

Fatimid *Da'wa* and Ismaili resistance to Seljuq rule in Iran

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One of the most thrilling and complex chapters in Muslim History is undoubtedly framed in the events taking place from the rise of the Fatimid Dynasty in Egypt (969 AD) until the fall of the Seljuq Empire in Persia (1194 AD). A Muslim World deprived of its earlier sense of territorial coherence found its centre of gravity in the ideological dispute between Fatimids and Seljuqs, and their mutual aspiration to control the entire *dar al-Islam*.¹ Indeed, the Fatimid caliph-imams aimed to be recognized as the religious authority (which is no different than being recognized as the political authority) of the Muslim *umma*.² In spite of the animosity of the Umayyads in Spain and the rivalry with Byzantines for the control of the Mediterranean,³ the Fatimids managed to stretch from Egypt to Sicily, and from Yemen to the Hijaz;⁴ they also succeeded in developing a commerce network to India passing through the Red Sea, in opposition to the Abbasids who used the Persian Gulf as a trade route.⁵

The Fatimids became a growing threat, first to Abbasids and then to Seljuqs. However, this threat was not so related to the rapid growth of the Fatimid Caliphate above described. Surprisingly, not too many were able to identify the real menace posed by the Fatimids. One of those few was al-Ghazali, who stressed that more than the naval supremacy or economic wealth, the most threatening challenge laid in the doctrines and activities of the Fatimid *da'wa*, the propaganda organization for the Ismaili movement.⁶

After the Caliph Imam al-Mu'izz (953-975) established the new capital of the dynasty in Cairo, the Fatimids immediately knew that Egypt represented only an intermediary step. The main

¹ Mitha, Farouk, *Al-Ghazali and the Ismailis: A debate on Reason and Authority in Medieval Islam*, London, The Institute of Ismaili Studies, 2001, p. 21.

² Daftary, Farhad, *A short History of the Ismailis*, Edinburgh, Edinburgh University Press, 1998, p. 90.

³ Daftary, Farhad, *Ismailis in Medieval Muslim Societies*, London, I.B. Tauris & Co Ltd, 2005, p. 65.

⁴ Van Grondelle, Marc, *The Ismailis in the Colonial Era: Modernity, Empire and Islam*, London, C. Hurst & Co., 2009, p.10.

⁵ Daftary, Farhad, *A short History of the Ismailis*, p. 65.

⁶ Mitha, Farouk, *Al-Ghazali and the Ismailis*, p. 22.

goal was to seize Baghdad.⁷ Thus, the Fatimid strategy consisted in being active in Persia through the religious missionaries (*da'i*) in order to topple a regime of usurpers and install the Ismaili Imam to lead the *umma*.⁸ But, what made the Fatimids think they could accomplish this task by sending summoners armed only with their speech to the very heart of the Abbasid Empire? Reading Samuel Stern it is possible to note that this was not such an absurd plan, given that there was already a Shiite basis in Iran: Rayy, Aba, Qumm, Qashan and the provinces of Tabaristan and Mazandaran were all Shiite cells, a foothold and unsurpassable starting point for the missionaries.⁹ Daylam as well became a centre of Shiite activity from the end of the eighth century and guarded its independence against the Caliph of Baghdad and other Sunni rulers.¹⁰ The Fatimid rulers realized very soon the effectiveness of sending missionaries. Therefore, the *da'wa* was systematically intensified in Irak and Persia during the rule of al-Hakim (996-1021)¹¹; under al-Mustansir (1036-1094), the Fatimid *da'wa* was organized in a strictly hierarchical fashion and reached its full elaboration.¹² From the middle of the 9th century the Ismaili *da'wa* (or more precisely, *al-da'wa al-hadiya*, the rightly guiding mission) was a secret religio-political movement.¹³ Only until 1090, with the seizure of the Alamut fortress by Hasan Sabbah, a new phase of armed revolt initiated and the Isma'ili activities were no longer clandestine.¹⁴

The rise of the Seljuq Empire and the situation of the Dai's stationed in Persia

The internal weakness of the Islamic world in the eleventh century is revealed by a series of invasions and the emergence of a new and unshakable military power represented by the Seljuq

⁷ Daftary, Farhad, *A short History of the Ismailis*, p. 81.

⁸ The Abbasids, like the Ummayyads before them, were accused by the Shiites of having usurped the legitimate rights of the Alids. See Daftary, Farhad, *The Assassin legends: myths of the Ismailis*, London, I.B. Tauris & Co Ltd, 1994, p. 88.

⁹ Stern, S.M., *Studies in Early Ismailism*, Leiden, E.J. Brill, 1983, p. 190.

¹⁰ Lewis, Bernard, *The Assassins: A radical sect in Islam*, New York, Basic Books, 1968, p. 42.

¹¹ Daftary, Farhad, *A short History of the Ismailis*, p. 99.

¹² Stern, S.M., "Cairo as the Centre of the Isma'ili Movement", in *Colloque international sur l'histoire du Caire*. Cairo, 1972, pp. 437-50.

¹³ Daftary, Farhad, *Ismailis in Medieval Muslim Societies*, p. 62.

¹⁴ Daftary, Farhad, *A short History of the Ismailis*, p. 124. See also Daftary, Farhad, *The Isma'ilis: Their History and Doctrines*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1990, p. 339.

Turks. Indeed, the Seljuqs managed to create a new Empire stretching from Central Asia to the Mediterranean,¹⁵ and their supremacy became undisputed after the victory over the Byzantine forces in Manzikert, which resulted in the Turkish occupation of a large part of Anatolia.¹⁶ Not long after the Seljuqs' arrival to Persia, they had to deal with the Isma'ili *dai's* and especially with the so called *al-dawa al-jadida* (the new preaching) led by Hasan Sabbah.

After a burgeoning Tenth Century, a military and economic crisis that began in 1062 put an end to the Fatimid hopes of universal dominion.¹⁷ This reversal of fortune was manifested with the turmoil and upheaval following the death of al-Mustansir (1094), and the succession dispute between his sons that split the Ismaili community and *da'wa* into Nizari and Musta'li factions.¹⁸ In 1094, only four years after the seizure of Alamut, the Persian *da'i* Hasan Sabbah saw the opportunity to sever relations with a much weakened Fatimid regime by supporting the losing Nizari side. This decision marked the establishment of the independent Nizari Ismaili state in Persia¹⁹ and the foundation of an independent *dawa* (*al-da'wa al-jadida*, in contradistinction to *al da'wa al-qadima*, the old preaching of the Fatimid Isma'ilis maintained by the Musta'lians).²⁰ Hasan Sabbah's decision was based on the fact that the Persian Ismailis could no longer count on receiving any effective support from a Fatimid state that was witnessing numerous crises.²¹ Mostly, the missionaries stationed in Iran could not get from Egypt any military support that was needed after 1090, with the beginning of the armed revolt abovementioned. In fact, Cairo emerged as the centre of the Caliphate but only in terms of theological training and initiation of the *da'is*.²² Yet, the priority of the periphery and especially of the Persian province (or "island")²³ was to be prepared for war. Hence, and according to Farhad Daftary, the Nizari Ismailis devoted themselves to produce military commanders rather than learned theologians and jurist.²⁴

¹⁵ Lewis, Bernard, *The Assassins*, p. 36.

¹⁶ Franzius, Enno, *History of the Order of the Assassins*, New York, Funk & Wagnalls, 1969, p. 33.

¹⁷ Hodgson, Marshall, *The Order of Assassins*, The Hague, Mouton & CO, 1955, p. 37.

¹⁸ Mitha, Farouk, *Al-Ghazali and the Ismailis*, p. XXI.

¹⁹ Daftary, Farhad, *A short History of the Ismailis*, p. 130.

²⁰ Daftary, Farhad, *The Isma'ilis*, p. 262.

²¹ Daftary, Farhad, *Ismailis in Medieval Muslim Societies*, p. 129.

²² Mitha, Farouk, *Al-Ghazali and the Ismailis*, p. 22.

²³ The Fatimid provinces where the *da'wa* was being propagated received the name of "islands" (*jaziras*). They were twelve in total and I mentioned the *jazira* of Daylam, used synonymously with Persia. See Daftary, Farhad, *A short History of the Ismailis*, p. 98.

²⁴ Daftary, Farhad, *A short History of the Ismailis*, p. 121.

Another issue that led to the rupture with Cairo was the resurgence of the Persian identity. Resulting from this Persian awareness, Hasan Sabbah substituted Persian for Arabic as the religious language of the Iranian Ismailis. “This was the first time that a major Muslim community had adopted Persian as its religious language”.²⁵ According to Daftary, this revival of the Persian identity produced also anti-Seljuq sentiments that were “aggravated by the anarchy and depression caused in towns and villages by the Turks and their unruly soldiers, who were continuously attracted in new waves from Central Asia through Seljuq victories”.²⁶ Daftary explains that the success of the revolt led by Hassan Sabbah was also rooted in the economic grievances shared by the underprivileged social classes who were subject to the oppressive rule and the excessive taxes levied by the Seljuq *amirs*. “By contrast, those who became incorporated into Ismaili-held territories were treated more equitably in a society dedicated to establishing social justice”.²⁷ However, this version deserves a careful examination since History is rarely framed in a “black and white” account of events and its complexity cannot always be elucidated by the exclusive use of the Marxist theoretical tools.

First of all, the Seljuqs were the heirs of a terrible legacy. They found a Persia whose traditional economy (namely the textile industry of Transoxiana and the tillage of land) was plummeting because of inflation.²⁸ The anarchy in the countryside of the eleventh-century Iran was unmanageable: “The Turkish nomads infiltrated the Near East from Central Asia, and together with local brigands made roads unsafe and insecurity rampant. As a result there was a serious decline in agriculture and the rural economy which was essential to the health of the entire land”.²⁹ The Seljuq government realized that they had to reestablish the *iqta* institution in order to control the tribesmen and placate the chiefs of the many Turkish tribes.³⁰ Nonetheless, this institution proved to be ineffective to stop anarchy when it was first incorporated by the Buyids, the former rulers of Iran.³¹ Furthermore, the Seljuqs had no experience on

²⁵ We have to keep in mind that most of the Fatimid *dai*'s stationed in Iran were originally Persians. See Daftary, Farhad, *A short History of the Ismailis*, p. 125.

²⁶ “Hasan Sabbah himself resented the Turks and their rule over Persia. He referred to the Saljuq Sultan as a mere ignorant Turk; he also said that the Turks were *jinn*. See Daftary, Farhad, *A short History of the Ismailis*, p. 125.

²⁷ Daftary, Farhad, *A short History of the Ismailis*, p. 126.

²⁸ Frye, Richard, *The golden age of Persia*, London, Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1975, p. 228.

²⁹ Frye, Richard, *The golden age of Persia*, p. 227.

³⁰ The *iqta* denotes an assignment of land as a source of revenue; this system was originally implemented by the Buyids which ruled Iran prior to the Seljuq invasion. See Frye, Richard, *The golden age of Persia*, p. 227.

³¹ Lambton, Ann, *Landlord and Peasant in Persia: a study of land tenure and land revenue administration*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1953, p. 53.

administrative matters, so they were forced to turn to the *dihqans* (the Iranian aristocracy of Khurasan) in order to govern the new empire.³² Indeed, one of the most important allies of the Turks was a Persian aristocrat named Nizam al-Mulk that even became the great vizier of the Sultans Alp Arslan and Malikshah. Nizam al-Mulk opted for the reinstatement of land assignments and he was the responsible for the division of the regions into *iqta*'s, and for granting to the assignees (*muqta*'s) their revenue and produce, so that they had the greatest interest in the prosperity of their *iqta*'s and in the shortest time the regions could be again in the best condition.³³ Nizam al-Mulk, who for a while managed to turn the *iqta* into an efficient system, never stopped considering the Sultan as the sole owner of the soil,³⁴ and for that reason the land assignments were not intended to be of a permanent nature. However, a Turkish tribal tendency arose among some *muqta*'s who regarded certain districts as their own *iqta*, with the aggravating circumstance that a good number of those *iqta*'s were militarized.³⁵ In the long term, the Seljuqs failed to find a satisfactory way to incorporate into the structure of their empire a large nomadic element,³⁶ and this was the cause of many divisions especially in the interregnum periods.

But the implementation of the *iqta* was not the only ruling tool used by Nizam al-Mulk. The main goal of the great vizier was to reestablish the Muslim Social unity, and for that purpose he developed a network of *madrasas* that became known as the Nizamiyya.³⁷ According to Omi Safi, the *madrasa* succeeded in restoring the balance between the competing madhabs, training some bureaucrats and cultivating a class of Sunni *ulama*.³⁸ Unlike the *iqta*, the *madrasa* was successful in the long run and its importance transcended the historical limits of the Seljuq Empire, as I'll be discussing below.

There was however a very complex relation between Seljuqs and Islam worth to take into consideration. In one hand it is clear that an essential goal of the Nizamiyya was the promotion

³² Frye, Richard, *The golden age of Persia*, p. 227.

³³ Lambton, Ann, *Continuity and Change in Medieval Persia: Aspects of Administrative, Economic and Social History, 11th-14th Century*, London, I.B. Tauris & Co Ltd, 1988, pp. 101- 102.

³⁴ It seems that Nizam al-Mulk was applying the theory of the absolute ownership which he derived from Sasanian tradition. See Lambton, Ann, *Landlord and Peasant in Persia*, p. 61.

³⁵ Lambton, Ann, *Landlord and Peasant in Persia*, pp. 60- 61.

³⁶ Lambton, Ann, *Landlord and Peasant in Persia*, p. 56.

³⁷ Mitha, Farouk, *Al-Ghazali and the Ismailis*, p. 22.

³⁸ Safi, Omid, *The politics of Knowledge in Premodern Islam: Negotiating Ideology and Religious Enquiry*, Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 2006, pp. 90-104. See also Mitha, Farouk, *Al-Ghazali and the Ismailis*, p. 7.

of traditional Shafi'ism to keep at bay the Persian Nizaris in a theological and off course, political sense.³⁹ In the other hand, recent research has brought into question the idea supported by Farhad Daftary and George Makdisi *inter alia*, that the Seljuqs were the champions of Sunni Islam, the heroes of the Sunni revival and the sworn enemies of Nizaris.⁴⁰ On the contrary, there is evidence that some Turks shared Shiite sympathies⁴¹ and that there were instances of Seljuq toleration for Shiism and even Isma'ilism.⁴² It seems then that the Seljuqs sometimes flirted with Fatimids and Nizaris in order to get some political advantages, and religion was for them a matter of political expediency.⁴³ Concerning this, let's remember the account of Bar Hebraeus about the conversion of Turks when they arrived to Iran:

They took counsel together and said, "if we do not enter the Faith of the people of the country in which we desire (to live) and make a pact with them (or conform to their customs), no man will cleave to us, and we shall be a small and solitary people."⁴⁴

In any case it is indisputable that Shi'ism managed to permeate many Seljuq domains: "In the time of Sultan Muhammad b. Malikshah Sunni ulema were bribed to give fatwas stating that Shi'ite officials were actually Sunni or Hanafi".⁴⁵ Seriously alarmed, Nizam al-Mulk states that the Turkish court and divan are full of Daylamites⁴⁶ whose objective is to prevent Khurasanis from entering the court service: "One day the Turks will realize the iniquity of these people and

³⁹ In order to effectively confront and outshine the *dawa* menace, the Shafi'ism fostered by the *madrasas* was combined to a certain extent with some theological aspects of the Asharite School, mostly when al-Ghazali joined the Nizamiyya. As a result, al-Ghazali brought together traditionalism and rationalism, and he did it in a successful manner. See Mitha, Farouk, *Al-Ghazali and the Ismailis*, pp. 8-27. It is important to stress that the Nizamiyya incorporated Asharism as a part of the system of orthodox theology, which represented a victory not only over the Mu'tazila but also over the intransigent orthodoxy. See Goldziher, Ignaz, *Introduction to Islamic Theology and Law*, Princeton, Princeton University Press, 1981, p. 104.

⁴⁰ Peacock, A.C.S., *Early Seljuq History: A new interpretation*, New York, Routledge, 2010.

⁴¹ Calmard, Jean, "Le Chiisme imamite en Iran à l'époque seldjoukide d'après le Kitab al-Naqd", in *Le monde iranien et l'Islam: sociétés et cultures I*, 1971, pp. 43-66. For example, when Tughril conquered Baghdad with his Türkmen soldiers, he spared the lives of the people living in Karkh, the Shiite quarter of the city. See Peacock, A.C.S., *Early Seljuq History*, pp. 119-120.

⁴² Jurado Aceituno, Antonio, "The Seljuq *jihād*, against Fatimid Shi'sim: an observation of the Sunni Revival", in *Essays in Ottoman Civilization*, 1998, pp. 43-66. For instance, after the conquest of Tyre by the Türkmen Atsiz in 1075, the *khutba* remained in the name of the Fatimid caliph. See Peacock, A.C.S., *Early Seljuq History*, p. 119.

⁴³ Peacock, A.C.S., *Early Seljuq History*, p. 121.

⁴⁴ Bar Hebraeus, *Chronography*, Ernest A. Wallis Budge (tr), London, Oxford University Press, 1932, p. 195.

⁴⁵ Peacock, A.C.S., *Early Seljuq History*, p. 119.

⁴⁶ Most of the Persian Ismailies were stationed in the Daylam Province so the adjective "Daylamite" was used by antonomasia to refer to every single Ismaili Persian.

recall my words, when the divan becomes empty of Khurasani secretaries and officials”.⁴⁷ During Barkiyaruq’s rule (1092-1105), the *da’wa* successfully infiltrated Sultan’s court and the Ismailis acquired many supporters among the Persians in the Seljuq armies.⁴⁸ Not only that, Barkiyaruq even accepted Ismaili’s in his army.⁴⁹

We have to be aware anyway that the eleventh and twelfth centuries in Persia were clashing and full of contradictions. Sometimes the Ismailis received support from Sunnis (in both towns and rural areas) who were against the Saljuq order and sympathized with the revolt;⁵⁰ some other times, the Sunni population killed Ismailis on his own account in response of their assassinations.⁵¹ Sometimes the Ismailis were at war with the Seljuq *amirs* (who held *iqta* on behalf of the Sultan), some other times they were willing to intervene in non Ismaili factional disputes, making alliances with some *amirs* in order to fight against other assignees of land.⁵² In this very complex time of contradictions, we can observe that many times the Seljuqs hesitated when attacking Ismailis. When we approach to the *Siyasat Nama*, it is possible to read between the lines that the first time the Seljuqs attacked Hasan Sabbah and his men (1092, two years after the occupation of Alamut), Sultan Malikshah (who was accused of having had Ismaili sympathies)⁵³, only accepted reluctantly at the insistence of Nizam al-Mulk, to send armies against the Ismailis of Rudbar and Quhistan. “Muhammad, Barkiyaruq and Sanjar never formed a united front against the Ismailis of Alamut in the period of Ismaili growth in Iran, 485-498/1092-1105”.⁵⁴ These Sultans devoted some, but not all of their energies to fight against Ismailis. Briefly, the failure to wipe out Ismailis lies with Saljuqs and “is not to be

⁴⁷ Nizam al-Mulk, *The Book of Government or Rules for Kings (Siyasat-Nama)*, Hubert Darke (tr), London, Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1960, p. 160.

⁴⁸ Daftary, Farhad, *A short History of the Ismailis*, p. 128.

⁴⁹ On one occasion Barkiyaruq is said to have received 5000 Ismailis into his army. See Daftary, Farhad, *The Isma’ilis*, p. 342. Hillenbrand, Carole, “The power struggle between the Saljuqs and the Isma’ilis of Alamut, 487-518/1094—1124: the Saljuq perspective”, in Farhad Daftary (ed.), *Medieval Isma’ili History and Thought*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1996. Lewis, Bernard, *The Assassins*, p. 51.

⁵⁰ Daftary, Farhad, *A short History of the Ismailis*, p. 126.

⁵¹ Daftary, Farhad, *The Isma’ilis*, p. 354.

⁵² Many *amirs* indeed became allies of the Nizaris and some of them were converted to Ismailism. See Daftary, Farhad, *The Isma’ilis*, pp. 352-353.

⁵³ Lambton, A.K.S., *Continuity and Change in Medieval Persia: Aspects of Administrative, Economic and Social History, Eleventh to Fourteenth Centuries*, London, I.B. Tauris, 1988, p. 237.

⁵⁴ Hillenbrand, Carole, “The power struggle between the Saljuqs and the Isma’ilis of Alamut, 487-518/1094—1124: the Saljuq perspective”, p. 216.

attributed to Ismaili dynamism alone.”⁵⁵ The atomization of Saljuq power, their lack of concerted military activity, the problem of financial resources and the infiltration of Ismaili preaching both in urban and rural area as well as in the Saljuq army and court, all of them are the factors that contributed to the Saljuqs failure.

In the other hand, the Persian Ismailis knew well how to exploit the weakness of the Turks. The Nizaris always took advantage of Seljuq’s hesitations and of the truces offered by the ruling class: After the death of Muhammad Tapar (1118)⁵⁶, his heir Mahmud II (1118-1131) decided to negotiate with the Nizaris, a circumstance that provided a respite for the Ismaili group who did recover from some of their earlier setbacks. In 1157, Sultan Sanjar had also come to some understanding with the Nizaris,⁵⁷ a situation exploited by Buzurg-Ummid (Hasan Sabbah’s successor) to find more allies within the Seljuq *amirs* who without the Ismaili assistance could not maintain their own positions in particular regions.⁵⁸ The Ismailis also benefited from the interregnum chaos: After the death of Malik Shah (1092), the dynastic disputes threw the Seljuq Empire into a civil war marked by the constant shifting of alliances; Hasan Sabbah took advantage of this situation of decentralization and confusion to extend the Ismaili position to the Alburz Mountains, Mihrin, the north of Damghan and Ustunawand.⁵⁹

However and in spite of all the Ismaili achievements, in the long run the Persian Nizaris failed to meet their objectives. This was not precisely because of the Seljuq armed response as we have already seen. This was because of the opposition exerted by the *madrasas* and its permanent concern in depoliticizing Nizaris and their doctrines. Such counteraction produced a

⁵⁵ Hillenbrand, Carole, “The power struggle between the Saljuqs and the Isma’ilis of Alamut, 487-518/1094—1124: the Saljuq perspective”, p. 218.

⁵⁶ As we have said, the Seljuqs were not bitter enemies of the Ismailis. It is nonetheless necessary to clarify that this was not a constant situation and in some instances the Seljuqs fought tooth and nail against Hasan Sabbah and his men. Muhammad Tapar (1105-1118) was for instance one of the few Sultans who launched a series of major campaigns against the Nizaris, in the process of which they lost most of their strongholds in the Zagros Mountains and in Irak. See Daftary, Farhad, *A short History of the Ismailis*, p. 133.

⁵⁷ Sultan Sanjar even let the Ismailis to levy a toll on travelers passing beneath Girdkuh. See Lewis, Bernard, *The Assassins*, p. 59. During the rule of Berkiyaruq, the Nizaris captured Shahdiz and began to collect taxes around this garrison. See Daftary, Farhad, *The Isma’ilis*, p. 355. In order to survive and to have an economic basis, the Ismailis also had to levy taxes.

⁵⁸ Daftary, Farhad, *A short History of the Ismailis*, p. 136

⁵⁹ Daftary, Farhad, *The Isma’ilis*, p. 343.

growing isolation of the Nizari community, which eventually led to the theological surrender on the part of imam Jalal al-Din Hasan, in one of the final stages of the Alamut period.⁶⁰

Anyhow, the Nizaris never succeeded in holding a single city and never acquired a major military capability. The only (but significant) threat they posed was their preaching and the use of their terror tool *par excellence*: the selective assassination. This practice was so widespread among Nizaris that some scholars have considered them, even though *avant la lettre*, as the first “terrorists”.⁶¹ In spite that “terrorism” is a modern and not unanimous definition, this idea might be supported by different accounts. Nizam al-Mulk for example, states that the Ismaili Daylamites were dedicated to extort and steal from the population. In addition, they spread corruption and oppression; they set up ambushes in order to pounce on every beautiful woman or boy and commit immoral acts, etc.⁶² Samuel Stern attests the version of Nizam al-Mulk and gives a detailed description of the low moral fiber from many of the converts to Ismailism in the Fatimid Caliphate’s periphery.⁶³ Even today, some prominent thinkers of philosophy and Shia Islam still regarding Nizaris as extremist (*ghulats*). This is the case of al-Tabataba’i (1903-1981), who maintains that “the Batinis⁶⁴ had no respect for the lives and possessions of those who were outside their group... many times they stopped the caravans of those who were making the pilgrimage to Mecca, killing tens of thousands of pilgrims and plundering their provisions and camels”.⁶⁵ All these accounts contradict the version of Farhad Daftary about the social justice established in Ismaili society.

⁶⁰ Jalal al-Din Hasan, the leader of Alamut from 1210 to 1221, had no other choice than approach to the Sunni Muslims. He even invited Sunni scholars belonging to the Shafi’I madhab to instruct his people, also permitting Sunni observers to remove any books they deemed heretical from the library at Alamut. See Daftary, Farhad, *The Isma’ilis*, pp. 145-146.

⁶¹ Lewis, Bernard, *The Assassins*, pp. 129-130.

⁶² Nizam al-Mulk, *The Book of Government or Rules for Kings (Siyasat-Nama)*, p. 65.

⁶³ Stern, S.M., *Studies in Early Ismailism*, p. 234.

⁶⁴ The Ismailis and specially the Nizaris were called Batinis by their Sunni contradictors. This was a way to mock the Ismaili tenet of *batin* (the hidden or esoteric meaning behind the literal wording of sacred texts and religious prescriptions).

⁶⁵ Tabatabai, A.S.M.H., *Shi’ite Islam*, New York, State University of New York Press, 1977, p. 80.

The Munazara and the religio-political opposition to Ismailis

After the Seljuqs conquered Iran, they “imposed their protection on the powerless Abbasids”⁶⁶ and became the holders of the *de facto* power. In spite of this situation, the Abbasid Caliphs continued to possess the symbolic importance of being the leaders of the *umma*. One of the main aspirations of the system of *madrasas* established by Nizam al-Mulk was to keep alive this conception of the caliphal authority over the Muslim community. The Ismailis knew this situation and realized that their major obstacle was Nizam al-Mulk and his network of *ulamas*.⁶⁷ Nizam al-Mulk, very concerned, reveals that the Batinis took advantage of their infiltrations in some Seljuq domains in order to convince the Sultan to overthrow the house of the Abbasids.⁶⁸ The Ismailis were then very aware of the symbolic connotation held by the Abbasids and the menace it represented for their purposes. For al-Ghazali, who joined the Nizamiyya in 1091 and to some extent spearheaded it, the Ismailis aimed to threaten the very fabric of the Sunni ethos.⁶⁹

The two battle lines used by the Nizzamiya in order to counteract the Persian Ismailis were the *munazara* (intellectual disputation)⁷⁰ and the anathematization of the Batiniyya. There are too many aspects linked to these issues, and therefore an explanation of both of them will be given in a summarized way. Regarding the second matter, al-Ghazali maintains among many other things, that the Batiniyya is nothing but an organized conspiracy fuelled solely by the desire for power and domination,⁷¹ whose members are seeking vengeance on behalf of their ancestors (pre-islamic Persians) whose rule they feel was usurped by the rise of Islam.⁷² Indeed, both al-Ghazali and Baghdadi believed the Batinis were dualists who pretended to convert the Muslims to the religion of the Magians.⁷³ Not open war but deceit was the way they choose to overthrow

⁶⁶ Franzius, Enno, *History of the Order of the Assassins*, p. 32.

⁶⁷ Not surprisingly, Nizam al-Mulk was the first prominent enemy assassinated by the Persian Ismailis (October, 1092). See Daftary, Farhad, *The Isma'ilis*, pp. 341-342.

⁶⁸ Nizam al-Mulk, *The Book of Government or Rules for Kings (Siyasat-Nama)*, p. 188.

⁶⁹ Mitha, Farouk, *Al-Ghazali and the Ismailis*, p. 23.

⁷⁰ Mitha, Farouk, *Al-Ghazali and the Ismailis*, p. 24.

⁷¹ Mitha, Farouk, *Al-Ghazali and the Ismailis*, p. 37.

⁷² Mitha, Farouk, *Al-Ghazali and the Ismailis*, p. 41.

⁷³ Lewis, Bernard, *The Origins of Ismailism*, Cambridge, W. Heffer & Sons LTD, 1940, p. 90.

Muslims.⁷⁴ So, Ismailis were considered heretics (*Zindiq*) disposed to permit everything to which one's natural desires incline,⁷⁵ and whose exegesis led them to an "intellectual anarchy where there are no limits or rules, just the sheer desire to destroy the sanctity of the law".⁷⁶ In fact, there were important reasons to consider Ismailis and more specifically Nizaris as heretics: the *shari'a* for them is a veil that hides an inner reality (the light of the Imam) and Prophet Muhammad has only a third degree of significance (below Ali and Gabriel) whose task is to summon people and to lead them towards the Imam, just like a mere *da'i*.⁷⁷

Regarding *munazara* in its purest sense, al-Ghazali somehow identifies the Batiniyya as a continuation of the Mu'tazila and related to Ibn Sina.⁷⁸ Let's remember that the main tenets of the Mu'tazila were adopted and adapted by Shiism: Justice (*adl*) and Unity (*tawhid*) of God. As God is just, it is necessary the presence of an infallible Imam in every age to provide guidance for men and save the souls of the ones who follow him.⁷⁹ Therefore *ta'lim*, the authoritative teaching carried by the Imam, is essential for Ismailis.⁸⁰ The principle of *tawhid* (the denial of divine attributes to avoid introducing multiplicity into the one and indivisible nature of God) is a central idea in the texts of many Persian Dai's, among them al-Sijistani, Nasir Khusraw and al-Kirmani. Al-Ghazali criticizes this principle of Unity, affirming that both Ibn Sina and the Mu'tazila fell into the trap of *ta'til*,⁸¹ which denotes the evacuation of God from Cosmos given His completely lack of attributes.

⁷⁴ Goldziher, Ignaz, "Streitschrift des Gazali gegen die Batinijja-Sekte", in *Muhammedanische Studien*, Leyden, Halle, 1916, pp. 38, 39.

⁷⁵ Lewis, Bernard, *The Origins of Ismailism*, p. 90. It is very interesting that Baghdadi accuses the Ismailis of being related to Zoroastrianism but he uses the word *zindiq*, which is the one the Sasanian Zoroastrians used to refer to the heretic Mazdakites. See Pourshariati, Parvaneh, *Decline and fall of the Sasanian Empire: The Sasanian-Parthian confederacy and the Arab conquest of Iran*, London, I.B. Tauris, 2008.

⁷⁶ Mitha, Farouk, *Al-Ghazali and the Ismailis*, p. 48.

⁷⁷ Corbin, Henry, *Histoire de la Philosophie Islamique*, Paris, Gallimard, 1964, p. 147, 148.

⁷⁸ In other words, the origin of the threat was the Greek Philosophy and its adaptation to Islam. Some modern scholars maintain that Ghazali did not reject philosophy and was very acquainted with the Greek thought. However, we have to keep in mind that there is a mystic Ghazali influenced by Neo-Platonism, and another very different Ghazali, which is the orthodox theologian.

⁷⁹ Goldziher, Ignaz, *Introduction to Islamic Theology and Law*, p. 204.

⁸⁰ This is an outrage for Al-Ghazali who argues that the only infalible teacher is the Prophet Muhammad. See Mitha, Farouk, *Al-Ghazali and the Ismailis*, p. 61.

⁸¹ Madelung, Wilfred, "Aspects of Isma'ili Theology: The Prophetic Chain and the God Beyond Being", in Seyyed Hossein Nasr (ed.), *Isma'ili Contributions to Islamic Culture*, Tehran, Imperial Iranian Academy of Philosophy, 1977, p. 58.

Al-Ghazali erroneously thinks that the Persian Ismailis are followers of the Mu'tazila⁸² and of Ibn Sina. On the contrary, they contradicted and reformulated some of the main ideas of Ibn Sina in order to strengthen the principle of *tawhid* and God's transcendence. According to the Ismaili philosophers, God transcended the Universal Intellect without being himself Intellect as the Aristotelian tradition maintained.⁸³ In the same way, Nasir Khusraw places God above the Ibn Sina's Necessary Existent (*wajib al-wujud*)⁸⁴ and al-Kirmani maintains that the Necessary Existent compromises God's transcendence since it could apply only to a "created being".⁸⁵ Al-Sijistani explains that giving attributes to God and affirm His existence is anthropomorphism (*tashbih*), but deny all attribute is *ta'til*; therefore, *tawhid* must follow a path between denial and denial of denial.⁸⁶

Because of the belief in the eternity of the world, Al-Ghazali and Baghdadi referred to Ismailis as heretics,⁸⁷ again. But in spite of their patent Neo-Platonism,⁸⁸ the Ismaili philosophers

⁸² The Mu'tazila was born as an opposition to some of the central premises of Aristotle. This opposition resulted from the Mu'tazilite adaptation of the Aristotelian philosophy to a religious context. Because of that, the Mu'tazila got imbued with the Aristotelian philosophy. To establish a link between the Mu'tazila and the Ismaili philosophy is rather an inconsistency, since there is no trace of the Neo-Platonic thought in the Mu'tazilite narrative and the main influence of Ismailism is certainly Neo-Platonic. Indeed, the Neo-Platonic theory of emanations was one of the most powerful influences of the internal evolution of Ismaili philosophy of religion. For instance, the construction of the periodical manifestations is entirely composed by Neo-Platonic elements: "The sequence of these manifestations begins with Adam, continues through Noah, Abraham, Moses, Jesus, and Muhammad, and concludes with the *Imam* following the sixth Imam of the Shi'is (these are Ismai'l and his son Muhammad b. Isma'il), forming a cycle of seven "Speakers" (*natiq*). The interval between any two of these "Speakers" is filled by a series of seven persons, also emanations of transcendental powers, who reinforce the work of the Speaker they follow and prepare the work of the Speaker to come. This is a well-defined artificially constructed hierarchy in whose progressive unfolding since the beginning of the world the divine mind has been revealing itself to mankind in ever more perfect manifestations. Each manifestation perfects the work of the one before it. Divine revelation did not conclude at a particular date in the history of the world. With the same cyclical regularity the seventh *natiq* is followed by the *Mahdi* who, as an ever more perfect manifestation of the Universal Intellect, is the destined to pass beyond the work of his predecessors, including that of the Prophet Muhammad." See Goldziher, Ignaz, *Introduction to Islamic Theology and Law*, p. 220. It is clear then that this particular philosophy of religion brings into question the essential Muslim conception of Muhammad as the "seal of the prophets". This was an additional reason for Ismailis to be considered as heretics by the Muslim Orthodoxy.

⁸³ Madelung, Wilfred, "Aspects of Isma'ili Theology: The Prophetic Chain and the God Beyond Being", p. 56.

⁸⁴ Nasir Khusraw, *Knowledge and Liberation: A Treatise on Philosophical Theology*, Faquir M. Hunzai (tr), London, I.B. Tauris, 1998, p. 14.

⁸⁵ Daftary, Farhad, *A short History of the Ismailis*, p. 88.

⁸⁶ This was an idea perpetuated by Nasir Khusraw. See Nasir Khusraw, *Le livre réunissant les deux sagesse ou harmonie de la philosophie grecque et de la théosophie ismaélienne*, Henry Corbin and Moh Moin (ed), Paris, Adrien-Maisonneuve, 1953, p. 69.

⁸⁷ Lewis, Bernard, *The Origins of Ismailism*, p. 90. Pines, S., "Philosophy", in *The Cambridge History of Islam*, P.M. Holt, Ann K.S. Lambton, Bernard Lewis (ed), Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1970, p. 814.

⁸⁸ Following Plotinus the world is just an emanation of the One and at the same time there is no distinction between God and the world. That betrays the pantheism of the Neo-Platonism and means that the Divine being and the world are identical. Therefore, the world, and in broad terms the Universe, are eternal. It is advisable to bear in

managed to take distance from a purely emanationist outlook regarding this specific issue: “in the system of the Iranian Dai’s, God brings creation into being through His command (*amr*) or word (*kalmia*), in an act of extra-temporal, primordial origination (*ibda*) out of nothing or *ex nihilo*”.⁸⁹

As we can see, Al-Ghazali had to cope with a very sophisticated philosophy of religion, whose theories were not just concatenations of Greek sources but contained original ideas, both in phenomenological method and content.⁹⁰ In a sense, the Persian Dai’s and in broad terms, the Ismaili philosophers were not only spearheading an armed and politic-theological revolution. They were also leading a philosophical revolution whose main goal was to de-aristotelize (if I may use this term) the Neo-Platonic philosophy⁹¹ absorbed by Islam in the ninth century, following al-Kindi’s translations. Despite this situation, the *madrasas* became the most effective battle line, even more than the Seljuq army.

Conclusions

The real clash between Ismailism and Sunni Islam in the eleventh and twelfth centuries was not armed but religio-philosophical. It was a confrontation between two different ethos, but also between two non-homogeneous structures. The Seljuqs were destined to be the visible face of a jeopardized orthodoxy. As we have seen, the Turks were unable to understand the nature of their own time and that task was entrusted by History to a subdued Persians. Regarding the issue of the *iqtas*, it is possible to confirm that Nizam al-Molk had a wider and more Universalist approach than the Sultans who were confined by their tribalist view. The foundation of the Nizamiyya network was also a Universalistic project whose role was the preservation of *umma*’s cohesion. In the long run the *madrasas* accomplished their task and the

mind that the Greeks avoided the concept of creation and always used the term “emanation”. See Mariás, Julián, *Obras de Julián Mariás I, Historia de la Filosofía*, Madrid, Revista de Occidente, 1958, pp. 96-99.

⁸⁹ Creation *ex nihilo* was a concept always rejected by the Greek Philosophy. They use instead the idea of eternity. See Daftary, Farhad, *A short History of the Ismailis*, p. 85.

⁹⁰ Nasir Khusraw, *Knowledge and Liberation*, p. 14.

⁹¹ A very long process of opposition to Ibn Sina and generally speaking to Aristotelian philosophy carried by Sijistani, Nasir Khusraw, al-Kirmani and al-Tusi afterwards.

Muslim *umma* could even survived Mongol's devastation. The destiny of the Sunni Community could have been very different had it not been for Nizam al-Mulk and Ghazali.

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