fatimid-oriented scholarship among Nizar Isma'ilis. Ironically, this very fact contributed to the doctrinal originality of the remaining Nizari sources. Finally, the Mongol invasion destroyed the bulk of Nizari texts preserved in the libraries of Alamut and other major Nizari fortresses. As the Syrian Nizaris were spared the Mongol catastrophe, they succeeded in preserving at least a part of Nizari literature, however their libraries were also subjected to later systematic destruction by Mamluks and Alawis. Yet, there are still various sources accessible to researches, however all fragmented and in methodological disarray: the primary source of information on the legendary founder of Nizari state, Hassan-i Sabbah and the Nizari first phase's doctrines is an anonymous biography entitled *Sargudhasht-i Sayyidna* (the Life of Our Lord) that has not survived directly but fortunately has been preserved fragmentarily in the historical works of Ala al-Din Juwayni, Rashid al-Din Fadl Allah and al-Shahrastani.<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>21</sup> Ala al-Din Ata-Malik Juwayni, *Tarikh-i jahan-gushay*, ed. M. Gazwini (Leiden and London: 1912-37), vol. 3, pp.186-216; Rashid al-Din Fadl Allah, *Jami' al-tawarikh: qismat-i Isma'iliyan va Fatimiyan va Nizariyan va da'iyān va rafi'qan*, ed. M. T. Danishpazhuh and M. Mudarrisi Zanjan (Tehran: 1959), pp. 97-137; Abu'l-Fath Muhammad b. 'Abd al-Karim al-Shahrastani, *Kitab al-milal wa'l-nihal*, ed. by A. F. Muhammad, Vol. I (Cairo: 1948).

According to *Sargudhasht*, Hassan-i Sabbah was born in mid-1050s in Qumm in central Persia into a Twelver Shi'i family. Taking the oath of allegiance to the Isma'ili caliph-imam of the time, al-Mustansir, at the age of seventeen, Hassan received his Isma'ili educations directly from Abd al-Malik b. Attash, the chief Isma'ili *da'i* in Persia, at the secret Isma'ili headquarters of Isfahan in the heart of the Saljuq Empire. On the recommendation of Ibn Attash, Hassan travelled to the Fatimid capital in 1078 to expand his knowledge of Isma'ili thought as well as advancing his career as a novice *da'i*. While most of Hassan's experiences during his three years in Egypt are unknown, *Sargudhasht* clearly indicates that he was affected by the growing tension in the Capital over the prospect of succession of the dying Caliph. Remarkable for a young foreigner, Hassan was astoundingly active in the field of the Empire's 'high politics': he passionately supported the Caliph's heir-designate, Nizar, against the all-powerful Badr al-Jamali and his pre-emptive arrangements to assume power through overriding the Caliph's original designation. The historian Ibn al-Athir even goes as far as reporting a private conversation between the Caliph Mustansir himself and Hassan regarding the question of succession in which the ailing Mustansir confides to Hassan that Nizar was the only legitimate heir to the throne of the imamate/caliphate.<sup>22</sup> Such suspiciously romantic accounts aside, Hassan was forced to move to Alexandria as the base of low-intensity political resistance to the Armenian General. While he clearly sensed Cairo's blind fall into the decadence of internal power politics and the resulting lack of a trans-regional strategic outlook, Hassan's visit to Alexandria revealed to him the significant decline of the Fatimid military power too. Disillusioned yet illuminated, Hassan departed Egypt to return to Persia in 1081 with a clear assessment of the Fatimid potentials to serve the Isma'ili cause.

As an acute observer, Hassan-i Sabbah's precise and objective evaluation of the Fatimid's military and political capacities contributed greatly to the formation of his unique strategic perspective in regard to the future of Isma'ili movement in general, and Persian Isma'ilis in particular. Central to Hassan's outlook was his ideological and political opposition to the Saljuq administration of Persia: on the ideological level, the Saljuqs represented an oppressive Sunni institution with excessively harsh policies towards the Isma'ilis, bound to suffocate the Shi'a ideology in their realm. On the political level, the Saljuq Turks were alien elements in Persia and greatly detested by Persians of various social classes. This latter nationalistic factor in the perspective of the founder of Persian Isma'ili state signifies a critical departure from Islam's fundamental non/anti-nationalistic framework. At any rate, contrary to the Persian Isma'ilis initial hope for inspiring an interventionist Fatimid policy to assist them in their anti-Saljuq struggle, Hassan's experience in Egypt had convinced him of the Fatimids' lack of political resolve and military means to effectively engage the Saljuqs as the major military power in the Near

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<sup>22</sup> Izz al-Din Abu'l-Hasan Ali b. Muhammad Ibn al-Athir, *Tarikh al-kamil* (Cairo: 1885), p. 64.



East. On the basis of such political realities, the Persian Isma'ilis' struggle against the ruling Sunni Turks had to be conducted independently and, considering the nature of the conflict, in a revolutionary phase. Persian Isma'ilis were alone in their fight and an independent policy was required to organize and direct all scattered efforts. This insight led Hassan to develop his unique revolutionary strategy to counter the Saljuqs.

The general framework of Hassan's initial strategy later became the main source of Nizari power throughout the three centuries of the Alamut period. As a capable military and political strategist, Hassan-i Sabbah quickly recognized and included the Saljuqs' absolute military superiority and administrative coherence as the two fundamental variables in his grand strategy for uprooting their rule. In response to such obstacles, Hassan devised a multi-layered strategy to a) challenge, b) exhaust and c) destroy the enemy's insurmountable military force and formidable structure of political power through a gradual process. This strategy consisted of two main components: first, the development of a network of mountainous castles and second, assassination of religio-political adversaries.

*The Policies of Persian Isma'ilis' Strategy:  
Mountain Castles Network and Assassination*

*"Fear, and be slain."*

*(Richard II, William Shakespeare)*

At the heart of this strategy was a network of impregnable mountain fortresses, established in the periphery of the enemy's territorial lands. The totality of the network had to be able to logistically support and strategically conduct a wide range of symmetric/asymmetric operations while sustaining the longest of sieges. According to Hassan-i Sabbah's elaboration of the concept of the Isma'ili castle, a fortress must be a centre of intellectual activity as well as a military base: the establishment of libraries was paramount to all major Isma'ili castles as the ideological operations were as important as military campaigns. In addition, the local Isma'ili population could concentrate in areas within the effective range of regional castles for protection against all external threats. At the centre of this fortified organic network would stand one symbolic unconquerable castle to coordinate and synchronise the network's operations as well as embodying the Persian Isma'ilis' power. As each major castle would act as the regional command centre of the Isma'ili revolt, the synchronized operation of the entire network would gradually remove the Saljuqs' administrative influence locality by locality through a) challenging the predominantly conventional Saljuq military to exhaust its momentum in prolonged castle warfare that would lead to b) the creation of a power void that could be filled with c) local Isma'ili rule, eventually leading to d) the establishment of a fragmented Isma'ili realm reliant upon the authority of the central castle. Resembling a noose, the network would tighten around the centre of Saljuq power and moving inward until the enemy's complete institutional and moral fatigue, hence its eventual collapse. This

formulated concept of castle-centric strategy became the most iconic characteristic of all Nizari Isma'ili activities in the Alamut era.

Through the adoption of such revolutionary strategies the mode of the Persian Isma'ili organization instantly changed. Hassan-i Sabbah's cunning seizure of the Alamut castle in Northern Iran from its Saljuq master through lengthy and patient preparations in 1090 signalled the transformation of a formerly clandestine Isma'ili movement into an open armed revolt against the Saljuqs, also marking the effective foundation of the future independent Nizari Isma'ili state.<sup>23</sup> As the first and central piece in Hassan's grand strategy, the Alamut's fortifications and storage facilities were improved to establish a virtually impregnable castle. Once firmly installed at Alamut (in local language: 'the Eagle Nest'), Hassan extended his influence into adjacent regions of Rudbar and Daylam by seizing further castles and winning more Isma'ili converts among the local population. In an astonishingly fast pace of events, while the systematic fortification of conquered castles and the increasing success of the Isma'ili religio-political message among the locals enabled Hassan to swiftly consolidate the Alamut's power over all northern regions of Persia, he even succeeded in expanding his scope of influence as far as western Persia, into Quhistan in south-eastern Khurasan. Then, under the tyrannical rule of Saljuq-designated local *amir*, the local population instantly responded to the Alamut call for revolt in 1091 by a large-scale popular uprising, capturing numerous castles and several key towns, thus effectively terminating the Saljuq rule in Quhistan. Hassan-i Sabbah quickly activated the Isma'ili network of Quhistan, making that region the second major Isma'ili territory after Rudbar.

The Saljuqs, overwhelmed and confused by the scale of the uprising and the depth of Hassan's strategy, reacted hastily to the Isma'ili hegemonic challenge by sending major expeditions against Alamut and other major Isma'ili castles in 1092. Upon the initiation of the large-scale military confrontation phase, the second component of Hassan's strategy was activated: assassination as a method of asymmetric and psychological warfare. From the beginning of the revolt, Hassan had detected the decentralized nature of Saljuq rule. After the death of the formidable Saljuq sultan Malik Shah, the political structure of the Saljuq Empire had been subject to a process of military and political power devolution, from the centre to the peripheries: as the result, Saljuq dominion had transformed from a unitary centralized government to a set of local semi-autonomous principalities under the rule of regional Turkish *amirs*. Under such conditions, as the first layer of strategy aimed to remove these regional influences one by one via a network of strongholds, assassination of notable Saljuq officials and other strategic targets would facilitate the process. Besides, the numerically inferior Persian Isma'ilis could not hope to defeat the entire Saljuq army in the open field. From the military perspective, even if Persian Isma'ilis could muster armies large enough to destroy the Saljuq military might, the decentralization of the Saljuq state

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<sup>23</sup> Farhad Daftary, 'Nizari Isma'ili History during the Alamut Period', in *The Isma'ilis: Their History and Doctrines*, p. 315-6.

had left no one single sultan, one who would be central to the existence of the state, to be removed. Therefore, the policy of assassinating enemy combatants (e.g. military commanders, Saljuq ministers, etc) was the most optimized strategic option available to Alamut.

The assassination policy was implemented methodically. The assignments were carried out by superbly-trained self-sacrificing devotees known as *fidais*. Using daggers as the main weapon, the assassinations were carried out in two forms for achieving the intended goals: first, the targets were assassinated within the heavily protected walls of their palaces. In addition to the physical elimination of the intended target, the first method aimed at creating an atmosphere of fear and insecurity among other Saljuq officials by demonstrating the depth of Isma'ili infiltration into the innermost layers of Saljuq armies and government. As a perfect form of psychological warfare, the method became so effective that several Saljuq princes, such as Barqiyaruk, began wearing chain mail under their clothes within their private halls.<sup>24</sup> In the second method, the assassinations were conducted in public in the most daring ways. Aiming to communicate to a wider range of audience, the secondary objective of the second method was to demonstrate the level of courage and devotion of Persian Isma'ilis to the public as well as to the Saljuq military. As Persian Isma'ilis unleashed their psychological and asymmetric operations upon the Saljuqs with great precision, Alamut's assassination policy proved to be too successful: any significant political or apolitical murders within the central Islamic lands, or even natural death of notable officials, irrelevant of the Alamut involvement, were attributed to the mysterious plots of Alamut and its fearsome shadows. Ironically, such rumours and the increasing fear of the Isma'ili dagger were even more beneficial to Hassan's plans and his secret weapon which was fear itself, the most powerful weapon of all.

At this stage, Hassan-i Sabbah had succeeded in founding an autonomous territorial state for Persian Isma'ilis, a principality within the Saljuq Empire. When the succession crisis of Nizar-Musta'li occurred in 1094, the foundations for a potential independent state had already been constructed. He was now referred to as the Lord of Alamut, a title that his successors in the first phase of Nizari history also inherited. The Isma'ili hegemonic challenge initiated an endless series of military confrontations between bold Persian Isma'ilis, now possessing a major territorial state, and the challenged Saljuqs.<sup>25</sup>

*Hassan and the Establishment  
of the Nizari Isma'ili Da'wa*

As discussed earlier, the successional dispute permanently divided the Isma'ili movement into two factions: Nizari and Musta'li. The new tragic developments in Cairo, however, would be a political and

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<sup>24</sup> Peter Willey, *Eagle's Nest: Isma'ili Castles in Iran and Syria* (London: I. B. Tauris Publishers, 2005), p. 32.

<sup>25</sup> For a comprehensive account of the Persian Isma'ili-Saljuq military confrontations, see: Carole Hillenbrand, 'The Power Struggle between the Saljuqs and the Isma'ilis of Alamut, 487-518/1094-1124: The Saljuq Perspective', in *Mediaeval Isma'ili History & Thought*, ed. by F. Daftary (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), pp. 205-20.

ideological opportunity for Hassan-i Sabbah who had already devised his nationalistic policy agenda independently of Cairo: in addition to Hassan's original opposition to Badr al-Jamali and his ambitious schemes, he viewed the Fatimid caliphate as fragile, ineffective and in moral and political decline. Thus, passionately upholding Nizar's right to succession, Hassan did not hesitate in severing all relations with the 'usurper' Musta'li and his Fatimid headquarters. As a result of such a decision, Hassan-i Sabbah, unanimously supported by the bulk of Persian Isma'ili community, founded an independent Isma'ili movement in the form of the nascent Nizari Isma'ili *da'wa* (mission).

The establishment of the Nizari movement inevitably raised the fundamental question of Nizari imamate in the absence of the rightful imam. The execution of Nizar had left the nascent movement without an accessible caliph/imam. In a political manoeuvre to maintain the ideological coherence of the organization, Hassan endorsed the right of Nizar to the imamate, intentionally avoided revealing the name of Nizar's successor to the leadership of Nizari Isma'ilis. Despite the Nizari community's awareness of the existence of Nizar's male progeny, the unknown identity of the Nizari imam re-created an atmosphere identical to the early Isma'ili perception of the concealed imam and the messianic notion of Mahdi. In this context, the Nizaris entered a new 'age of concealment' (*dawr al-satr*) similar to the pre-Fatimid Isma'ilis who were awaiting the reappearance of Mohammad b. Isma'il. The critical similarity between the early Isma'ilis and the Nizaris' view of concealment was in the fact that both awaited the return of an imam whose identity was unknown to them.

Considering the fact that the Fatimids had excluded the concept of the 'hidden imam' from their theological system, the early Nizari re-establishment of the notion of the imam's occlusion indicates a change in Isma'ili doctrinal patterns. As a result of Hassan's decision, the re-adoption of the concept naturally associated with re-installation of the office of *hujja*, the representatives of the hidden imam. In a doctrinal return to the pre-Fatimid Isma'ili pattern, Nizaris hold that since in the absence of the Nizari imam his *hujja* would represent the concealed imam's wills and thoughts, the *hujja* was eligible for the leadership of the Nizari community in the interim period until the appearance of imam himself. In spite of entrusting the religio-political authority to the *hujja* (i.e. Hassan-i Sabbah), it is critical to note that the office of *hujjas* never undermined the image of Nizar and his offspring as the community's rightful caliph/imam. The inscriptions on restored coins from the first phase of Alamut era carry the Nizar's official caliphate title, al-Mustafa li-Din Allah, as well as a blessing for his anonymous offspring.<sup>26</sup>

A concise Nizari reformulation of this Early Isma'ili theory with an explicit emphasis on the imminent return of the concealed imam is represented in *Haft bab-i Baba Sayyidna* ('Seven Chapters of Our

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<sup>26</sup> For a detailed discussion on Nizari Isma'ili coins, see: George. C. Miles, 'Coins of the Assassin of Alamut', *Orientalia Lovaniensia Periodica*, 3 (1972), 155-62.

Grandmaster'), the earliest Nizari treatise attributed to Hassan-i Sabbah, written in about 1200.<sup>27</sup> Unsurprisingly, the treatise re-affirms Hassan as the *hujja* of the hidden Nizari imam, a re-affirmation that was systematically extended also to Hassan's two successors. As for the Nizari community's general sentiments in regard to the question of leadership, historians Rashid al-Din and Juwayni both confirm that Hassan was automatically and widely endorsed as the *hujja* soon after the 1094 schism and prior to the authorship of the *Haft bab*.

Yet, more interestingly, both historians also refer to the contemporary Persian Nizari community's widespread belief that Hassan-i Sabbah had ordered a clandestine operation to rescue Nizar's son from Alexandria and have him brought to the Alamut for protection.<sup>28</sup> The belief that Nizar's son was living within the walls of the Eagle's Nest was so widely accepted among Isma'ilis of the Near East that the Fatimid headquarters which had long embarked on the policy of discrediting Nizari claims to religio-political authority responded by distributing an anti-Nizari polemical epistle in 1122.<sup>29</sup> The epistle, issued by the Fatimid caliph al-Amir bi-Ahkam Allah, who was aware of the power of the Nizari Persians, was an attempt to refuse Nizar's claim to the imamate, as well as the legitimacy of 'any possible descendants', on theological grounds. The aforementioned belief of the Persian Nizari community played a key role later at the beginning of the second phase of the Alamut period.

Such inter-Isma'ili quarrels aside, as the Nizari-Fatimid ideological split deepened, the Nizaris gradually developed their own doctrine of imamate to challenge the Sunni Abbasid world, a new doctrinal approach known as the 'new preaching' by the contemporary observers outside the Nizari circle. At the heart of this the new approach, aiming to challenge the religious authority of the Abbasid Baghdad, was the reformulated doctrine of *ta'lim*, the early Nizaris' fundamental contribution to the Isma'ili thought and one of the most sophisticated reformulations ever conducted in the history of mediaeval Islamic thought.

*'The New Preaching' and  
the Doctrine of Ta'lim*

Contrary to the 11<sup>th</sup> century non-Nizari Muslim scholars' belief that the Alamut's religio-political theory was an entirely 'new preaching' (*al-da'wa al-jadida*) in contrast to the 'old [Fatimid Isma'ili] preaching' (*al-da'wa al-qadima*), the Nizari doctrine of *ta'lim* is in fact a sophisticated reformulation of the previously discussed traditional Shi'a theory of imamate. The theoretical structure of the doctrine of *ta'lim* was fully elaborated by Hassan-i Sabbah in the philosophical treatise *Chahar fasl* ('The Four Chapters'), written entirely in Persian. Fortunately, the treatise has been preserved in an abridged Arabic

<sup>27</sup> The treatise of '*Haft bab-i Baba Sayyidna*' can be found in: Abu'l-Fath Muhammad b. 'Abd al-Karim al-Shahrastani, *Kitab al-milal wa'l-nihal*, ed. by A. F. Muhammad (Cairo: 1948), i, 330-60, (pp. 345-59).

<sup>28</sup> Rashid al-Din, *Jami' al-tawarikh*, pp.79, 166-8, and Juwayni, *Tarikh-i jahan-gushay*, vol. 3, pp. 180-1, 231-7.

<sup>29</sup> al-Amir bi-Ahkam Allah, 'al-Hidaya al-Amiriyaa', in *Majmu'at al-Watha'iq al-Fatimiyya*, ed. by Jamal al-Din al-Shayyal (Cairo: 1958), pp. 23-4.

format by the historian and theologian al-Shahrastani in his seminal heresiographical work, '*Kitab al-milal wa'l-nihal*', written in 1127. The content of Hassan's treatise embodies the general ideological perspective of the Nizari Isma'ilis during the Alamut era and the consecutive post-Alamut periods.

The treatise's theoretical starting point is the early Shi'a principle that if the Divine Will has appointed prophets for the spiritual guidance of mankind according to the Universal Wisdom, then the individual has no right to depend on his own arbitrary decisions in religious and/or spiritual matters. Therefore mankind needs an authoritative teacher through whose divinely-illuminated teaching (*ta'lim*) he may seize the hidden spiritual truth of religion. According to this early Shi'a notion and the early Isma'ili concept of revelational history, such authoritative teachers (in the Islamic context) are none but the Prophet, his legatee Ali and the Alid imams of time who are all designated by the divine ordinance. The Shi'a further argued that these teachers are in possession of a unique religious knowledge (*ilm*), its source being Universal Wisdom itself, equipping the teachers/imams with transcendental spiritual insight. Rejecting the communal choice, the Shi'a emphasis on the inalienable divine right notion was (and still is) a retrospective criticism of the Sunni abandonment of the principle of authoritative teaching since the first century of Islam and the election of the first three caliphs. As noted before, the Shi'a systematically argued that as it would be contrary to the God's absolute wisdom and justice to abandon the Muslim community without an explicitly designated successor to the Prophet, and such a successor was 'obviously' Ali and his descendants, then the Sunni doctrine of election by community would be illogical, against reason, against the natural order of the organic Islamic society, and contrary to the divine revelation itself. The final notion of the Sunni doctrine contradicting the divine revelation was based on the Shi'a belief that the Prophet had in fact directly appointed Ali as his legatee in his last pilgrimage. The crux of this traditional principle of religious teaching was adopted by Hassan-i Sabbah for developing the Nizari doctrine of *ta'lim*.

Based on the al-Shahrastani's version of the treatise, Hassan's reformulation is conducted via four propositions.<sup>30</sup> In the first proposition, Hassan first reasserts the insufficiency of mankind's intellectual capacity for understanding the religious truth as well as perceiving the mind of God. By raising a series of premises and analogies, Hassan attempts to refute the philosophers' doctrine of rationalism by which individual reason is viewed as the ultimate tool for discovering the absolute truth about God. According to Hassan's reasoning, either man needs a teacher to understand God, or he himself is capable of such a task; if he himself is capable, he cannot prefer his own speculations to another's since denying another's views is an implicit teaching of him.<sup>31</sup> Yet, as there are diverse and conflicting approaches to the task of understanding God, maintaining one particular view is equal to accepting one's authority. It seems that Hassan is referring to a set of infinite religious doctrines, each without any significant rational

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<sup>30</sup> Abu'l-Fath Muhammad b. 'Abd al-Karim al-Shahrastani, *Kitab al-milal wa'l-nihal*, ed. by A. F. Muhammad (Cairo: 1948), i, 330-360, (pp. 339-345).

<sup>31</sup> Hodgson, p. 55.

superiority over any other: inside the set, the proliferation of doctrines and views oblige one to seek an original insight to discover the right pattern as the diversity has created ultimate confusion. Therefore, as the first proposition eliminates the authority of rationality, mankind's need for a teacher is thus established.

Within the same theoretical continuum as the first proposition, the second proposition aims at outlining the essential qualitative and quantitative characteristics of the teacher, respectively. First, compatible with the general Shi'a position, Hassan argues that the teacher must be trustworthy and authoritative (*sadiq*). Here authority is defined in terms of intrinsic intellectual/spiritual capital given by the divine ordinance, an unrivalled abundance of religious knowledge, a spiritual insight that cannot be obtained, matched or surpassed via education or any other means. The second quality is deducted from the first: as the teacher must be the highest of all authorities, and the hierarchy of authority always resembles a pyramid model, then the only logical conclusion is that there can be only one single divinely-appointed authority. That unrivalled arbiter, Hassan joyfully includes, is the imam of every age. The second proposition's dual qualities are in sharp contrast with the Sunni tradition of the multiplicity of religious scholars (*ulama*) as well as the more recent similar Twelvers' tradition. In his intentionally provocative argumentative statements, Hassan systematically criticises the plurality in the matter of religious authority as a fundamentally false practice, specifically targeting the nature of Abbasid religious system: either there is one teacher, or more; if more, either one claims greater authority than others, or not; if one does, one is either truly authoritative and is the imam of the age, or one is false in his claim; if none claims higher authority, none is authoritative; and if none is authoritative, any teacher will do since their knowledge is equally finite and inadequate. Combined with this line of reasoning, if none is authoritative and there is no divinely-designated imam as the only authoritative teacher, then the Muslim community is abandoned and neglected by God; since such logical yet inconceivable consequence is contrary to the absolute qualities of the Universal Being, we must go back to the first two descriptive premises to avoid sacrilege: a) the teacher must be the absolute authority, and b) there must be more than zero and less than two of such teacher. As Hodgson puts it, Hassan's destruction of the 'egalitarianism of the Sunni legists' is methodically complete.<sup>32</sup>

In the third proposition, however, Hassan-i Sabbah aims mercilessly to destroy the pre-Nizari Shi'a principle of *ta'lim* itself, this time to an unprecedented extent. As stated in the second proposition, either the authority of the teacher (i.e. the imam) must be verified or all teachers with their finite knowledge and inadequate insight must be regarded as authoritative. The second scenario takes us back to beginning of the second proposition's loop-like argument. The first scenario, however, presents logical implications disastrous for the Shi'i doctrine: Hassan simply asks that how one's authority is to be demonstrated. Naturally, as a master can verify his apprentice's inferior knowledge, a higher authority is

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<sup>32</sup> Hodgson, p. 55.

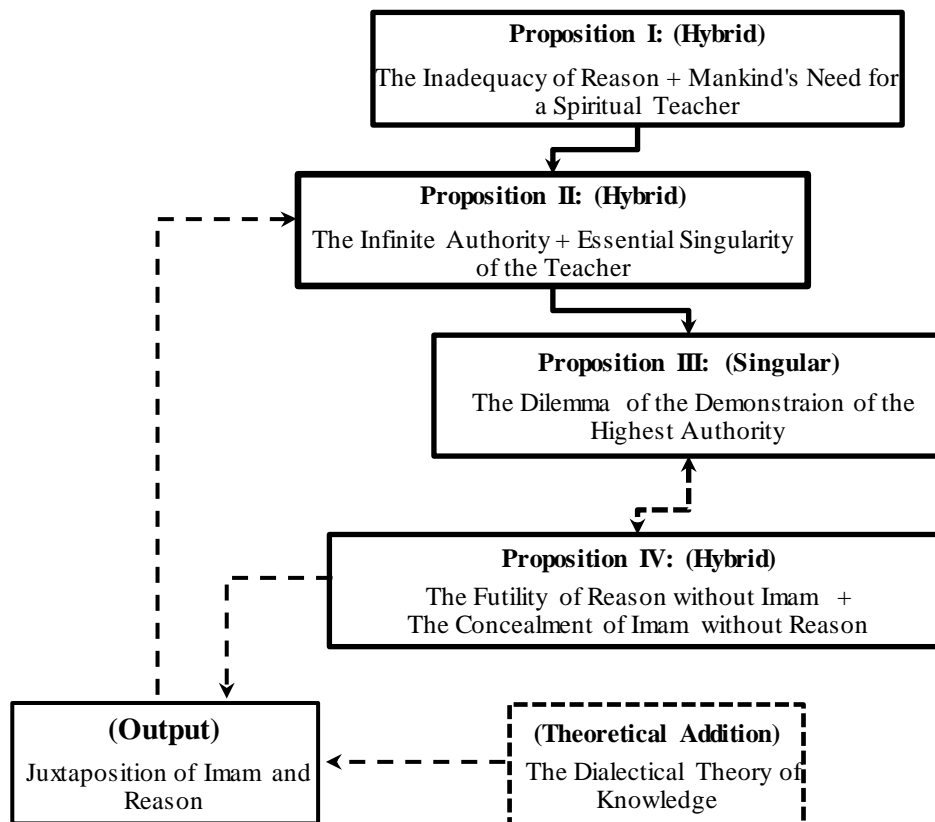
required to measure and judge one's lower authority. In the most optimistic of conditions, one arbitrator can demonstrate another's authority which is equal to his own. But Hassan then asks how the authority of the authoritative teacher/imam should be verified? If none is more authoritative than him, if there is no higher authority for our demonstration, how can the infinity of his religious knowledge be verified? In the absence of a religious/spiritual knowledge 'touchstone', the traditional Shi'a doctrine of *ta'lim* is equally obliterated as the philosopher's doctrine of rationality and the Sunni tradition of multiplicity of religious scholars.

The fourth proposition is Hassan's philosophical attempt to solve the dilemma through reformulating the question in such a way as to arrive at a result in favour of the Nizari Isma'ili imam. As stated earlier, the Shi'a position struggles with a theoretical obstacle in regard to the verification of the imam's authority as the principle of 'comparison and evaluation' cannot be applied. However, the faithful Hassan assumes that the Shi'a position cannot be false since the first and the second proposition successfully establish mankind's need for the single authoritative sanctioned spiritual teacher. Therefore, the root of the problem presented by the third proposition should be in the evaluative principle. Hassan argues that if one abandons the classic principle of 'comparison and evaluation' and instead applies a dialectical principle on the case, the authority of the teacher can be demonstrated through the very nature of knowledge. If the dialectical principle is defined as achieving true knowledge via contrasting two opposites that can only be understood through one another, the relationship between the one who seeks the true knowledge and the imam as the only portal to such knowledge can be explained. Hassan's dialectical theory of knowledge states that while, for example, the Necessary can only be recognized by juxtaposition with the Possible and the Possible can only be known by juxtaposition with the Necessary, the two contrasts are incomprehensible without the other. The application of this theory signifies the existence of a dialectic between the imam and the reason. On one hand, the first and the second propositions show the individual's reasoning's need for the authoritative teacher, that being the imam; therefore, the two propositions demonstrate the unintelligibility of the reason without the imam. On the other hand, the third proposition shows the unintelligibility of the imam himself without reason; without reason, the imam and his infinite knowledge remain undiscovered. With the establishment of the contrasting relation between the two opposing concepts, Hassan's dialectical theory transforms the 'Achilles heel' of the argument to its very factor of self-sufficiency: he argues that as reason leads one to recognize his need for the authoritative teacher, reason reaches its final frontiers as it cannot proceed further to determine who the teacher is. Yet, as reason reaches this stage of recognition, the imam presents himself to satisfy the need and uphold the balance of the dialectical relation. In this manner, the imam does not need to prove his imamate through resorting to miracles: his very being and words are sufficient proof of his legitimacy. In sum, the Lord of the Alamut argues that without an imam, reason is futile; without reasons the imam remains unproven and unknown; but a conjunction of the two place them in a tautological equation. While Hassan does not explain how a fraudulent claimant can be



recognized in practice, his theoretical approach in the fourth proposition seems to solve the third proposition's dilemma, hence the validity of the doctrine of *ta'lim*.

The reformulated doctrine of *ta'lim* became the central doctrine of the early Nizari Isma'ilis. The imam-centric doctrine focused on the religio-political authority of the Nizari Isma'ili imam and is theoretically well-balanced and self-sufficient (See Author's Figure II). Upon adoption, Hassan's doctrine produced the intended political and ideological consequences. On one hand, the doctrine of *ta'lim* was primarily developed to challenge and refute the legitimacy of the Abbasid-Sunni institution as the representative of the Muslim world. The Abbasid perceived the intellectual challenge posed by the Persian Nizaris' doctrine of *ta'lim*, and responded by mobilizing legions of jurists and theologians to attack the new doctrine. An example of such officially-orchestrated responses is the previously discussed anti-Isma'ili treatise *al-Mustazhiri*, written by the prominent Sunni scholar al-Ghazali, with a great focus on the refutation of the doctrine of *ta'lim*. On the other hand, the doctrine succeeded in providing such a central and unifying doctrinal basis for the Nizari thought and community that the Nizaris were soon known as the *Ta'limmiyya*. The doctrine of *ta'lim* concludes the early Nizari intellectual activities as the Nizari revolt remained within its predominantly military and political framework until the end of its first phase.



**Figure II. The Theoretical Structure of the Nizari Doctrine of Ta'lim**

After the 1094 schism, the Persian Isma'ilis (now known as Nizari Isma'ilis) captured more castles and firmly consolidated their state. Having succeeded in establishing the Nizari *da'wa* and state, Hassan-i

Sabbah died in the mid-June 1124, leaving the Persian Isma'ilis with a unique political and doctrinal heritage. Under the political and religious leadership of the first Lord of Alamut, the Nizari Isma'ili doctrinal model evolved from the Fatimid doctrinal platform via acquiring three political/theoretical components. First, Hassan's nationalistic agenda, which was a radical departure from the non-nationalistic framework of Islam. Second, the Nizari Isma'ilis' re-adoption of the early Isma'ili concept of Mahdi, which distinguished Nizari thought from the Fatimid tradition that had long abandoned the Shi'i eschatological concept for the sake of institutional coherence. Finally, the Nizari reformulated doctrine of *ta'lim*, which had also marked a doctrinal evolution from the Shi'a general theoretical framework. After Hassan's death, the expansion of the Nizari state continued under the rule of his two successors, Kiya Buzurg-Ummid (d. 1138) and his son Muhammad b. Buzurg-Ummid (d. 1162). During the reign of the next two Lords of Alamut, and after countless military confrontations with the Saljuq armies, a stalemate developed between the two foes. The Nizari-Saljuq stalemate provided the leadership in Alamut with the opportunity to extend its influence to Syria, where Syrian Nizaris soon established the western flank of the Nizari state by occupying two major castles, Masyaf and Kahf. As the Persian Nizari state gained a trans-regional dimension, military and political affairs continued to dominate its overall perspective. This first historical phase ended with the death of the third Lord of Alamut Muhammad b. Buzurg-Ummid and the succession of his 'son' Hassan to the leadership of Alamut in 1162.

#### **IV. Nizari History and Doctrines in the Alamut Era: Phase II (1164-1210)**

By the official commencement of stalemate between the rising Nizari state and the declining Saljuqs, negotiated successfully between the Alamut's Second Lord Buzurg-Ummid and the Saljuq Sultan Muhammad II, Nizari Isma'ilis initiated an ambitious trans-regional expansionist policy to infiltrate Georgia and also to consolidate their previously unsuccessful presence in Syria. Under the command of Alamut, and in compliance with the classic Nizari strategy, the Syrian Nizaris focused their attention on Jabal Bahra, a mountainous region between Hama and the Mediterranean coastline, far from the major Syrian urban centres, with numerous castles occupied by Sunnis and the Crusaders. The Nizaris swiftly acquired several strategic castles that could be utilized for the construction of an Isma'ili network within the Syrian territory. Within the period of 1132 to 1141, the majority of castles in Jabal Bahra were seized and reinforced by the Nizaris. The most important of these fortresses was the mighty castle of Masyaf that was soon used as the regional command centre of the Syrian Isma'ili network. The Nizari discipline and astonishing operational capacity in capturing the castles as well as the sudden activation of their network alarmed the watchful Crusaders of the Latin states of Antioch and Tripoli. Ironically, as the Crusaders embarked on a confrontational policy towards the Nizaris, the regional Sunni rulers could not

hesitate in following the Frankish knights in their anti-Nizari efforts. Meanwhile, the Nizaris of Persia were thriving in the process of political and economic stabilization of the Isma'ili principalities.

By the beginning of the reign of the Third Lord of Alamut Muhammad b. Buzurg-Ummid, the Nizari state resembled a consolidated federal polity. The federal model can be well applied to the Alamut rule for describing the structure of the Nizari state in the final years of the first phase. The Nizari territories, now stretched from eastern Persia to Syria, were geographically separated. As the lack of immediate territorial proximity with the Isma'ili-affiliated regions had made the communication difficult with Alamut, the appointed chief *da'is* (as the local rulers) had to act upon their own initiatives within the surrounding hostile environment. The distribution of power from Alamut to the territories, contributed to the formation of a mid-level administrative autonomy within the Nizari state. Yet, unlike the Saljuqs, the Nizari Isma'ilis maintained an astonishing level of cohesion and stability. With the advancement of the process of stabilization, however, it was evident that the age of the great Nizari revolt had ended. The Saljuqs were now militarily incapable of large scale wars and the Frankish invaders of the East were far away from the Persian heartland. Due to these factors, the long reign of Muhammad associated with petty local conflicts and minor territorial quarrels, creating a sense of disappointment within the Nizari community that craved the glorious early years of the early Nizari revolt. In reaction to this sense of dissatisfaction, the final years of the Third Lord's rule witnessed the younger generation's gradual move towards the early Isma'ili notion of the coming of *qiyama* (the Day of Resurrection), the establishment of true justice in the world, the day that would commence upon the return of the concealed imam. These sentiments, compatible with the previously discussed belief of the Nizari community that the Nizar's son was secretly living in the Alamut castle, created a nostalgic atmosphere of agitated anticipation for the imminent return of the imam's true descendant. The most notable supporter of the idea was Hassan, the apparent son and heir of Muhammad b. Buzurg-Ummid. The young Hassan, already an expert in the doctrine of *ta'wil* and symbolic interpretations, succeeded Muhammad who died in March 1162. With his succession to the leadership of Alamut as Hassan II, the Fourth Lord of Alamut, the greatest doctrinal revolution in the entire Nizari Isma'ili history was to be initiated.

*Hassan II and the Doctrine of Qiyama:  
Proclamation, Jurisprudential and Philosophical Dimensions*

Two and half years after the beginning of the new lord's reign and his cautious preparation of the ground for the initiation of his religious revolution, Hassan summoned the *da'is* and representative of Nizari territories of Persia to Alamut. According to our Persian historians who have preserved the accounts of this wonderful event in the Isma'ili history,<sup>33</sup> the representatives gathered in the Alamut ground on 8 August 1164, in the month of fasting (Ramadan) where a pulpit had been erected by the order of Hassan. Facing towards the west and Mecca, the pulpit was decorated with four banners of four colours: green,

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<sup>33</sup> Juwayni, vol. III, pp. 225-230; Rashid al-Din, pp. 164-9.

yellow, red and white. Interestingly, since the Muslim pulpits usually face away from the west (i.e. the direction of prayer), the positioning of the pulpit itself had its symbolic implications. At noon, Hassan descended from the castle in his white robes, and ascended the pulpit in the most perfect manner. After greeting the assembly, Hassan who obviously had talents in theatricalities, rose up, raised his sword, and in a loud and commanding voice delivered a message from the concealed imam himself: a message of new instructions for the Nizari Isma'ili community. The message, as Hassan declared it, and in the words of Rashid al-Din, began with usual oratorical formalities:

“The imam of our time sends you blessing and compassion, calling you his specially selected servants... .”

But then, the most crucial words in the history of Nizari Isma'ilism followed:

“... He [the imam of the age] has lifted from you the burden of the obligation of the *shari'a* (religious law), and has brought you to the *qiyama* (the Resurrection).”

The grave theological and doctrinal implications of these very few lines, lines so thoroughly unprecedented in the history of Islamic thought and so perfectly representing the ultimate operation of Isma'ili hermeneutics, can be analysed in two intertwined theoretical domains: a) Islamic jurisprudence and b) Isma'ili gnostic theology and philosophical Isma'ilism. In the first domain, the Islamic religious law, the implication was clear: the abolition of the totality of Islamic behavioural code of ethics/law which was so methodically observed in the Persian Nizari community during the reign of the first three lords of Alamut. According to Hassan II, the Nizari community had no further obligation to submit to the framework of religious law for ensuring the sanctity of its spiritual life nor as basis for its social order. If one may deviate momentarily from theo-philosophical discussions to assume a political sociology perspective, Hassan's declaration can be perceived in an additional dimension: entertaining a degree of flexibility in categorization, if one considers the Persian Nizari state to be a form of theocracy with religious law as one of the fundamental pillars of the political system, then the nullification of that system of law is equal to the abrogation of system of religio-political hierarchy, hence the reconstruction of the nature of state. Be that as it may, the immediate intended objective of the declaration was, at this level, to eradicate the strict Islamic *shari'a* from the Nizari society. As charismatic and commanding as Hassan was in his white robes and with his raised sword, the implantation of such radical policy of social and spiritual modification would have been impossible without adequate doctrinal justification(s). In this context, the second domain, the philosophical Isma'ilism, was to provide the required theoretical ground for Hassan's revolution.

The formulation of the doctrine *qiyama* and its subsequent proclamation by Hassan II demonstrates the philosophical capacity of Isma'ili methodology in 'processing' the theological principles of Islamic

thought. In Islamic terminology, *qiyama* is the Last Day, the Day of Great Judgment. Common in the eschatological tradition of Abrahamic religions, the Islamic version of the Last Day associates with terrible manifestations of God's omnipotence such as cataclysmic events and mass resurrection of the dead. Described by Qur'an, the Day will commence when the angelic Trumpet is blown twice, when the living die and the dead awaken, and all shall then be resurrected to be judged according to God's justice which will commit them eternally either to Paradise or Hell. This Qur'anic apocalyptic account of the world's violent ending and a vengeful God's merciless judgment was processed through the Isma'ili theory of esoteric exegesis (*ta'wil*) and its semantic methodologies in order to be interpreted in an entirely symbolic manner. Via applying the doctrine of *ta'wil* on Quran's account of the Last Day, Hassan II interpreted the act of resurrection not as the rise of legions of the dead but as the manifestation of the unveiled truth (*haqiqa*) in the Nizari Isma'ili imam. Hassan's interpretation draws heavily from the previously discussed pre-Fatimid Ismaili doctrines of cyclical view of revelational history (gnostic theology), philosophical Isma'ilism and Isma'ili-Shi'i eschatology. The Isma'ili gnostic theology had argued that as the Divine Will is revealed to each era's messenger-prophet, and as the exoteric manifestation of the revelation constitutes the religious law of each era's, and since their legatees' minds inherit the divine knowledge of prophets necessary for extracting the hidden truth (i.e. esoteric) from the shrouds of exoteric, therefore prophets and their legatees are in fact representations of the Divine Truth. At this stage, the critical concept is belief that the seventh legatee (imam) of each era abolishes the religious law of the previous era, substituting it with a newly established law. This last point clearly demonstrates the theoretical connection between Hassan's abrogation of *shari'a* and the earlier Isma'ili intellectual traditions. At any rate, once combined with the Neoplatonized Isma'ili cosmology that emphasized the inability of mankind's reason to perceive God, the Isma'ili gnostic theology could acquire a teleological dimension: if prophets and legatees would represent the ultimate truth, and Isma'ili eschatology had already institutionalized the concept of *Mahdi*, then perhaps the cyclical order of religious history could be well concluded with the return of the concealed imam. With his returns, the embodiment of Divine Truth returns, resulting in mankind's emancipation from the veils of exoteric. That would be the most auspiciousness conclusion to the evolutionary history. And as for the problem of Qur'anic reference to resurrection and the vivid account of world's ending, could it not be simply a matter of semantics and symbolism?

The doctrine of *qiyama* is the Nizari response to the above question, as well as being the logical product of the theoretical expansion of Isma'ili gnostic theology, cosmology and eschatology. Symbolism dominates the entire discourse of the doctrine. Even the notion of Paradise and Hell are symbolically interpreted. The structure of the doctrine, however, is simple: Qur'an's reference to resurrection is to be perceived symbolically, spiritually and in its esoteric essence. While in exoteric level the resurrection seems to indicate the physical death of all men and the subsequent revival of the dead, in esoteric level Qur'an is referring to the spiritual revival and spiritual death of mankind. According to the Nizari

‘methodology’ of discourse, the account of resurrection is interpreted as follows: once the concealed imam (the Prometheus-like messenger of wisdom and the embodiment of truth) returns, men are divided into two categories, perception-wise: the ‘insiders’ and the ‘outsiders’. On one hand, those who acknowledged the imam would be capable of perceiving the esoteric essence of religious law, the Truth, the spiritual reality; these shall be awakened, illuminated, enlightened, emancipated from the previous spiritual ignorance imposed by the dominance of exoteric aspect of religious law, simply resurrected from the spiritual ‘death’. Paradise is actualized on earth, as Paradise is none but the realm of timeless absolute wisdom in which man is finally able to penetrate the exoteric to behold the esoteric. [As irrelevant as it maybe, one cannot resist associating this description of spiritual resurrection with the Buddhist concept of spiritual awakening.] The awakened are ‘insiders’. They reside within the domain of spiritual awareness (i.e. Nizari Paradise) in which, contrary to exoteric world, all is reckoning and there is no action. In this world, man is capable of sensing God, being with God at all times. In the age of resurrection, hence, those who embrace awakening through the Nizari imam are relieved from the burden of religious law and the ritual of worship. Such practices are now made redundant for the illuminated. According to Rashid-al-Din, it was for this particular theorization of the abrogation of *shari’a* that the Nizaris became designated as heretics (*malahida*).<sup>34</sup> On the other hand, however, stand the ‘outsiders’ as those who refuse to acknowledge the imam, rejecting him as the manifestation of truth. Contrary to the contemporary violent verdicts of Christianity and Sunni Islam against the general category of religious ‘outsiders’, the Nizari Isma’ili doctrine of *qiyama* simply condemn them to philosophical ignorance. In the Nizari literature, there is no Dante’s *Inferno*, no realm of torture, fire and serpents for those who deny, defy and detest the Nizari imam. Instead, the ‘outsiders’ remain in an epistemological Hell actualized on earth. The Nizari version of Hell is simply the realm of ignorance and spiritual unawareness in which the exoteric is the final horizon of the mind. In this world, all is action and there is no reckoning. The unaware residents of the realm are spiritually non-existent and incapable of perceiving the quintessential knowledge, thus spiritually ‘dead’.

Therefore, while the non-believers constitute the ‘dead’, the believers are the ‘resurrected’, and the imam who initiate the resurrection by his return is ‘lord of the resurrection’, a term mentioned in earlier Isma’ili literature. Through these masterly interpretations, the doctrine of *qiyama* transforms (or elevate) the five notions of resurrection, death, life, Paradise and Hell from their apparent textual meaning to a set of symbolic epistemological codes to justify the abrogation of *shari’a*. The extent of Nizari symbolic interpretations, however, goes far beyond the aforementioned five principle notions. In *Haft bab*, the Qur’anic reference to the two blasts of the angelic Trumpet, announcing the commencement of the Day of Judgment, are also subjected to Nizari symbolism.<sup>35</sup> An interesting example of Nizari hermeneutics, the first blast was sounded by Hassan-i Sabbah who had theorized the position and function of the office

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<sup>34</sup> Rashid-al-Din, p. 165.

<sup>35</sup> For this specific reference, see: ‘Haft bab-i Baba Sayyidna’, tr. M. Hodgson, in *Secret Order of Assassins*, p. 21.

of *hujja* as well developing the doctrine of *ta'lim*. The second blast was then sounded by Hassan II who concluded the doctrinal evolution of Isma'ili thought by proclaiming *qiyama*.

*Doctrine of Qiyama:  
Political Dimension*

After delivering the brief yet crucial message with its predominantly philosophical dimension, Hassan II also delivered an eloquent address with grave immediate and long-term political implications for the status of the lords of Alamut and the Nizari Isma'ili leadership. The essence of Hassan's address sought to provide an institutional capacity necessary for the implementation of his policy of religious reformation/revolution. Obviously, the proclamation of *qiyama* and the nullification of *shari'a* could only be triggered by the Nizari imam himself. Strategically speaking, achieving such goals first required overcoming two major obstacles: first, the Nizari imam had been in occlusion and inaccessible since the execution of Nizar in 1094. In practice, the negative significance of the elements of public doubt and disbelief could not be easily ignored. If the imam were to suddenly appear on the battlements of Alamut castle, would all members of the Nizari state embrace him as the true legatee of the Prophet? Second, in spite of the institutionalized function of the office of *hujja* as a liaison between the concealed imam and the Nizari community, the *hujjas* did not possess sufficient authority to introduce doctrinal paradigm-shifts into the Nizari religious perspective. Even Hassan-i Sabbah, the most legendary figure of the time, had confined his intellectual prowess to the conservatively formulated doctrine of *ta'lim*. Considering the initial rank of Hassan II as the imam's *hujja*, how could he effectively raise the concept of resurrection? Hassan's address sought to eliminate these obstacles, a task eventually accomplished with admirable dexterity and acumen.

The address, delivered eloquently in Arabic, was instantly translated into Persian for the audience by the Nizari Jurist Muhammad Busti who had been placed at the foot of the pulpit. The address, also claimed to be the exact words of the concealed imam, has been quoted by Rashid al-Din and Juwayni with slightly different tone and arrangement of sentences. Yet, Hodgson's meticulous textual analysis of the two historians' accounts seems to have produced the most inclusive version of Hassan's address:

Hassan b. Muhammad b. Buzurg-Ummid is our deputy (*khalifa*: caliph), our *da'i*, our *hujja*; our Shi'a must be obedient and submissive to him in the affairs of this world and the next; considering his command incontrovertible and knowing his word to be our word. They must know that our Lord has interceded for them, and has brought you to God.<sup>36</sup>

Parallel to emphasizing Hassan's position as the chief *da'i* and the *hujja*, the address aimed to establish and confer upon him the position of imam's caliph, a position that was not yet defined within the Nizari

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<sup>36</sup> Hodgson, pp. 149-50.

hierarchical system of authority. It is critical to remember that in the Fatimid system, the two notions of caliphate and imamate were in fact fundamentally inseparable: by the return of the Muhammad b. Isma'il's heir and the subsequent abandonment of the concept of imam's occlusion, the Fatimid doctrine combined political and religious authority in one singular manifestation of caliph/imam. This institutional equilibrium was missing in the system of Nizari state. With the inaccessibility of the Nizari imam, the Persian Isma'ilis focused on outlining the powers and limits of office of *hujjas*, thus the absence of any elaborate definition of the office of Nizari caliph. In such a definitional void, Hassan's address implicitly defined caliph as a rank higher than *hujja* and chief *da'i*, lower than imam, but with plenary authority as the imam's deputy.<sup>37</sup> Therefore, Hassan now possessed the rank of caliph, equal to the pre-schism Fatimid Caliph al-Mustansir yet with a degree of ambiguity. The Isma'ili political terminology could not adequately define the new rank. The ambiguity of the new rank's extent of authority was intentional: while the mixing of the Nizari notion of *hujja* with the Fatimid concept of caliph would produce a sense of definitional overlapping, its main purpose was to signal the true identity of Hassan II to the Nizari elites. In any case, through such alteration in the framework of ranks, the address provided the *hujja* (now the Nizari caliph) with an unprecedented level of authority over all religious matters. Clearly, the Nizari caliph now possessed sufficient authority to communicate the concealed imam's order for proclamation of resurrection. The second obstacle was now successfully removed.

In retrospective, one can argue that Hassan's modification was simply the actualization of the potential political capacity of a series of relevant Nizari and Shi'i theories. On one hand, as Hassan-i Sabbah's doctrine of *ta'lim* had already theorized the ultimate authority of imam in all matters, his representatives (i.e. *hujjas*) were automatically granted a space wide enough for certain theo-political manoeuvres; on the other hand, the general framework of Shi'i thought had such an emphasis on the infallibility of the imam (either revealed or concealed) that even the most radical of claims made by his *hujjas* on the imam's behalf would have been accepted unanimously by the Shi'i community. At any rate, after completing his address, Hassan descended from the pulpit and performed the two prostrations reserved for the festive occasions, concluding his revolutionary sermon. Adding to the day's collection of surprises, a feast was also prepared to which the assembly were invited to join the *hujja* in breaking of the fast in spite of being in the middle of the fasting month. One can only imagine the sense of astonishment these revelations had caused among the audience. All feasted and made merry as Hassan named the day, 8 August/17 Ramadan, the 'festival of resurrection' (*id-i qiyamat*), a day of rejoicing celebrated by all the Nizaris.

Similar ceremonies for the proclamation of *qiyama* were held in other major fortresses of the Nizari state. Alamut dispatched documents to the chief *da'i* of Quhistan, *ra'is* Muzaffar, containing instructions

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<sup>37</sup> Daftary, *The Isma'ilis*, p. 359.



regarding the declaration of *qiyama*, the content of the concealed imam's message and Hassan's address, all to be delivered to the Quhistani Nizaris. Interestingly, comparing to the original event in Alamut, the Quhistani ceremony was conducted with one additional stage that aimed at communicating the true identity of the Nizari caliph to the masses, hence overcoming the first obstacle. In addition to the announcement of *qiyama*, an oral message from Hassan II was also delivered by a messenger of Alamut in which the new Nizari hierarchy was now explicitly clarified: according to this new message, as al-Mustansir was God's caliph on earth, the new developments had now elevated Hassan II to the same much exalted rank. The statement of identity was explicit: the emphasis on Hassan being God's caliph on earth clearly indicated that he was the concealed imam himself, now returned to his devotees. This claim now fulfilled all requirements for the full implementation of *qiyama* doctrine. If the resurrection was proclaimed and the *shari'a* was abolished, the only plausible implication would have been the return of the concealed imam.

All theological obstacles against such a claim were effectively eliminated: first, while the early Isma'ili messianic doctrine of *Mahdi* had already established the necessity of the imam, the Nizaris viewed a state without imam as organically incomplete; second, since Hassan-i Sabbah's doctrine of *ta'lim* had formerly emphasised imam's authoritative knowledge and his *hujja*'s truthfulness, doubting the truthfulness of *hujja* Hassan was seen as doubting the imam himself, especially if the *hujja* and the imam were the same person. However, Hassan II did deviate from doctrine of *ta'lim* in one particular respect: contrary to Hassan-i Sabbah's argument that the imam did not need to refer to his ancestry to prove his claim of imamate, as all that was required of him was to present himself to the Nizari community, Hassan II revealed (or perhaps merely argued) in his later addresses and epistles that in spite of appearing as the son of Muhammad b. Buzurg-Ummid, he was the direct descendant of Nizar b. Al-Mustansir. As a realist, Hassan had recognized that dialectical theory of knowledge would not be a thoroughly reliable tool in a game as intricate and sensitive as the game of Nizari throne. The announcement of the latter point in Quhistan, instead of Alamut, could have also been due to cautious considerations: it seems that the shrewd Hassan preferred to communicate the crux of his political agenda far away from the centre of Nizari power. Through such a tactic, while the Nizari community was still absorbing the initial exclusively religion-oriented shock of the abolition of the *shari'a*, the news of the political reformation would first reach and influence the periphery, a region that could offer mass support with strategic importance in case any solid opposition would arise in the centre. Calculations aside, the Quhistani Nizaris joined other regions in celebrating the initiation of a new era. No opposition has been recorded. Soon after, the *qiyama* was also announced in Syria. The festival of resurrection was declared and the Nizaris of Jabal Bahra celebrated the new era of Isma'ilism in their fortified dominion.

The doctrine of *qiyama* constitutes the central factor in the religious/philosophical perspective of Nizaris of Alamut in their last intellectually significant phase of existence. Subsequent Nizari imams of this historical phase further elaborated the details of the new policy while mainly focusing on the centrality of imamate to the doctrine of *qiyama*. The doctrinal continuity was not affected by the death of Hassan II. The Nizari imam was mysteriously murdered in 9 January 1166 in the castle of Lamsar, apparently stabbed by his brother-in-law, one and half year after the proclamation of *qiyama*. Upon Hassan's death and in compliance with the Shi'i tradition, his nineteen-year-old son Nur al-Din Muhammad succeeded his father as the lord of Alamut and the Nizari caliph/imam, beginning his long reign of forty-four years. A prolific writer, Muhammad II devoted his life to systematic elaboration and refinement of the doctrine of *qiyama* without altering its main components.<sup>38</sup> During his reign, the Nizari state of Persia experienced a rather uneventful period. As the result of the resurrection doctrine, the Nizari state intentionally assumed an isolationist policy towards the Sunni world. From the perspective of political psychology, one could argue that the adoption and further elaboration of doctrine of *qiyama* was due to the formation of an unbreakable stalemate between the Nizari state and the Sunni world. In spite of its immense power and influence, Alamut had recognized that a total victory over the Sunni world was infeasible. The implementation of the new religious policies by Hassan II and further institutionalization of the doctrine by Muhammad II provided a form of remedy to the Nizari sense of political dismay. If the enemy could not be conquered, then perhaps it could be rendered spiritually non-existent. While the foe would be confined to its dominion of ignorance, the Nizaris would turn their organizational talents and intellectual prowess towards perfecting the foundations of their progressive society. The objectivity of this analysis aside, the Nizaris of Persia did in fact immerse themselves in philosophical and scientific studies, enhancing the quantity and quality of their distinguished libraries. The Nizari fortresses, especially the castle of Alamut, continued to host some of most prominent minds in the Muslim world, Isma'ili and non-Isma'ili, who eagerly sought access to the castles' libraries.

This sense of political stability and social serenity was largely missing in the western flank of the Nizari state, Syria, where Nizaris were engaged in an intricate web of alliance and war against their Frankish and Muslim foes. Vastly outnumbered yet superbly organized under the leadership of one the most formidable strategists of the mediaeval world, Rashid al-Din Sinan (1126?-1193), the Syrian Nizaris were developing an 'international relations' strategy of creating a sustainable balance between the main regional powers. This Nizari 'balance of power' policy, aimed at securing the Syrian Nizari state from a possible lethal anti-Nizari alliance between Crusader and Sunni forces, was implemented by Sinan with great tactical dexterity and smart use of methods of psychological warfare (e.g. daring assassinations, stealth, deep penetration into enemy's administration, agent plantation, exhibition of fearlessness, etc). Sinan, like Hassan-i Sabbah, had recognized that it would be a great strategic advantage for the greatly

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<sup>38</sup> Daftary, *The Isma'ilis*, p. 363.

outnumbered Nizaris to become more than men in the mind of their enemies and that theatricalities and deception were (and are) powerful agents in such a pursuit. While Sinan designed a general policy of shifting alliances, the use of asymmetric warfare methods against Crusaders or Sunni rulers created such an atmosphere of fear and fascination (among Frankish forces), and of dread and deterrence (among Sunni forces) that eventual outcomes far exceeded Sinan's initial expectations. In addition to fulfilling Nizari policy objectives, Masyaf's operations contributed to the creation of the enduring myth of legendary Assassins, a myth that occupied the Western imagination for subsequent centuries. It is regrettable that the purpose and length of this paper does not allow detailed discussion on Syrian Nizaris and that we must confine our discussion to such a short and inadequate introduction. Sinan, or as Crusaders referred to him, 'the Old Man of the Mountain', stands in the centre of a captivating chapter in Nizari Isma'ili history that begs further investigation. Unfortunately, as fascinating the politics and history of Syrian Nizaris are, the current Isma'ili literature contains few references to their intellectual life and traditions. Nevertheless, a research with methodical focus on the Syrian Nizaris in the Alamut period may produce the most interesting results regarding the doctrinal creativities of these most celebrated Nizaris of all times.

As for our Persian Nizaris, their intellectual endeavours did not lead them to any further grave doctrinal adventurism until the ascension of Hassan III to the imamate. The intellectual heritage of Hassan II, the resurrection doctrine and its socio-political and socio-religious manifestations, continued to dominate the Persian Nizari thought and policies until the end of the reign of Muhammad II in September 1210 by the Lord's death. During the long reign of the last Lord of the second historical phase, the regional political scene was rapidly changing, perhaps not the best for Nizaris: following the death of Sultan Sanjar in 1157, the pace of disintegration of the ailing Saljuq Empire was hastened. The eventual collapse of Saljuq power and the creation of a temporary power void led to the revival of the Nizaris' ancient rival, the Abbasids of Baghdad who could now adopt an ambitious regional and trans-regional diplomacy. The new caliph al-Nasir (1180-1225) sought a policy of religious unification of Islamic territories with the Abbasid caliph as the head, hence a clear threat to Persian Nizari state and the institution of Nizari imamate. Parallel to these developments, a new hostile power was rising in Persia as several Turkish dynasties of Sunni faith competed to claim the remnants of Saljuq dominions, a competition which ended with the triumph of the Khwarezmids. The Khwarezmids Empire also adopted a hostile stance toward the Nizaris. It was in this context that the ascension of the deceased imam's son, Hassan III, to the Nizari imamate initiated the third and last phase of Nizari political history of Alamut period, a chapter which is beyond the scope of the present paper. Yet, as without a brief introduction our story would be incomplete, Hassan III, now facing multiple adversaries, embarked on a bold policy of rapprochement with Sunni Islam via repudiation of *qiyama* doctrine to end the Nizari self-imposed isolationism. In the post-Muhammad II era, the new imam's religious policy sought to contain and replace doctrine of *qiyama* with the 'politically correct' tactic of restoring the observation of *shari'a*.

Curiously and as an excellent example of the Nizari community's political awareness, the restoration of *shari'a* provoked no opposition from the public as the Nizaris observed their imam's verdict as a reimposition and implementation of the Shi'i notion of dissimulation (*taqiyya*), a tactical manoeuvre to castrate rising threats by accommodating to the outside world as decreed by the infallible imam.<sup>39</sup> To the realist Nizari imam, the diplomacy of external threats constituted a solid ground for temporary doctrinal flexibility. The existence of the Nizari state preceded the observance of 'radical and provocative' Nizari doctrines. After all, the triumph of politics usually necessitates sacrificing ideology on the altar of, in modern terms, 'national security'. From this stage, the stage of 'repudiation-restoration' and the rapprochement policy, the Nizaris of Alamut entered their third phase of existence, a phase of intellectual maturity, engaging diplomacy and further social stability. The story of this period and its developments and events, until its violent end with the collapse of the Persian Nizari state in 1256 by the Mongolian hordes' barbaric invasion of Persia, is one colourful account that we must leave to another scholarly endeavour.

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Khurshah, endowed with the indecision of Richard II and misfortunes of Emperor Claudius, succumbed to a lethal confusion and surrendered to the besieging troops.

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<sup>39</sup> Daftary, *A Short History of the Isma'ilis*, p. 146.

## Conclusion

Our chronological discussion on the history, policies and doctrines of Nizari Isma'ilism sought to outline the major events in the adventurous history of this truly astonishing sect, and perhaps it would be better to avoid exposing the reader to the boredom of an unnecessary repetition of the obvious. Yet, upon the completion of the story, the evolutionary patterns of are easier to detect. The evolutionary pattern of Nizari Isma'ilism, with its ideological roots being in the greater context of Shi'ism, consists of two major categorical vectors: historical/political and philosophical/doctrinal. From the historical/political perspective, the account of the emergence and rise of early and mediaeval Isma'ilis is none but the continuation of the socio-religious and socio-political narrative of Shi'i rebellion and organized defiance against the dominance of Sunni theological and political interpretation of Islam, a narrative of rejection of obedience to the apparently overwhelming might of the opponent, a narrative of a religious minority's astonishing momentum, resilience and discontent. Once coupled with political power and organizational resources, the Isma'ilim's uncompromising 'revisionist'/revolutionary attitude towards the notions of religious and political legitimacy and hierarchy instantly transmuted the unipolarity of the contemporary Sunni-dominated Muslim world to an enduring system of Shi'i-Sunni bipolarity. In the centre of the Isma'ili historical process of institutional evolution, from the early Isma'ilis through the age of the Alamut, stands the doctrine of imamate of strategic significance. In practice, as the political theory of imamate with its methodical reliance on the 'inalienable' right of the Alids to the caliphate operated in a meta-nationalistic level, the Isma'ili world as the civilizational anti-thesis to the Sunnism emerged as a pluralist entity due to its inclusion of various ethnicities of different faiths within its structure of society and power. As the result of such inclusive policy, the Isma'ili states were intellectually diverse, religiously tolerant and politically pluralist. Without falling into the realm of exaggeration or glorification, while the Abbasids' merits and virtues are beyond question, the Isma'ili states resemble an unusual level of sophisticated diversity and systematic plurality both in administration and ideological perspective. The two major Isma'ili powers of the mediaeval world, the Fatimid Empire and the Nizari state of Persia and Syria, were manifestations of such an ambitious yet fruitful project.

From the doctrinal perspective, as the Nizari Isma'ilism inherited the golden intellectual heritage of the Fatimids, the systematic pattern of Nizari philosophical thought gained 'non-linear' complexity. In retrospective, the analysis and genealogy of the Nizari philosophical doctrines within the chronological context of general Isma'ilism demonstrates a 'fluid' and organic doctrinal system of dialectical nature, yet with a surprisingly high level of theoretical fluctuation. In other words, the simultaneous presence of both doctrinal coherence and doctrinal paradigm shift is detectable in the theoretical structure of Isma'ilism in the Alamut era. The pattern is most visible in the correlation between the two major Nizari doctrines of *ta'lim* and *qiyama*: the former provided a dialectical system for establishing the absolute authority of the Nizari imam and hence empowered the mastermind of the latter to initiate his

unprecedented doctrinal revolution. On one hand, the doctrine of *ta'lim* had been an expansion of former Isma'ili theories regarding the features and qualities of Isma'ili imam/caliph, henceforth signifying doctrinal continuity. On the other hand, while the doctrine of *qiyama* was an ingenious expansion of doctrine of *ta'lim*, it caused a paradigm shift, in the true sense of the word, in the religious and philosophical perspective of Isma'ilism. Curiously, the logical conclusion to the evolution of such coherent system of thought, of such continuity, had been a revolutionary doctrine. Yet, even more interesting, the Nizari doctrinal system remained stable as the two fundamental doctrines maintained a level of systemic theoretical balance via the strategic function of theory of imamate. Any possible conflict between the totality of the two doctrines or their theological and philosophical components were resolved, or perhaps eliminated, by the system's imam-centrism. As discussed, the Shi'i belief in the infallible knowledge of the imam, inherited from the Prophet himself via his legatee Alid, constituted such a powerful concept of religious and political authority (as manifested in the position of imam/caliph) that its function within a constantly evolving philosophical system would be 'elixir-like'. However, as we witnessed, the infallible imams of divine knowledge, the enigmatic Lords of Eagle Nest, left us with an intellectual heritage of magnificent sophistication and symmetric beauty.

## Glossary\*

*ahl al-bayt*: lit., people of the house; members of the household of the Prophet Muhammad.

*aql al-kull*: the Universal Intellect.

*batin*: the inward, hidden, or esoteric meaning behind the literal wording of sacred texts and religious prescriptions, notably the Qur'an, in distinction from *zahir* (q.v.).

*da'i*: lit., summoner; a religious missionary or propagandist, especially among the Isma'ilis.

*da'wa*: the mission, in the religio-political sense.

*hujja*: representative of hidden Imams.

*imam*: religious leader of the Islamic nation.

*khalifat rasul Allah*: successor to the Messenger of God.

*Mahdi*: the Divinely Guided One; a name applied to the restorer of religious and justice who will appear and rule before the end of the world.

*mu'allim-i sadiq*: the true authoritative spiritual teacher.

*nafs al-kull*: the Universal Soul.

*shari'a*: the divinely revealed sacred law of Islam; the whole body of rules guiding the life of a Muslim.

*tafsir*: lit., explanation, commentary; particularly the commentaries on the Qur'an; the external philological exegesis of the Qur'an, in distinction from *ta'wil* (q.v.).

*ta'lim*: teaching, instruction; in Shi'i thought, authoritative teaching in religion which could be carried out only by an imam in every age after the prophet.

*taqiyya*: dissimulation

*tanzil*: revelation of scripture through angelic intermediaries.

*ta'wil*: the educing of the inner, original meaning from the literal wording or apparent meaning of a text or ritual religious prescription; among the Shi'is, the term denotes the method of educing the *batin* (q.v.) from the *zahir* (q.v.). Translated also as esoteric or spiritual exegesis, *ta'wil* may be distinguished from *tafsir* (q.v.).

*zahir*: the outward, literal, or exoteric meaning of sacred texts and religious prescriptions, notably the Qur'an and the *shari'a* (q.v.), in distinction from the *batin* (q.v.).

\* The definitions mentioned in the glossary are borrowed from the terminology provided by Dr. Farhad Daftary, in his: *A Short History of the Isma'ilis: Traditions of a Muslim Community* (Edinburgh University Press, 1998), pp. 217-20.

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