The Ismaili Da’wa outside the Fatimid Dawla
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Abstract

This article examines the history, structure and successes of the da’wa system prior to and during the establishment of the Fatimid Caliphate. Early Ismaili da’wa took advantage of the fact that there were many discontented factions among the Abbasid populace. Acquiring the allegiance of these groups facilitated the eventual establishment of the Fatimid Caliphate.

During the reign of the Fatimids, the da’wa structure continued to be refined and expanded. Within the Fatimid state, the da’wa enjoyed unbridled freedom to propagate the faith and expound upon ideological developments. However, the Fatimid’s policies of tolerance and freedom of religion prevented Ismailism from ever rooting deeply into the North African population. It remained the faith of a minority for the duration of the Fatimid reign.

Ironically, outside the Fatimid dawla, the da’wa was more successful in establishing significant Ismaili communities across Asia and into the Subcontinent. It is this stability, achieved outside Fatimid territory, which allowed Ismailism’s survival and continuation after the decline of the Fatimid dynasty.

Keywords:
dā’ī, da’wa, Fatimid, imāmate, Ismailis, Shia, Abbāsids, Mustali, Nizārī, Hafizi, Ṭayyibī, al-Kirmānī, al-Sijistānī, al-Nu’mān, Al-Shirazi, Ḥasan Ṣabbāh, Nāṣir Khusraw

Background

The Ismailis separated from the rest of the Imāmi Shi‘īs on the death of the Imām Ja‘far al-Ṣādiq in 148/765. By the middle of the 3rd/9th century, the Ismailis had organized a secret, religio-political movement designated as al-da’wa (the mission) or, more precisely, al-da’wa al-hādiya (the rightly guiding mission). The over-all aim of this dynamic and centrally-directed movement of social protest was to uproot the ’Abbāsids and install the ‘Alīd imām acknowledged by the Ismailis to the actual rule of the Islamic community (umma). The revolutionary message of the Ismaili da’wa was systematically propagated by a network of dā’īs or religio-political missionaries in different parts of the Muslim world, from Transoxania to Yaman and North Africa.

Aim of the Da’wa System

The Ismaili dā’īs summoned the Muslims everywhere to accord their allegiance to the Ismaili imām-Mahdī, who was expected to deliver the believers from the oppressive rule of the ’Abbāsids and establish justice and a more equitable social order in the world. Thus, the
Ismaili da’wa also promised to restore the leadership of the Muslims to ‘Alīds, members of the ahl al-bayt or the Prophet Muḥammad's family, whose legitimate rights to leadership had been successively usurped by the Umayyads and the ‘Abbāsids.¹ The Ismailī dā’īs won an increasing number of converts among a multitude of discontented groups of diverse social backgrounds. Among such groups mention may be made of the landless peasantry and Bedouin tribesmen whose interests were set apart from those of the prospering urban classes. The dā’īs also capitalized on regional grievances. On the basis of a well-designed da’wa strategy, the dā’īs were initially more successful in nonurban milieus, removed from the administrative centres of the Ḍabasid caliphate. This explains the early spread of Ismailism among rural inhabitants and Bedouin tribesmen of the Arab lands, notably in southern Iraq, eastern Arabia (Bahrayn) and Yaman. In contrast, in the Iranian lands, especially in the Jībāl, Khurāsān and Transoxania, the da’wa was primarily addressed to the ruling classes and the educated elite.

**Ismaili Doctrine**

The early Ismailī da’wa achieved particular success among those Imāmī Shi’īs of Iraq, Persia and elsewhere, later designated as Ithna’ashariyya (Twelvers), who had been left in a state of disarray and confusion following the death of their eleventh imām and the simultaneous disappearance of his infant son Muḥammad in 260/874. These Imāmis shared the same early theological heritage with the Ismailis, especially the Imāmi doctrine of the imāmate. This doctrine, which provided the central teaching of the Twelver and Ismaili Shi’īs, was based on the belief in the permanent need of mankind for a divinely guided, sinless and infallible (ma’sūm) imām who, after the Prophet Muḥammad, would act as the authoritative teacher and guide of men in all their spiritual affairs. This imām was entitled to temporal leadership as much as to religious authority; his mandate, however, did not depend on his actual rule. The doctrine further taught that the Prophet himself had designated his cousin and son-in-law ‘Alī b. Abī Ṭālib (d. 40/661), who was married to the Prophet's daughter Fāṭima, as his successor under divine command; and that the imāmate was to be transmitted from father to son among the descendants of ‘Alī and Fāṭima, through their son al-Ḥusayn (d. 61/680) until the end of time. This ‘Alīd imām was in possession of a special knowledge or ‘ilm, and had perfect understanding of the exoteric (zāhir) and esoteric (bātin) meanings of the Qur’ān and the commandments and prohibitions of the shari’a or the sacred law of Islam. Recognition of this imām, the sole legitimate imām at any time, and obedience to him were made the absolute duties of every believer.²

By 286/899, when the Ismailis themselves split into the loyal Fatimid Ismaili and the dissident Qarmatī factions, significant Ismaili communities had appeared in numerous regions of the Arab world and throughout the Iranian lands, as well as in North Africa where the Kutāma and other Berber tribal confederations had responded to the summons of the Ismailī da’wa. The dissident Qarmatīs did not acknowledge the imāmate of ‘Abd Allāh al-Mahdī (the future founder of the Fatimid caliphate) and his predecessors, the central leaders of early Ismailism, as well as his successors in the Fatimid dynasty. In the same eventful year 286/899, the Qarmatīs founded a powerful state of their own in Bahrayn, which survived in rivalry with the Fatimid state until 470/1077.³

**Establishment of an Ismaili State**

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The success of the early Ismaili da'wa was crowned in 297/909 by the establishment of the Fatimid state or dawla in North Africa, in Ifrīqiya (today's Tunisia and eastern Algeria). The foundation of this Fatimid Ismaili Shi‘ī caliphate represented not only a great success for the Ismā‘īliyya, who now possessed for the first time a state under the leadership of their imām, but for the entire Shi‘a. Not since the time of `Alī, had the Shi‘a witnessed the succession of an ‘Alid to the actual leadership of an important Islamic state. By acquiring political power, and then transforming the nascent Fatimid dawla into a flourishing empire, the Ismaili imām presented his Shi‘ī challenge to `Abbāsid hegemony and Sunnī interpretations of Islam. Ismailism, too, had now found its own place among the state-sponsored communities of interpretation in Islam. Henceforth, the Fatimid caliph- imām could claim to act as the spiritual spokesman of Shi‘ī Islam in general, much like the `Abbāsid caliph was the mouthpiece of Sunni Islam.

Inauguration of the Fatimid Caliphate

On 20 Rabī’ II 297/4 January 910, the Ismaili Imām `Abd Allāh al-Mahdī made his triumphant entry into Raqqāda, the Aghlabid capital in Ifrīqiya, where he was acclaimed as caliph by the Kutāma Berbers and the notables of the uprooted Aghlabid state. On the following day, the khūṭba was pronounced for the first time in all the mosques of Qayrawān in the name of `Abd Allāh al-Mahdī. At the same time, a manifesto was read from the pulpits announcing that leadership had finally come to be vested in the ahl al-bayt. As one of the first acts of the new regime, the jurists of Ifrīqiya were instructed to give their legal opinions in accordance with the Shī‘ī principles of jurisprudence. The new caliphate and dynasty came to be known as Fatimid (Fāṭimiyya), derived from the name of the Prophet's daughter Fāṭima, to whom al-Mahdī and his successors traced their ancestry.

Laying Ideological Foundations

The ground for the establishment of the Fatimid caliphate in Ifrīqiya had been carefully prepared since 280/893 by the dā‘ī Abū ‘Abd Allāh al-Shī‘ī, who had been active among the Kutāma Berbers of the Lesser Kabylia. It was from his base in the Maghrib that the dā‘ī al-Shī‘ī converted the bulk of the Kutāma Berbers; and with the help of his Kutama armies he eventually seized all of Ifrīqiya. It is to be noted, however, that Shi‘ism had never taken deep roots in North Africa, where the native Berbers generally adhered to diverse schools of Khārijism while Qayrawān, founded as a garrison town and inhabited by Arab warriors, remained the stronghold of Mālikī Sunnism. Under such circumstances, the newly converted Berbers' understanding of Ismailism, which at the time still lacked a distinctive school of law (madhhab), was rather superficial - a phenomenon that remained essentially unchanged in subsequent decades. The dā‘ī al-Shī‘ī personally taught the Kutāma initiates Ismaili tenets in regular lectures. These lectures were known as the "sessions of wisdom" (majālis al-ḥikma), as esoteric Ismaili doctrine was referred to as "wisdom" or ḥikma. Abu `Abd Allāh al-Shī‘ī instructed his subordinate dā‘īs to hold similar sessions in the areas under their jurisdiction. Later, the dā‘ī al-Shī‘ī’s brother Abu'l-`Abbās, another learned dā‘ī of high intellectual calibre, held public disputations with the leading Mālikī jurists of Qayrawān, expounding the Shī‘ī foundations of the new regime and the legitimate rights of the ahl al-bayt to the leadership of the Islamic community. The ground was thus rapidly laid also doctrinally for the establishment of the new Shī‘ī caliphate.
Consolidating Authority

The Fatimid caliph-imām al-Mahdī (d. 322/934) and his next three successors, ruling from Ifrīqiya, encountered numerous difficulties while consolidating the pillars of their state. In addition to the continued animosity of the ‘Abbāsids, and the Umayyads of Spain, who as rival claimants to the caliphate entertained their own designs for North Africa, the early Fatimids had numerous military entanglements with the Byzantines. They also devoted much of their energy to subduing the rebellions of the Khārijī Berbers, especially those belonging to the Zanāta confederation, and the hostilities of the Sunnī inhabitants of the cities of Ifrīqiya led by their influential Mālikī jurists. All this made it extremely difficult for the early Fatimids to secure control over any region of the Maghrib, beyond the heartland of Ifrīqiya, for any extended period. It also made the propagation of the Ismaili daʿwa rather impractical in the Maghrib. In fact, ´Abd Allāh al-Mahdī and his immediate successors did not actively engage in the extension of their daʿwa in order to avoid hostile reactions of the majoritarian Khārijī and Sunnī inhabitants of North Africa. Nevertheless, the Ismailis were now for the first time permitted to practise their faith openly and without fearing persecution within Fatimid dominions, while outside the boundaries of their state they were obliged, as before, to observe taqiyya or precautionary dissimulation of their true beliefs.

Continuation of the Daʿwa and Codification of Ismaili Law

In line with their universal claims the Fatimid caliph-imāms had, however, not abandoned their daʿwa aspirations on assuming power. Claiming to possess sole legitimate religious authority, the Fatimids aimed to extend their authority and rule over the entire Muslim umma and even the regions of the world inhabited by non-Muslims. As a result, they retained the network of dāʿīs operating on their behalf both within and outside Fatimid dominions, although initially they effectively refrained from daʿwa activities within the Fatimid state. It took the Fatimids several decades to formally establish their rule in North Africa. Only the fourth Fatimid caliph-imām, al-Muʿizz (341-365/953-975), was able to pursue successfully policies of war and diplomacy, also concerning himself specifically with the affairs of the Ismaili daʿwa. His overall aim was to extend the universal authority of the Fatimids at the expense of their major rivals, namely, the Umayyads of Spain, the Byzantines and above all, the ´Abbāsids. The process of codifying Ismaili law, too, attained its climax under al-Muʿizz mainly through the efforts of al-Qādī al-Nuʿmān (d. 363/974), the foremost Fatimid jurist. Al-Muʿizz officially commissioned al-Nuʿmān, who headed the Fatimid judiciary from 337/948 in the reign of the third Fatimid caliph-imām al-Manṣūr, to promulgate an Ismaili madhhab. His efforts culminated in the compilation of the Daʿāʾim al-Islam (The Pillars of Islam), which was endorsed by al-Muʿizz as the official code of the Fatimid dawla. The Ismailis, too, now possessed a system of law and jurisprudence as well as an Ismaili paradigm of governance.

Key Tenets of Ismaili Law

As developed by al-Nuʿmān, Ismaili law accorded special importance to the central Shiʿī doctrine of the imāmate. In fact, the opening chapter in the Daʿāʾim al-Islam, which relates to walāya, explains the necessity of acknowledging the rightful imām of the time, viz., the Fatimid caliph-imām, also providing Islamic legitimation for the ´Alīd state ruled by the
Fatimids belonging to the Prophet's family. In fact, the authority of the infallible Fatimid Alīd imām and his teachings were listed as the third principal source of Ismaili law, after the Qur'ān and the sunna of the Prophet which are accepted as the first two sources by all Muslims. In sum, it was al-Qādī al-Nuʿmān who elaborated in his legal compendia a doctrinal basis for the Fatimids' legitimacy as ruling caliph-imāms, also lending support to their universal claims.  

Religious Propaganda Within and Against the Fatimid Dawla

Al-Muʿizz, as noted, was the first member of his dynasty to have concerned himself with the Ismailī daʿwā outside Fatimid dominions. In addition to preparing the ideological ground for Fatimid rule, his daʿwā strategy was based on a number of more specific religio-political considerations. The propaganda of the Qarmatīs of Bahrayn, Iraq, Persia and elsewhere, who had continuously refused to recognize the imāmate of the Fatimids, generally undermined the Ismailī daʿwā and the activities of the Fatimid dāʿīs in the same regions. It was, indeed, mainly due to the doctrines and practices of the Qarmatīs that the entire Ismailī movement was accused by the Sunni polemists and heresiographers of deviation in religion, as these hostile sources did not distinguish between the dissident Qarmatīs and those Ismailīs who acknowledged the Fatimid caliphs as their imāms. The anti-Ismailī literary campaign of the Sunni establishment, dating mainly to the foundation of Fatimid rule, was particularly intensified in the aftermath of the Qarmatīs' sack of Mecca in 317/930. At any rate, al-Muʿizz must have also recognized the military advantages of winning the support of the formidable Qarmatī armies, which would have significantly enhanced the chances of the Fatimids' victory over the ʿAbbāsids in the central Islamic lands. It was in line with these objectives that al-Muʿizz made certain doctrinal adjustments, rooted in the teachings of the early Ismailīs and designed to prove appealing to the Qarmatīs. Perhaps as a concession to the Qarmatī camp, al-Muʿizz and the Fatimid daʿwā also endorsed the Neoplatonized cosmology first propounded by the Qarmatī dāʾī Muḥammad al-Nasāfī (d. 332/943) in his Kitāb al-maḥṣūl (Book of the Yield) around 300/912. Henceforth, this new cosmology was generally advocated by the Fatimid daʿwā in preference to the mythological Kūnī-Qadar cosmology of the early Ismailīs.  

Results of Daʿwa Strategies

The daʿwā strategy of al-Muʿizz won some success in the dissident camp outside the confines of the Fatimid state. The dāʾī AbūYaʿqūb al-Sijistānī, who had hitherto belonged to the Qarmatī faction, switched his allegiance to the Fatimid daʿwā. As a result, large numbers of the Qarmatīs of Khurāsān, Sistan (Arabicised, Sijistan), Makran and Central Asia, where al-Sijistānī acted as chief dāʾī in succession to al-Nasāfī and his sons, also acknowledged the Fatimid Ismailī imām. Al-Sijistānī was executed as a heretic (mulḥid) not long after 361/971 on the order of Khalaf b. Aḥmad, the Ṣaffarī amīr of Sistān, but Ismailism survived in the eastern regions of the Iranian world. Fatimid Iṣmāʿīlism also succeeded in acquiring a permanent stronghold in Sind, in northern India, where Ismailī communities have survived to modern times. Around 347/958, through the efforts of a Fatimid dāʾī who converted a local Hindu ruler, an Ismailī principality was established in Sind, with its seat in Multan (in present-day Pakistan). Large numbers of Hindus converted to Ismailism in that region of the
Indian subcontinent, where the *khuṭba* was read in the name of al-Mu`izz and the Fatimids. This Ismaili principality survived until 396/1005 when Sultan Maḥmud of Ghazna invaded Multan and persecuted the Ismailis. Despite the hostilities of the Ghaznavids and their successors, however, Ismailism survived in Sind and later received the protection of the Sūmras, who ruled independently from Thatta for almost three centuries starting in 443/1051. On the other hand, Qarmaṣism persisted in Daylam, Ādharbāyjān and other parts of Persia, as well as in Iraq and Central Asia for almost a century after al-Mu`izz. Above all, al-Mu`izz failed to win the support of the Qarmaṣīs of Bahrayn, who effectively frustrated the Fatimids' strategy of eastern expansion into Syria and other central Islamic lands.

**The Egyptian Expedition**

Meanwhile, al-Mu`izz had made detailed plans for the conquest of Egypt, a vital Fatimid goal which the first two members of the dynasty had failed to achieve. To that end, the Fatimid *da`wa* was intensified in Egypt, then beset by numerous economic and political difficulties under disintegrating Ikhshīdīd rule. Jawhar, the capable Fatimid commander who had pacified North Africa for al-Mu`izz, was selected to lead the Egyptian expedition. Having encountered only token resistance. Jawhar entered Fustāṭ, the capital of Ikhshīdīd Egypt, in Sha`ban 358/July 969. Jawhar behaved leniently towards Egyptians, declaring a general amnesty. Subsequently, the Fatimids introduced the Ismaili *madhhab* only gradually in Egypt, where Shi`ism had never acquired a stronghold. Fatimid Egypt remained primarily Sunnī, of the Shāfī`ī *madhhab*, with an important community of Christian Copts. The Fatimids never attempted forced conversion of their subjects and the minoritarian status of the Shi`a remained unchanged in Egypt despite two centuries of Ismaili Shi`ī rule.

Jawhar camped his army to the north of Fustāṭ and immediately proceeded to build a new royal city there, the future Fatimid capital al-Qāhirah. (Cairo). Al-Mu`izz had personally supervised the plan of Cairo with its al-Azhar mosque and Fatimid palace complex. Jawhar ruled over Egypt for four years until the arrival of al-Mu`izz. In line with the eastern strategy of the Fatimids, in 359/969 Jawhar dispatched the main body of the Fatimid armies for the conquest of Palestine and Syria. In the following year, the Fatimids were defeated near Damascus by a coalition of the Qarmaṣīs of Bahrayn, Būyids and other powers. Later in 361/971, the Qarmaṣīs of Bahrayn advanced to the gates of Fustāṭ before being driven back. Henceforth, there occurred numerous military encounters between the Fatimids and the Qarmaṣīs of Bahrayn, postponing the establishment of Fatimid rule over Syria for several decades.

**The Caliph Moves to Egypt**

In the meantime, al-Mu`izz had made meticulous preparations for the transference of the seat of the Fatimid state to Egypt. He appointed Buluggin b. Zīrī, the *amīr* of the loyal Ṣanḥāja Berbers, as governor of Ifrīqiya. Buluggin, like his father, had faithfully defended the Fatimids against the Zanāta Berbers and other enemies in North Africa; and he was to found the Zīrīd dynasty of the Maghrib (361-543/972-1148). Accompanied by the entire Fatimid family, Ismaili notables, Kutāma chieftains, as well as the Fatimid treasuries and the coffins of his predecessors, al-Mu`izz crossed the Nile and took possession of his new capital in Ramadān 362/June 973. In Egypt, al-Mu`izz was mainly preoccupied with the elaboration of Fatimid governance in addition to repelling further Qarmaṣī incursions. Having transformed
the Fatimid *dawla* from a regional power into an expanding and stable empire with a newly activated *daʾwa* apparatus, al-Muʿizz died in 365/975.

Cairo served from early on as the central headquarters of the Fatimid Ismaili *daʾwa* organization that developed over time and reached its peak under the eighth Fatimid caliph-imām al-Mustanṣir (427-187/1036-094). The religio-political message of the *daʾwa* continued to be disseminated both within and outside the Fatimid state through an expanding network of *dāʾīs*. The term *daʾwa*, it may be noted, referred to both the organization of the Ismaili mission, with its elaborate hierarchical ranks or *hudūd*, and the functioning of that organization, including especially the missionary activities of the *dāʾīs* who were the representatives of the *daʾwa* in different regions.

**Secrecy Surrounding *Daʾwa* Functioning**

The organization and functioning of the Ismaili *daʾwa* are among the most secretly guarded aspects of Fatimid Ismailism. It is not surprising, therefore, that the Ismaili literature of the Fatimid period recovered in modern times has shed only limited light on this subject. Information is particularly meagre regarding the *daʾwa* and the activities of the *dāʾīs* in hostile regions outside the Fatimid *dawla*, such as Iraq, Persia, Central Asia and India, where the *dāʾīs*, fearful of persecution, were continuously obliged to observe *taqiyya* and secrecy in their operations. All this once again explains why Ismaili literature is generally so poor in historiographical details on the activities of the *dāʾīs* - information that in Fatimid times may have been available only to the central headquarters of the Ismaili *daʾwa*, headed by the person of the imām. However, modern scholarship in Ismaili studies, drawing on a variety of Ismaili and non-Ismaili sources, including histories of Egypt, has now finally succeeded to piece together a relatively reliable sketch of the Fatimid Ismaili *daʾwa*, with some of its major practices and institutions.

**Central *Daʾwa* Objectives**

The Fatimids, as noted, aspired to be recognized as rightful imāms by the entire Muslim *umma*: they also aimed to extend their actual rule over all Muslim lands and beyond. These were, indeed, the central objectives of their *daʾwa*, which continued to be designated as *al-daʾwa al-hādiya*, the rightly guiding summons to mankind to follow the Fatimid Ismaili imām. The word *dāʾī*, literally meaning "summoner", was used by several Muslim groups and movements, including the early Shiʿī *ghulāt*, the ʿAbbāsiids, the Muʿtazila, and the Zaydiyya, in reference to their religio-political missionaries. But the term acquired its widest application in connection with the Ismāʿīliyya, while the early Ismailis and Qarmaṣīs in Persia and elsewhere sometimes used other designations such as *janāḥ* (plural, *ajniha*) instead of *dāʾī*. It should also be noted that at least from Fatimid times several categories of *dāʾīs* existed in any region. Be that as it may, the term *dāʾī* (plural, *duʿāʾī*) was applied generically to any authorized representative of the Fatimid *daʾwa*, a missionary responsible for propagating Ismāʿīlism through winning new converts, and followers for the Ismaili imām of the time. As the provision of instruction in Ismaili doctrine for the initiates was from early on an important responsibility of the *daʾwa*, the *dāʾī* was also entrusted with the religious education of the new converts or *mustajībs*. Furthermore, the Ismaili *dāʾī* served as the unofficial agent of the Fatimid *dawla*, and promoted secretly the Fatimid cause wherever he operated. The earliest record of this aspect of the *dāʾī*’s activity is best exemplified in the
achievements of the ḍāʾī Abū ʿAbd Allāh al-Shīrī (d. 298/911) in North Africa. Within Fatimid dominions, the Ismaili daʿwa was protected by the Fatimid dawla and doubtless some collaborative relationship must have existed between them as both were headed by the person of the caliph-imām.10

Despite his all-important role, however, very little seems to have been written on the ḍāʾī by the Ismaili authors of Fatimid times. The prolific al-Qāḍī al-Nuʿmān, head of the daʿwa for some time, devoted only a few pages to the virtues of an ideal ḍāʾī.11 He merely emphasizes that the daʿwa was above all a teaching activity and that the ḍāʾīs were teachers who promoted their message also through their own exemplary knowledge and behaviour. A more detailed discussion of the attributes of an ideal ḍāʾī is contained in the only known Ismaili work on the subject written by the ḍāʾī-author ʿAbd Allāh b. Ibrāhīm al-Nisābūrī, al-Nuʿmān’s younger contemporary.12 According to al-Nisābūrī, a ḍāʾī could be appointed only by the imām's permission (idhn). The ḍāʾīs, especially those operating in remote lands outside Fatimid dominions, seem to have enjoyed a high degree of autonomy, and they evidently received only their general directives from the central daʿwa headquarters. In these generally hostile regions, the ḍāʾīs operated very secretly, finding it rather difficult to establish frequent contacts with the daʿwa headquarters in Cairo.

Under these circumstances, only Isma'ilis of high educational qualifications combined with proper moral and intellectual attributes could become ḍāʾīs leading Ismaili communities in particular localities. The ḍāʾīs were expected to have sufficient knowledge of both the zāhir and the bātin dimensions of religion, or the apparent meanings of the Qurʾān and the shariʿa and their Ismaili interpretation (tawil). In non-Fatimid lands, the ḍāʾī also acted as a judge in communal disputes and his decisions were binding for the members of the local Ismaili community. Thus, the ḍāʾī was often trained in legal sciences as well. The ḍāʾī was expected to be adequately familiar with the teachings of non-Muslim religions, in addition to knowing the languages and customs of the region in which he functioned. All these qualifications were required for the orderly performance of the ḍāʾī’s duties. As a result, a great number of ḍāʾīs were highly learned and cultured scholars and made important contributions to Islamic thought. They also produced the bulk of the Ismaili literature of the Fatimid period in Arabic, dealing with a diversity of exoteric and esoteric subjects ranging from jurisprudence and theology to philosophy and esoteric exegesis.13 Nāṣir-ī Khusraw was the only major Fatimid ḍāʾī to have written his books in Persian.

Daʿwa Methodology

Like other aspects of the daʿwa, few details are available on the actual methods used by the Fatimid ḍāʾīs for winning and educating new converts. Always avoiding mass proselytization, the ḍāʾī had to be personally acquainted with the prospective initiates, who were selected with special regard to their intellectual abilities and talents. Many Sunnī sources, influenced by anti-Ismaili polemical writings, mention a seven-stage process of initiation (balāgh) into Ismailism, and even provide different names for each stage in a process that allegedly led the novice to the ultimate stage of irreligiosity and unbelief.14 There is no evidence for any fixed graded system in the extant Ismaili literature, although a certain degree of gradualism in the initiation and education of converts must have been unavoidable. Indeed, al-Nisābūrī relates that the ḍāʾī was expected to instruct the mustajīb in a gradual
fashion, not divulging too much at any given time: the act of initiation itself was perceived by the Ismailis as the spiritual rebirth of the adept.

**Functions of the Dāʿī**

It was the duty of the dāʿī to administer to the initiate an oath of allegiance (‘ahd or mīthāq) to the Ismaili imām of the time. As part of this oath, the initiate also pledged to maintain secrecy in Ismaili doctrines taught to him by the dāʿī. Only after this oath the dāʿī began instructing the mustajīb, usually in regular "teaching sessions" held at his house for a number of such adepts. The funds required by the dāʿī for the performance of his various duties were raised locally from the members of his community. The dāʿī kept a portion of the funds collected on behalf of the imām, including the zakāt, the khums and certain Ismaili-specific dues like the najwā, to finance his local operations and sent the remainder to the imām through reliable couriers. The latter, especially those going to Cairo from remote daʿwa regions, also brought back Ismaili books for the dāʿīs. The Fatimid dāʿīs were, thus, kept well informed on the intellectual developments within Ismailism, especially those endorsed by the daʿwa headquarters.

**Majalis and the Proliferation of Ismaili Ideology**

The scholarly qualifications required of the dāʿīs and the Fatimids' high esteem for learning resulted in a number of distinctive traditions and institutions under the Fatimids. The daʿwa was, as noted, concerned with the religious education of converts, who had to be duly instructed in Ismaili esoteric doctrine or ḥikma. For that purpose, a variety of "teaching sessions", generally designated as majālis (singular, majlis), were organized. These sessions, addressed to different audiences, were formalized by the time of the Fatimid caliph-imām al-Iḫṣāṣī (386-411/996-1021). The lectures on Ismaili doctrine, the majālis al-ḥikma, as noted, were initiated by the dāʿī Abū ʿAbd Allāh al-Shīrīnī, and then systematized by al-Qādī al-Nuʿman. In the Fatimid state, from early on, the private majālis al-ḥikma, organized for the exclusive benefit of the Ismaili initiates, were held separately for men and women. These lectures, delivered by the chief dāʿī (dāʿī al-duʿāt) who was often also the chief qādī (qādī al-qudat) of the Fatimid state, required the prior approval of the Fatimid caliph-imām. There were also public lectures on Ismaili law. The legal doctrines of the Ismaili madhhab, adopted as the official system of religious law in the Fatimid state, were applied by the Fatimid judiciary, headed by the chief qādī. But the Ismaili legal code, governing the juridical basis of the daily life of the Muslim subjects of the Fatimid state, was new and its precepts had to be explained to Ismaili as well as non-Ismaili Muslims. As a result, public sessions on the shariʿa as interpreted by Ismaili jurisprudence, were held by al-Qādī al-Nuʿman and his successors as chief qādīs, after the Friday midday prayers, in the Fatimid capital. In Cairo, the public sessions on Ismaili law were held at al-Azhar and other great mosques there. On these occasions, excerpts from al-Nuʿman's Daʿīʾ al-Islām and other legal works were read to large audiences.

On the other hand, the private majālis al-ḥikma continued to be held in the Fatimid palace in Cairo for the Ismaili initiates who had already taken the oath of allegiance and secrecy. Many of these majālis, normally prepared by or for the chief dāʿī, were in time collected in writing. This distinctive Fatimid tradition of learning found its culmination in the Majālis of...
al-Mu'ayyad fîl-Dîn al-Shîrâzî (d. 470/1078), chief dâ‘î for almost twenty years under al-Mustanṣîr. Fatimid dâ‘îs working outside Fatimid dominions seem to have held similar "teaching sessions" for the education of the Ismaili initiates. In non-Fatimid territories, the Isma'ili observers the law of the land wherever they lived, while taking their personal disputes to local Isma'ili dâ‘îs. The Fatimids paid particular attention to the training of their dâ‘îs, including those operating outside the confines of the Fatimid state. Among the Fatimid institutions of learning mention should be made of the Dâr al-‘Ilm (House of Knowledge), founded in 395/1005 by al-Ḥâkim in Cairo. A wide variety of religious and non-religious sciences were taught at this institution which was also equipped with a major library. Many Fatimid dâ‘îs received at least part of their education at the Dâr al-‘Ilm. By later Fatimid times, the Dâr al-‘Ilm more closely served the needs of the da‘wa.

**Organisation of the Da‘wa**

The Fatimid da‘wa was organized hierarchically under the overall guidance of the Isma'ili imâm, who authorized its general policies. It should be noted that the da‘wa hierarchy or hudûd mentioned in various Fatimid texts seems to have had reference to a utopian situation, when the Isma'ili imâm would rule the entire world. Consequently, the da‘wa ranks mentioned in these sources were not actually filled at all times: some of them were probably never filled at all. The chief dâ‘î (dâ‘î al-du‘ât) acted as the administrative head of the da‘wa organization. He appointed the provincial dâ‘îs of the Fatimid state, who were stationed in the main cities of the Fatimid provinces, including Damascus, Tyre, Acre, Ascalon, and Ramla, as well as in some rural areas. These dâ‘îs represented the da‘wa and the chief dâ‘î, operating alongside the provincial qâdîs who represented the Fatimid qâdî al-quḍât. The chief dâ‘î also played a part in selecting the dâ‘îs of non-Fatimid territories. Not much else is known about the functions of the chief dâ‘î, who was closely supervised by the imâm. As noted, he was also responsible for organizing the majâlîs al-ḥikma; and in Fatimid ceremonial, he ranked second after the chief qâdî, if both positions were not held by the same person. The title of dâ‘î al-du‘ât itself, used in non-Ismaili sources, rarely appears in the Isma'ili texts of the Fatimid period which, instead, usually use the term bāb (or bāb al-abwâb), implying gateway to the imâm's "wisdom", in reference to the administrative head of the da‘wa organization. The dâ‘î Ḥâmîd al-Dîn al-Kirmâni makes particular allusions to the position of bāb and his closeness to the imâm.

**Further Evolution of the Da‘wa Organisation**

The organization of the Fatimid da‘wa, with its hierarchy of ranks, developed over time and reached its full elaboration under the caliph-imâm al-Mustanṣîr. There are different references to the da‘wa ranks (hudûd) after the imâm and his bāb. According to the idealized scheme, the world, specifically the regions outside Fatimid dominions, was divided into twelve jazîras or "islands" for da‘wa purposes; each jazîra representing a separate da‘wa region. Delineated on the basis of a combination of geographic and ethnographic considerations, the "islands", collectively designated as the "islands of the earth" (jazîra al-arḍ), included Rûm (Byzantine), Daylam, standing for Persia, Sind, Hind (India), Sin (China), and the regions inhabited by Arabs, Nubians, Khazars, Slavs (Sâqâlîba), Berbers, Africans (Zanj), and Abyssinians (Habash). Other classifications of the "islands", too, seem to have been observed in practice. For instance, Nâṣîr Khusraw refers to Khurâsân as a jazîra under his own jurisdiction; and this claim is corroborated by the well-informed Ibn Hawqal,

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who further adds that Baluchistan, in eastern Persia, belonged to that jazîra.\textsuperscript{21} In this sense, Khurâsân seems to have included neighbouring regions in today's Afghanistan and Central Asia. Among other regions functioning as jazîras of the Fatimid da‘wa, mention may be made of Yaman as well as Iraq and western Persia, for a time headed by the dâ‘î al-Kîrmânî.

Each jazîra was placed under the overall charge of a high ranking dâ‘î known specifically as hujjâ (proof, guarantor), also called naqîb, lähiq or yad (hand) in early Fatimid times. The hujjâ was the highest representative of the da‘wa in any "island", and he was assisted by a number of subordinate dâ‘îs of different ranks operating in the localities under his jurisdiction. These included dâ‘î al-balâgh, al-dâ‘î al-muṭlaq, and al-dâ‘î al-maḥdûd (or al-maḥṣûr). There may have been as many as thirty such dâ‘îs in some jazîras.\textsuperscript{22} The particular responsibilities of different dâ‘îs are not clarified in the meagre sources. It seems, however, that dâ‘î al-balâgh acted as liaison between the central da‘wa headquarters in the Fatimid capital and the hujjâ's headquarters in his jazîra, and al-dâ‘î al-muṭlaq evidently became the chief functionary of the da‘wa, operating with absolute authority in the absence of the hujjâ and his dâ‘î al-balâgh. The regional dâ‘îs, in turn, had their assistants, entitled al-ma‘dînîn, the licentiate. The sources mention at least two categories of this rank, namely, al-ma‘dînîn al-muṭlaq, and al-ma‘dînîn al-maḥdûd (or al-maḥṣûr), eventually called al-mukâsîr. The ma‘dînîn al-muṭlaq often became a dâ‘î himself; he was authorized as the chief licentiate to administer the oath of initiation and explain the rules and policies of the da‘wa to the initiates, while the mukâsîr (literally, breaker) was mainly responsible for attracting prospective converts and breaking their attachments to other religions. The ordinary Ismaili initiates, the mustaḥîbs or respondents who referred to themselves as the awlîyâ Allâh or "friends of God", did not occupy a rank (ḥadd) at the bottom of the da‘wa hierarchy. Belonging to the ahl al-da‘wa (people of the mission), they represented the elite, the khawâsî, as compared to the common Muslims, designated as the ‘āmmat al-Muslimûn or the ‘awwâm. The ranks of the Fatimid da‘wa, numbering to seven from bâb (or dâ‘î al-du‘ât) to mukâsîr, together with their idealised functions and their corresponding celestial hierarchy, are elaborated by the dâ‘î al-Kîrmânî.\textsuperscript{23}

\textit{Da‘wa Within and Without the Dawla}

The Fatimid da‘wa was propagated openly throughout the Fatimid state enjoying the protection of the government apparatus. But the success of the da‘wa within Fatimid dominions was both limited and transitory, with the major exception of Syria where different Shi‘î traditions had deep roots. During the North African phase of the Fatimid caliphate, Ismailism retained its minoritarian status in Ibrîqiya and other Fatimid territories in the Maghrib where the spread of the da‘wa was effectively checked by Mâlikî Sunnism and Khârijism. By 440/1048, Ismailism had virtually disappeared from the former Fatimid dominions in North Africa, where the Ismailis were severely persecuted after the departure of the Fatimids. In Fatimid Egypt, too, the Ismailis always remained a minority community. It was outside the Fatimid state, in the jazîras, that the Fatimid Ismaili da‘wa achieved its greatest and most lasting success. Many of these "islands" in the Islamic world, scattered from Yaman to Transoxania, were well acquainted with a diversity of Shi‘î traditions, including Ismailism, and large numbers in these regions responded to the summons of the Ismaili dâ‘îs. By the time of the Fatimid caliph-imâm al-Mustanṣîr, significant Ismaili communities representing a united movement had appeared in many of the jazîras. By then, the dissident Qarmâtîs had either disintegrated or joined the dynamic Fatimid da‘wa.

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Al-Kirmānī’s Success and Abbasid Reactions

In Iraq and Persia, the Fatimid dā‘īs had systematically intensified their activities from the time of the sixth Fatimid caliph-īmām al-Ḥākim. Aiming to undermine the ‘Abbāsids, they concentrated their efforts on a number of influential tribal amīrs in Iraq, at the very centre of ‘Abbāsid power. Foremost among the dā‘īs of al-Ḥākim’s reign was Ḥamīd al-Dīn al-Kirmānī (d. after 411/1020), perhaps the most learned Ismaili scholar of the entire Fatimid period. Designated as the hujjat al’Irāqayn, as he spent a good part of his life as a chief dā‘ī in both the Arab Iraq and the west-central parts of Persia, al-Kirmānī succeeded in converting several local chieftains in Iraq, including the ‘Uqaylid amīr of Kūfā and several other towns who acknowledged Fatimid suzerainty. It was in reaction to the success of the dā‘ī in Iraq that the ‘Abbāsīd caliph al-Qādir (381-422/991-1031) launched a series of military campaigns against the refractors as well as an anti-Fatimid literary campaign, culminating in the Baghdad manifesto of 402/1011 denouncing the Fatimids and refuting their Ḥālid genealogy.24 This manifesto was read from the pulpits throughout the ‘Abbāsīd caliphate. It was also the learned dā‘ī al-Kirmānī who was invited to Cairo to refute, on behalf of the dā‘wa headquarters, the extremist doctrines then being expounded by the founders of the Druze movement.

Da‘wa Expansion in Iraq and Persia

The dā‘wa continued to be propounded successfully in Iraq, Persia, and other eastern lands even after the ardently Sunnī Sunnī was part of the ‘Abbāsīd caliphate in 447/1055. Important Ismaili communities were now in existence in Fārs, Kirmān, Isfahān and many other parts of Persia. In Fārs, the dā‘wa had achieved particular success through the efforts of the dā‘ī al-Mu‘ayyad fīl-Dīn al-Shīrāzī, who had penetrated the ruling Būyid circles. After converting AbūKālıjây Marzubān (415-440/1024-1048), the Būyid amīr of Fārs and Khoundzistān, and many of his courtiers, however, al-Mu‘ayyad was advised to flee in order to escape ‘Abbāsīd persecution. Subsequently, he settled in Cairo, where he played an active part in the affairs of the Fatimid dawla as well as the Ismaili dā‘wa which he headed for twenty years from 450/1058 until shortly before his death in 470/1078. As revealed in his autobiography, al-Mu‘ayyad played a crucial role as an intermediary between the Fatimid regime and the Turkish commander al-Basāsīrī who championed the Fatimid cause in Iraq against the Saljūqs and the ‘Abbāsīds.25 In fact, al-Basāsīrī, with Fatimid help and al-Mu‘ayyad's strategic guidance, seized several towns in Iraq and entered Baghdād itself at the end of 450/1058. In the ‘Abbāsīd capital the khūṭba was now pronounced for al-Mustanṣir until al-Basāsīrī was defeated a year later. That Fatimid suzerainty was recognized in ‘Abbāsīd Iraq - albeit for only one year - attests to the success of the dā‘ī al-Mu‘ayyad and the dā‘wa activities there. Al-Mu‘ayyad established close relations between the dā‘wa headquarters in Cairo and the local headquarters in several jāzīras, especially those located in Yaman and the Iranian lands.

In Persia proper, the Ismaili dā‘wa had continued to spread in the midst of Saljūq dominions. By the 460's/1070's, the Persian Ismailis were under the overall leadership of a chief dā‘ī, ‘Abd al-Malik b. ‘Ațāsh, who established his secret headquarters in Isfahān, the main Saljūq capital. A religious scholar of renown and a capable organizer in his own right, ‘Abd al-Malik was also responsible for launching the career of Ḥasan Šābāb, his future successor and the...
founder of the independent Nizarī Ismaili daʿwa and state. Further east, in certain parts of Khurāsān, Badakhshān and adjacent areas in Transoxania, the daʿwa continued to be active with various degrees of success after the downfall of the Sāmānids in 395/1005. Despite incessant persecutions of the Ghaznavids and other Turkish dynasties ruling over those regions of the Iranian world, Nāṣir Khusraw and other dāʾīs managed to win the allegiance of an increasing number to the Fatimid Ismaili imām.

Nāṣir Khusraw

A learned theologian and philosopher, and one of the foremost poets of the Persian language, Nāṣir Khusraw spread the daʿwa throughout Khurāsān from around 444/1052, after returning from his well-documented voyage to Fatimid Egypt. As the hujja of Khurāsān, he originally established his secret base of operations in his native Balkh (near today's Mazār-i Sharif in northern Afghanistan). A few years later, Sunnī hostilities obliged him to take permanent refuge in the valley of Yumgān in Badakhshān. There, enjoying the protection of a local Ismaili amīr, Nāṣir spent the rest of his life in the service of the daʿwa. It is interesting to note that even from his exile in the midst of the remote Pamirs, Nāṣir maintained his contacts with the daʿwa headquarters in Cairo, then still headed by the chief dāʾī al-Mu'ayyad. In fact, the lifelong friendship between al-Mu'ayyad and Nāṣir Khusraw dates to 439/1047 when both of these distinguished Persian Ismailis arrived in the Fatimid capital. On that occasion, Nāṣir stayed in Cairo for three years furthering his Ismaili education. It was evidently Nāṣir Khusraw who extended the daʿwa in Badakhshān, now divided by the Oxus between Afghanistan and Tajikistan. At any rate, the modern-day Ismailis of Badakhshān, and their offshoot communities in Hunza and other northern areas of Pakistan, all regard Nāṣir Khusraw as the founder of their Ismaili communities. Nāṣir Khusraw died not long after 462/1070, and his mausoleum is still preserved near Faydābād, the capital of Afghan Badakhshān.

Philosophical Ismailism

Nāṣir Khusraw was also the last major proponent of "philosophical Ismailism", a distinctive intellectual tradition elaborated by the dāʾīs of the Iranian lands during the Fatimid period. Influenced by the pseudo-Aristotelian texts circulating in the Muslim world, these dāʾīs elaborated complex metaphysical systems harmonizing Ismaili Shiʿī theology with a diversity of philosophical traditions, notably Neoplatonism. The dāʾīs of the Iranian lands, perhaps in reflection of their daʿwa policy, wrote for the educated strata of society, aiming to appeal intellectually to the ruling elite. This may explain why these dāʾīs, starting with al-Nasafi, expressed their theology in terms of the then most fashionable philosophical themes. This tradition has only recently been studied by modern scholars mainly on the basis of the numerous extant works of al-Sijistānī, while Nāṣir Khusraw's contributions still remain largely unexplored. Be that as it may, these dāʾīs of the Iranian lands elaborated the earliest tradition of philosophical theology in Shiʿī Islam without actually compromising the essence of their message which revolved around the Shiʿī doctrine of the imāmate.

Success in Yaman

The Ismaili daʿwa achieved one of its major successes of the Fatimid times in Yaman, where Ismailism had survived in a subdued form after the initial efforts of the dāʾīs Ibn Ḥawshab...
Manṣūr al-Yaman (d. 302/914) and Ibn-al-Faḍl (d. 303/910). By the time of al-Mustanṣir, the leadership of the da‘wa in Yaman had come to be vested in the dā‘ī ʿAlī b. Muḥammad al-Sulayḥī, a chieftain of the influential Banū Ḥamdān. In 429/1038, ʿAlī rose in the mountainous region of Ḥarāz marking the foundation of the Sulayḥid state. The Sulayḥids recognized the suzerainty of the Fatimids and ruled over various parts of Yaman for more than a century. ʿAlī al-Sulayḥī headed the Ismaili da‘wa as well as the Sulayḥid state in Yaman, an arrangement that underwent several changes in subsequent times. By 455/1063, he had subjugated almost all of Yaman, enabling the da‘wa to be propagated openly in his dominions. The Sulayḥids established close relations with the Fatimid da‘wa headquarters in Cairo, when al-Mu'ayyad was the chief dā‘ī there. After ʿAlī, who was murdered in a tribal vendetta in 459/1067, his son Aḥmad al-Mukarram succeeded as sultan to the leadership of the Sulayḥid state, while the dā‘ī Lamā b. Mālik al-Ḥammādī (d. 491/1098) acted as the executive head of the Yamanī da‘wa.

From the latter part of Aḥmad al-Mukarram's reign (459-477/1067-1084), when the Sulayḥids lost much of northern Yaman to Zaydí, effective authority in the Sulayḥid state was exercised by his consort, al-Malika al-Sayyida Ḥurra, a most remarkable queen and Ismaili leader. She played an increasingly important role in the affairs of the Yamanī da‘wa culminating in her appointment as the hujja of Yaman by al-Mustanṣir. This represented the first application of a high rank in the da‘wa hierarchy to a woman. Al-Mustanṣir also charged her with the affairs of the da‘wa in western India. The Sulayḥids played a major part in the renewed efforts of the Fatimids to spread Ismailism on the Indian subcontinent, an objective related to the Fatimid trade interests. At any rate, from around 460/1067, Yamanī dā‘īs were dispatched to Gujarāt under the close supervision of the Sulayḥids. These dā‘īs founded a new Ismaili community in Gujarāt which in time grew into the present Ṭayyibī Bohra community.

**Fatimid Decline and Dissension**

By the early decades of al-Mustanṣir's long reign (427-487/1036-1094), the Fatimid caliphate had already embarked on its political decline. In rapid succession, the Fatimids now lost almost all of their possessions outside Egypt proper, with the exception of a few coastal towns in the Levant. Al-Mustanṣir's death in 487/1094 and the ensuing dispute over his succession led to a major schism in the Ismaili da‘wa as well, aggravating the deteriorating situation of the Fatimid regime. Al-Mustanṣir's eldest surviving son and heir designate, Nizār, was deprived of his succession rights by the scheming and ambitious al-Afḍal, who a few months earlier had succeeded his own father Badr al-Jamali (d. 487/1094) as the all-powerful Fatimid vizier and "commander of the armies" (amīr al-juyush). Al-Afḍal installed Nizār's much younger half-brother Aḥmad to the Fatimid caliphate with the title of al-Musta’lī bi‘llāh, and he immediately obtained for him the allegiance of the da‘wa leaders in Cairo. In protest, Nizār rose in revolt in Alexandria, but was defeated and executed soon afterwards in 488/1095. These events permanently split the Ismaili da‘wa and community into two rival factions, designated as Musta‘liyya and Nizāriyya after al-Mustanṣir's sons who had claimed his heritage. The imāmate of al-Musta‘lī, who had actually succeeded his father on the Fatimid throne, was recognized by the da‘wa organization in Cairo, henceforth serving as central headquarters of the Musta‘lī Ismaili da‘wa, and by the Ismailis of Egypt, Yaman and western India, who depended on the Fatimid establishment. In Syria, too, the bulk of the Ismailis seem to have initially joined the Musta‘lī camp. The situation was drastically...

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different in the eastern Islamic lands where the Fatimids no longer exercised any political influence after the Başşirî episode.

**The Nizârîs Split from Fatimid Headquarters**

By 487/1094, Ḥasan Ṣabbāh, a most capable strategist and organizer, had emerged as chief dâ’î of the Ismailis of Persia and, probably, of all Saljuq territories. Earlier, Ḥasan had spent three years in Egypt, furthering his Ismaili education and closely observing the difficulties of the Fatimid state. On his return to Persia in 473/1081, Ḥasan operated as a Fatimid dâ’î in different Persian provinces while developing his own ideas for organizing an open revolt against the Saljuqs. The revolt was launched in 483/1090 by Ḥasan's seizure of the mountain fortress of Alamût in northern Persia, which henceforth served as his headquarters. At the time of al-Mustansîr's succession dispute Ḥasan was already following an independent revolutionary policy; and he did not hesitate to uphold Nizârî rights and break off his relations with the Fatimid establishment and the da’wa headquarters in Cairo. This decision, fully supported by the entire Ismaili communities of Persia and Iraq, in fact marked the foundation of the independent Nizârî Ismaili da’wa on behalf of the Nizârî imâm who was then inaccessible. Ḥasan Ṣabbâh also succeeded in creating a state, centred at Alamût, with vast territories and an intricate network of fortresses scattered in different parts of Persia as well as in Syria. Ḥasan Ṣabbâh (d. 518/1124) and his next two successors at Alamût, Kiyâ Buzurg-Umîd and his son Muḥammad, ruled as dâ’îs and hujjas representing the absent Nizârî imâm. By 559/1164, the Nizârî imâms themselves emerged openly at Alamût and took charge of the affairs of their da’wa and state.31 The Nizârî state lasted for some 666 years until it too was uprooted by the Mongol hordes in 654/1256. However, the Nizârî Ismaili da’wa and community survived the Mongol catastrophe. The Nizârî Ismailis, who currently recognize the Aga Khan as their imâm are today found in more than twenty-five countries of Asia, Africa, Europe and North America.

**Fatimid Disintegration**

In the meantime, Musta’îl Ismailism had witnessed an internal schism of its own with seminal consequences. On al-Musta’îl's premature death in 495/1101, all Mustalî Ismailis recognized al-ʿĀmir, his son and successor to the Fatimid caliphate, as their imâm. Due to the close relations then still existing between Ṣulayḥî Yaman and Fatimid Egypt, the queen al-Ṣayyida, too, acknowledged al-ʿĀmir's imâmate. The assassination of al-ʿĀmir in 524/1130 confronted the Musta’îl da’wa and communities with a major crisis. By then, the Fatimid caliphate was disintegrating rapidly, while the Ṣulayḥî state was beset by its own mounting difficulties. It was under such circumstances that on al-ʿĀmir's death power was assumed as regent in the Fatimid state by his cousin ʿAbd al-Majîd, while al-ʿĀmir's infant son and designated successor al-Ṭayyib had disappeared under mysterious circumstances. Shortly afterwards in 526/1132, ʿAbd al-Majîd successfully claimed the Fatimid caliphate as well as the imâmate of the Musta’îl Ismailis with the title of al-Ḥâfiz li-Dîn Allâh. The irregular accession of al-Ḥâfiz was endorsed, as in the case of al-Musta’îl, by the da’wa headquarters in Cairo; and, therefore, it also received the support of the Musta’îl communities of Egypt and Syria, who were dependent on the Fatimids. These Musta’îl Ismailis, recognizing al-Ḥâfiz (d. 544/1149) and the later Fatimid caliphs as their imâms, became known as Ḥâfiziyya.

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Further Offshoots

In Yaman, too, some Musta'ids, led by the Zuray'id s of 'Adan who had won their independence from the Shula'yids, supported the Ḥāfizī da'wa. On the other hand, the aged Shula'yid queen al-Sayyida who had already drifted apart from the Fatimid regime, upheld the rights of al-Ṭayyib and recognized him as al-Āmir's successor to the imām. Consequently, she severed her ties with Fatimid Cairo, much in the same way as her contemporary Ḥasan Ṣabḅāh had done a few decades earlier on al-Mustansir's death. Her decision was fully endorsed by the Musta'īl community of Gujarāt. The Shula'yid queen herself continued to take care of the Yamanī da'wa supporting al-Ṭayyib's imāmate, later designated as Ṭayyibiyyya. Until her death in 532/1138, al-Sayyida worked systematically for the consolidation of the Ṭayyibī da'wa. In fact, soon after 526/1132 she appointed al-Dhu'ayb b. Mūsā al-Wādī'i (d. 546/1151) as al-dā'i al-mutlaq, or the dā'i with absolute authority over the affairs of the Yamanī da'wa. This marked the foundation of the independent Ṭayyibī Musta'īlī da'wa on behalf of al-Ṭayyib and his successors to the Ṭayyibī imāmate all of whom have remained inaccessible.32 The Ṭayyibī da'wa was, thus, made independent of the Fatimids as well as the Shula'yids: and as such, it survived the downfall of both dynasties. The Ṭayyibī da'wa was initially led for several centuries from Yaman by al-Dhu'ayb's successors as dā'iṣ. In subsequent times, the stronghold of Ṭayyibī Ismailism was transferred to the Indian subcontinent and the community subdivided into several groups: the two major (Da'ūdī-Sulaymānī) groups still possess the authorities of their separate lines of dā'iṣ mutlaqṣ while awaiting the emergence of their imām. The Ṭayyibī Ismailis have also preserved a good share of the Isma'ili literature of the Fatimid period.

Ismaili Survival Amidst Fatimid Collapse

On 7 Muḥarram 567/10 September 1171, Saladin, ironically the last Fatimid vizier, formally ended Fatimid rule by instituting the khuṭba in Cairo in the name of the reigning 'Abbāsid caliph. At the time al-'Ābid, destined to be the seal of the Fatimid dynasty, lay dying in his palace. The Fatimid dawla collapsed uneventfully after 262 years amidst the complete apathy of the Egyptian populace. Saladin, the champion of Sunnī "orthodoxy" and the future founder of the Ayyūbid dynasty, then adopted swift measures to persecute the Ismailis of Egypt and suppress their da'wa and rituals, all representing the Ḥāfizī form of Ismailism. Indeed, Ismailism soon disappeared completely and irrevocably from Egypt, where it had enjoyed the protection of the Fatimid dawla. In Yaman, too, the Ḥāfizī da'wa did not survive the Fatimid caliphate on which it was dependent. On the other hand, by 567/1171 Nizārī and Ṭayyibī da'was and communities had acquired permanent strongholds in Persia, Syria, Yaman and Gujarāt. Later, all Central Asian Ismailis as well as an important Khoja community in India also acknowledged the Nizārī da'wa. That Ismailism survived at all the downfall of the Fatimid dynasty was, thus, mainly due to the astonishing record of success achieved by the Ismailī da'wā of Fatimid times outside the confines of the Fatimid dawla.


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29 The earliest Ismaili accounts of the Sulayhid dynasty, and the contemporary da ‘wa in Yaman, are contained in the dâ‘i Idrîs I’lmî al-Dîn b. al-Hasan’s *’Usûn al-akhbâr*, vol. 7, and his Nuzhat al-afkâr, which are still in manuscript forms. The best modern study here is ‘Usayn F. al-Hamdînî’s *al-Sulayhiyyân wa l-‘haraka al-Fâtimîyya fi’l-Yaman* (Cairo, 1955), especially p. 62-231.