



Aga Khan IV
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**Proactive Ismaili Imam:
His Highness the Aga Khan
Part - 2**

History: a live broadcast of the past, a joy of the present, and a treasure for the future. History has significant past knowledge, culture, and memories of ancestors wrapped in its womb. The historical monuments, art, music, culture, language, food, and traditional clothes educate people about who they are, where they are, and where they belong in the particular era.

Furthermore, the deep roots of history help individuals to see the fruitful stems of growth. The growth in the field of economics, science, architecture, education, and the quality of life of people in this period of modernization. Therefore, destroying history from the lives of the people would be the same as cutting the roots of a tree. No matter how healthy species a tree may be from, it won't be able to survive without its roots.

Thus, history builds a path that leads toward the future. Therefore, without the presence of history, the growth of the future would be unknown. Hence, the proactive Ismaili Imam, the Aga Khan, is actively taking every possible step to preserve history by preserving the historical monuments and improving the quality of life of people within the ambit. One of the best examples of the Aga Khan's work is in Syria, a country known for its Islamic history.

Syria and Islamic civilization go a long way back in history. As His Highness the Aga Khan said, *“Those of you who know the history of Syria, the history of cities such as Aleppo, you will know how much they have contributed to the civilisations of Islam, to the practices of Islam, to the search for truth not only within Muslim communities, but with Jewish communities, Christian communities. And therefore, this country carries with it into the future a remarkable history of which you should always be proud”* (Aga Khan IV, 2008, August 27). Syria plays a crucial role in shaping Islamic history. Both the roots of Islamic dynasty and history of Ismailism are wrapped in the womb of Syria.

Today, Al-Salamiyah has the largest Ismaili population in the Arab world, and it is the location of the headquarters of the Syrian Ismaili Council. Salamiyah, which is also known as “Mother of Cairo” is a city and a district located in the western Syria. This city is well known for its deep connection with the Ismaili Muslims Imams and their Imamatus. From 6th-10th Ismaili Imams resided in Salamiyah, and from there they propagated their dais and missionaries to preach the Ismaili faith to various regions.

Beloved Imams in Al-Salamiyah, Syria

	Names of Imams	Role of Salamiyah in Ismaili Imamatus
5 th	Imam Ja'far al-Sadiq (A. H. 114 – 148)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Imam Ja'far al-Sadiq passed the Nur of Imamatus by the rule of “Naas” to his son Hazrat Isma'il, who became the 6th Imam of the Ismailis Muslims. • To protect Imam Isma'il from the Abbasid Caliph, Al-Mansur, Imam Ja'far al-Sadiq sent Imam Isma'il to Syria.
6 th	Imam Isma'il (A. H. 148 – 158)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Imam Isma'il settled in Salamiyah, and from Salamiyah, he began to spread the philosophy and teachings of the Ismaili religion. Soon, the Ismaili religion began to prosper in Damascus, Syria, and Egypt. • Imam Isma'il lived his life as the 6th Ismaili Imam in Salamiyah till his <i>wafat</i>.
7 th	Imam Muhammad b. Isma'il (A.H. 158 – 197)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The 7th Imam, Muhammad b. Isma'il, succeeded his father Imam Isma'il. • He also spent the last days of his Imamatus in his father's residential city, Salamiyah, till his <i>wafat</i>. • After the <i>wafat</i> of the 7th Imam, the Imamatus was passed to his son Imam Wafi Ahmad.

8 th	Imam Wafi Ahmad (A.H. 197 – 212)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • During his Imamah, Imam Wafi Ahmad resided in Samarra, concealing his identity to protect himself and his family from the enemies. • Meanwhile, Imam Wafi Ahmad's dais went to Salamiyah to find a place for Imam's residence. • Then, the Imam moved to Salamiyah with his family along with his successor Hazrat Taqi Muhammad. • In Salamiyah, the Imam resided as a local merchant and spread the Ismaili religion. • Thus, Imam Wafi Ahmad resided in Salamiyah till his <i>wafat</i> and his "Kabra Mubarak" (blessed grave) is in Salamiyah.
9 th	Imam Taqi Muhammad (A.H. 212 – 225)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Imam Taqi Muhammad also stayed in Salamiyah and sent his dais to the other countries such as Yemen, Bahrain, Egypt, and Somalia. To spread the Ismaili beliefs, tradition, and cultural values of Ismailism. • Imam Taqi Muhammad's "Kabra Mubarak" (blessed grave) is in Salamiyah.
10 th	Imam Razyidin Abdallah (A.H. 225 - 268)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Imam Razyidin Abdallah, took the responsibility of Ismaili mission at his young age, and travelled to Iraq, Iran, Yemen, and Bahrain. • After his father's <i>wafat</i> he became the 10th Imam and returned to Salamiyah and continued his mission of preaching the Ismaili religion.

The Kabra Mubarak of Prince Aly Khan, father of His Highness the Aga Khan is in Salamiyah.

What we know about Syria

Key Information About Syria:

- The full name of Syria is Syrian Arab Republic.
- It is located in Western Asia.
- Syria is bordered by: Iraq to the East, Mediterranean Sea to the West, Turkey to the North, and Jordan to the South.
- The capital city is Damascus, and the largest city is Aleppo.
- The religious population is comprised of Sunni Muslims, Christians, Alawites, Druze, and Ismailis.



(Graphic Maps: *Syria*, n.d.)

After visiting Damascus in the year 1867, Mark Twain wrote: “To Damascus, years are only moments, decades are only flitting trifles of time. She measures time not by days and months and years, but by the empires she has seen rise and prosper and crumble to ruin. She is a type of immortality” (GoodReads Inc, 2013).

Islamic Connection

- Syria became the part of Islamic empire by 640 AD, when it was annexed by Khalid ibn al-Walid who was the leader of the Rashidun army.
- Later, the Umayyad dynasty came in the mid - 7th century and conquered Syria. The Umayyad rulers declared Damascus as the capital of their empire, and they divided Syria into 4 districts: Damascus, Hims, Palestine, and Jordan. Moreover, during the Umayyad dynasty “the Islamic empire spread from Spain and Morocco to India and parts of the central Asia, thus Syria prospered economically, being the capital of the empire” (Syria History – Islamic Era, n.d). Furthermore, the Umayyad leaders also constructed various mosques and palaces throughout Syria.
- Due to the corruption and ignorance of the Umayyad leaders, the dynasty was overthrown by the Abbasid dynasty in 750. The Abbasid dynasty moved the capital to Baghdad. During the Abbasid dynasty Arabic became the official language replacing Greek and Aramaic. Further, the Tulunids from Islamic Egypt conquered Syria from the Abbasids, which were then replaced by the Hamdanids.
- Then, came the Mongols in 1260. They came with the huge army and used aggressive battle techniques to conquer Syria. Hence, they were successful in conquering Syria, but their invasion severely destroyed the cities’ construction and the irrigation work.
- The Mamluks, a military caste of the medieval Egypt, then defeated Mongols. After the death of the Mamluk leader, the Turk named Qalawun soon defeated his successor.
- However, the Mamluks once again won Syria back supporting Qalawun who were attacked by the Mongols under the influence of Al-Ashquar.

- Further, as a regime does not stay in power forever, so the Mamluk regime ended when they were defeated by Timur in 1400.
- Eventually, weakened Syria was taken by the Ottoman Empire, and remained under the Ottoman Empire from 16th-20th century.

Needless to say all these battles led to major destructions of the various monuments. The current Ismaili Imam, the Aga Khan, has continued to show his distinctive interest in Syria. *“My interest in working in Syria is to take the various lead countries of the Ummah and say, let’s start, let’s move together, let’s revive our cultures so that modernity is not only seen in the terminology of the west, but in the intelligent use of our past”* (Aga Khan IV, 2008).

In the year 1999, “the Syrian directorate of Antiquities asked the Aga Khan Historic Cities Programme (AKHCP) to provide technical assistance for the conservation and reuse of a number of historic citadel sites in the country” (akdn.org). Three historic sites were selected for the restoration: The Citadel of Aleppo, Masyaf Citadel, and the Castel of Salah ad-Din.

Motives Behind the Restoration of the Historic Sites

The entire notion behind these conservation projects was to restore the cultural heritage, and utilize them as a springboard to enhance the economic condition and the quality of life of the present generation and the generations ahead. As the Aga Khan said, *“These historic sites are potential economic and social dynamos. They are not frozen, paralyzed historic assets. They are assets that can actually contribute to the quality of life of the people who live in those contexts”* (Aga Khan IV, 2008). Thus, these projects not only conserve the past but also revitalize the present and invest in the future.

What we know about the Citadel of Aleppo

- ***Location:*** It is located in the old Aleppo city in northern Syria.
- ***Historic Significance and Rulers:*** Citadel of Aleppo is the oldest and the largest castle in the world. It is one of the Islamic historic monuments, and it became the part of the UNESCO World Heritage Site in the year 1986. The castle was conquered by various civilizations such as: Greeks, Byzantines, Ayyubids, and Mamluks.
- ***Addition to the original physical structure over the centuries:*** Over the centuries the rulers built additions to the physical structure of the castle such as mosques, residential areas, towers, gates, and storage rooms. However, the majority of the construction dates back to the Ayyubid era. The Ayyubid Dynasty was a Muslim dynasty, which was founded by Saladin. Saladin was the first sultan of Egypt.
- ***Major destruction:*** With every invasion the physical structure of the Citadel got ruined. However, the major destruction was caused to the citadel by the Mongol invasion. Furthermore, the devastating earthquake, which resulted in the year 1822, also caused the major destructions to the original structure.

What we know about the Masyaf Citadel

- ***Location:*** The Masyaf citadel is located at Masyaf, a city in Syria.
- ***Historic Significance:*** The primary function of this historic site was to protect the neighboring cities from the invaders. Therefore, the defensive physical structure includes huge walls and towers surrounding the interior of the building.
- ***Rulers:*** It was originally constructed in the Byzantine period. However, this historic citadel is known as Ismaili building because the significant construction work was by carried out by the 12th century Ismaili leader Abu Sinan.

- ***Major destruction:*** The several phases of battles and reconstruction work over the period of time had caused major destruction to the physical structure of the citadel.

What we know about the Castle of Salah ad-Din

- ***Location:*** Castle of Salah ad-Din is also known as castle of Saladin, and it is located in the southwest of Aleppo.
- ***Historic Significance and Rulers:*** In 975, Byzantine emperor conquered this historic site, which was then invaded by the Crusaders. Thus, in the early 12th century the Crusaders constructed strong defensive structures such as stonewalls, high towers, and a ditch, which prevented invaders from entering into the castle.
- ***Addition to the original physical structure over the centuries:*** The Arab additions to the castle were the mosques, courtyards, madrasa, and bathhouses.
- ***Major destruction*** In 1188 Salah ad-Din over took the castle. Since, the defensive structure was very strong, Salah ad-Din had to use aggressive conquering tools and strategies to conquer the fort. To cross the stonewalls built by Crusaders, Salah ad-Din used a siege engine. Moreover, in the encounter the heavy stones of 110 lbs to 660 lbs were hurled at the castle resulting in significant damage to the physical structure of the historic site.

The Benefits of the Conservation and the Restoration Projects

- Restorations of the historic sites attracted tourists, and hence generated tourist income.
- Recovery of the traditional construction techniques by providing high-quality skilled work training in the field of traditional masonry and construction work.
- Offering employment on the restoration sites to these skilled local individuals. Furthermore, after receiving skilled training these individuals are ready to work independently in an active market of architecture and conservation projects.
- Promoting the usage of local materials in the construction process in order to generate income for the locals.
- Developing economic opportunities within the ambit of the historic sites. For instance, establishment of the market near the citadel of Masyaf created jobs for the locals, which increased the economic and the social welfare of the natives. Moreover, the market also attracted tourist income, which ultimately boosted the quality of life of the local communities.

Thus, there are various other factors that need to put into action in order to improve the living condition of people such as easy access to financial support, healthcare, and education. Therefore, in addition to the restoration of the monuments, the Aga Khan Development Network (AKDN) marked the milestone by signing the three agreements with the Syrian government. These agreements covered the crucial areas: microfinance, healthcare, and cultural tourism in Syria.

Outcomes of the Agreements

- The first agreement was the collaboration with the Syrian government in the field of microfinance. The post-benefits of the agreement indicate, “since 2003, approximately 45,000 loans have been disbursed, amounting to nearly two billion Syrian Pounds (US\$ 40 million), generating and developing over 35,000 new and existing business opportunities” (akdn.org). Furthermore, the First Microfinance Institution (FMFI) of Syria is working along with the Aga Khan Agency for Microfinance (AKAM) in improving the economic condition of the poverty-stricken Syrian population.
- The next agreement was signed for “the further development of the health care sector” (akdn.org). The Aga Khan University designed the motives behind this agreement, which was to provide better health care facilities and support in the field of nursing education.
- The third agreement was signed to strengthen the field of cultural tourism. This agreement was signed between the Syrian Government and the Tourism Promotion Services. It is an agency of the Aga Khan Fund for Economic Development (AKFED). The post-benefits of this agreement include, the restoration of three eighteenth century houses in Old Damascus: Beit Nizam, Beit Sibai, and Beit Kuwatti. These houses were restored in the form of a 5-star hotel. Approximately \$ 20 million were invested in the construction and restoration of this project. Furthermore, along with these three houses a local neighboring school was also restored. Thus, these agreement produced better education, employment opportunities for the natives, and locals were also provided skilled training which gave them independence and confidence to work on their own in the future.

Needless to say, the economic, cultural, social, and intellectual condition of the people highly depends on the environment they reside in. Therefore, the improvement in all these sectors could only be brought when the environment is subsidized with employment and business opportunities. Therefore, the Aga Khan believes in conserving historic cities and using them as a “trampoline” to improve the quality of life of the civil society by making them independent earners.

As the Aga Khan said, *“The historic city is, generally speaking, a concentration of the ultra-poor. There are many factors that cause that. So if you impact a historic city, you’re first of all impacting the quality of life of the ultra poor, then you’re reviving a cultural asset, then you’re learning what has caused the degradation of the environment and what you can do to stop that happening elsewhere. So there are many lessons there”* (Aga Khan IV, Aleppo, Syria).

Modernization is a platform for better life, and hence it should not be used to “Occidentalize” the authenticity of one’s persona. Moreover, the true essence of development lies in understanding the significance of one’s origin and identity. Therefore, connecting with own cultural values would help mankind to understand their role in the modern society.

Hence, with every project the proactive Ismaili Imam, Prince Karim Aga Khan, is trying to bring a constructive change by broadening the horizon of opportunities by “making intelligent use of the past.” Each project of His Highness is bringing a vision of progress in every sphere of life such as: education, healthcare, culture, and economic and social development.

Moreover, by restoring the cultural heritage and by providing opportunities for better life to the human race, the Ismaili Imam, His Highness the Aga Khan, is functioning to build a strong belief for a pluralistic world.



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