

THE RULE OF SHAIKH 'ISA

From time to time during the remaining years of the nineteenth century the British Government rejected Turkish claims to sovereignty over Bahrain, as in the years 1870 and 1874, while at the same time the British took the opportunity to consolidate their power in Bahrain by means of two treaties signed between Shaikh 'Isa and the British Government in December, 1880, and March, 1892. By these treaties the shaikh bound himself not to enter into any relationship with a foreign government, other than the British, without the latter's consent, and there were also stipulations about the disposal of Bahrain territories. In 1902 a British Political Agent was posted in Bahrain, and in July, 1913, a Convention was signed by the British and Ottoman Governments which included the recognition of Bahrain's independence and control of a number of nearby islands. Three years later Ibn Sa'ud signed a treaty with the British Government in which he also agreed to refrain from aggression against Bahrain. In April and May of 1923 there were internal troubles in Bahrain which led to the abdication of Shaikh 'Isa and the succession of his son, Shaikh Hamad, who ruled for twelve years as deputy ruler, and on the death of Shaikh 'Isa in 1935 became shaikh of Bahrain.

BAHRAIN IN RECENT YEARS

With the accession of Shaikh Hamad the story of modern Bahrain begins, and during the nineteen years of his rule Bahrain was transformed into a modern State. Conditions in the pearl industry were reformed, the position of the divers was bettered, municipalities, education and other public services were developed, and in many ways the state of the people of Bahrain was improved. In 1930 Shaikh Hamad signed a Concession Agreement with a company known as the Bahrain Petroleum Company (BAPCO), and three years later the first tanker-load of oil left Bahrain. A refinery was later built in Bahrain to process Bahraini and Sa'udi crude oil. The first payments of oil royalties came at a critical time in Bahrain's history, when it was suffering from the effects of a slump in the pearling industry, and they enabled the State to continue its public works and social services. Apart from increasing the cost of living and causing a shortage of foods, the 1939-1945 war had no direct effect on Bahrain, with the exception of a long-range bomber raid carried out by the Italian air force on the oil installations of Bahrain, and this attempt failed.

On February 20, 1942, Shaikh Hamad died, and was succeeded by his son, Shaikh Sulman, the present ruler, under whom the march of progress in Bahrain has continued, but this is another story, that of modern Bahrain, with which this article is not concerned.

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THE ISMA'ILIS, OF SYRIA TODAY

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IN mediæval times the Syrian Isma'ilis played a great part in history, but since the thirteenth century little has been heard of them. A community exists today, however, of which this article will attempt to give some description. Reference will be made particularly to recent history and to the social and economic condition of the people, no discussion being attempted of the highly technical subject of Isma'ilî religion.

Something must be recalled of the early history of the sect. It arose out of the Shi'ite ferment of the first Islamic centuries, and became a politico-religious movement aiming at the overthrow of the 'Abbasid caliphate, its replacement by the rule of 'Alid Imams, and the establishment of a universal religion. Its name derived from Isma'il, son of the Imam Ja'far es Sadiq. Isma'il was the focus of the whole revolutionary movement, a semi-divine figure in his followers' eyes. He was disowned by his father, so that orthodox (Sect of the Twelve) Shi'ites trace the line of Imams through Musa, Ja'far's other son, whilst the Isma'ilis particularly honour both Isma'il and his son Mohammed.

In the second half of the ninth century A.D. the town of Salamîyya, in central Syria, became one of the chief centres of this underground revolutionary movement. Here, some twenty miles east of Hama, the descendants of Isma'il lived in concealment, whilst their partisans were at work in North Africa making ready for the great day, which came early in the tenth century, when the coming of the Mahdi and the rule of the Fatimids were proclaimed. It is worth noting here that the first of the Fatimids, the Mahdi himself, was probably not an 'Alid at all, but the shadow-Imam or substitute who bore the burden and danger of the enterprise on behalf of the true Imam. Dr. Bernard Lewis has disentangled the difficult history of this period in his fascinating book *The Origins of Isma'ilism*, in which he shows how Isma'ilî claims as to the legitimacy of the Fatimid line can be reconciled with evidence which apparently points to a different conclusion.

After the first decade of the tenth century we hear little of Salamîyya. The town was sacked by the Mesopotamian Carmathians (themselves an offshoot from the Isma'ilî main stem) at about the time of the establishment of the Fatimid caliphate. We may presume that in any case it lost importance once the centre of Isma'ilî power had shifted to Egypt, and we know that during part of the troubled tenth century the Salamîyya region became Beduin territory.

The Syrian Isma'ilis became prominent again at the time of the Crusades, when some at least of them were known as Assassins. The traditional accounts are familiar: how Hasan es Sabbah and his successors took and held the Persian mountain fortresses round Alamut; how Rashid ed

Din es Sinan, the "Old Man of the Mountains" of the Crusader chronicles, maintained Masyaf, Qadnous and other fortresses of what we now call the Alaouite mountains, between the Franks of the coast and the Moslem interior; and how these two interlinked Isma'ili centres sustained their power and terrorized their opponents by the aid of fanatical emissaries who willingly embraced paradise by assassinating the enemies of their lords, the Grand Masters of the sect. This last and most violent Isma'ili ebullition came to a sudden end in the thirteenth century; the great castle of Alamut itself, stronghold of the Persian Assassins, was taken by Huiygu the Mongol in 1256, whilst less than twenty years later the great Mamluke Sultan Bahars broke the power of the Syrian Assassins.

The Fatimids had long gone from Africa and Isma'ilism had had its day. From henceforth the history of the Syrian Isma'ilis is obscure. Colonies of them survived, often poor and persecuted, in various parts of the country. Notably, some thousands of them remained in and near the old Assassin centres of Masyaf and Qadnous, mingled and at enmity with the Alaouites (or Alawis, Nusairis or Ansairis). The two heretical Moslem sects, sometimes confused by outsiders, had at least one thing in common—their dislike of each other was only slightly less than their hatred of the Sunni Turks, from whom they were able to maintain a near-independence amongst the mountains. The much more numerous Alaouites won a famous victory over the Isma'ilis in 1808. Two Alaouites, having gained the confidence of the Isma'ili Emir of Masyaf, were admitted to the castle. There they stabbed him and then opened the gates to the inrush of their co-religionists who were waiting in the vicinity. The Alaouites held the castle for a few months and were then forced to retire by a Turkish punitive expedition. Further civil strife was followed by a harsh incursion by the troops of Ibrahim Pasha, who ravaged a belt of country, burning villages and wrecking the old castles, after the mountaineers had revolted against his conscription. The Isma'ilis were weakened by feuds amongst their leaders, notably between two families of Emirs, centred at Qadnous and at Masyaf respectively. The Turks, of course, made good use of these internal rivalries. In 1843-4, Emir Milhem of the Masyaf branch seems to have been in favour with the Turks, and to have supported the Turkish nominee, an outsider of the Haroun family of Latakia, in a struggle for the governorship of Qadnous, although his relative Emir Isma'il of the Qadnous Emirs had a good claim to the position. Not only did the Qadnous Emirs have virtually a hereditary right to the post, but Isma'il had recently reinforced his claim by bribing the governor of Tripoli.

Isma'il was, however, taken and imprisoned by his enemies. His cousin, Tamir, scaled the walls of the castle in which he was confined, killed the Harouni, Isma'il's rival, and rescued Isma'il. The two Emirs were now rebels, and were hunted by the Turks and the forces of the Haroun family. The co-operation of Emir Milhem of Masyaf was secured, and he succeeded, by treachery, in securing both Qadnous and Emir Isma'il, whilst Tamir apparently died of wounds received in the struggle. Milhem may not have been altogether the villain of the piece in all this, for although he had been offered Qadnous if he removed Isma'il, he and the Isma'ilis in general had also been threatened with a Turkish punitive expedition if the

two rebels were not given up. Emir Isma'il must certainly have been a very powerful personality, but the record of these episodes reflects only his success as an adventurer. Milhem, on the other hand, seems at least to have served the Turks faithfully, and is still remembered as an astute politician.

Emir Isma'il was taken to Latakia and then shipped to Beirut. The vessel was, however, driven by bad weather to shelter at the island of Ruad, and Isma'il seized his chance, escaping under cover of darkness with his followers (probably with the connivance of their ten Albanian guards) to Tartous and thence to the mountains. He established himself in the castle of Khawabi, another of the medieval Assassin castles, and from it terrorized the district, punishing those villages in his former sphere of influence which had supported his enemies, and revenging himself on the latter. With his band of 300 men, he plundered some fifteen villages during the first three months of 1844.

Emir Milhem then intervened and acted as go-between for Isma'il and the Turks. The authorities consented to pardon Isma'il on condition that he and his followers left the area, and Isma'il agreed to go to empty lands east of Hama to settle with some of his people. They were to be given free land, to cultivate and to pay taxes, and to defend Hama and her villages against the Beduin. As the story is told today, even while negotiations were in progress in Hama the Emir and a few of his men beat off a raid on the town, his services being acknowledged by the gift of the territory he wanted. This was the beginning of a new era for the Isma'ilis of Syria.*

Let us return to the story of Salamiyya. After its great days as a nursery of Imams and Caliphs, and a further long period when it was known as a pleasant desert-edge country-town, "charming and rich, with abundant water and trees," it was deserted and all but disappeared. In the long centuries preceding the nineteenth, misgovernment, insecurity and economic stagnation took their toll. Population shrank, the frontiers of law and order and settled life retreated from the deserts, and almost all the great tracts of land east of the road from Aleppo via Hama to Damascus and thence to the Holy Cities of Hejaz were deserted and left to the Beduin and their flocks. Salamiyya became one of the many ruins strewn the desert fringes, where a few ragged walls and leaning pillars emerged from the heaps of rubble and decomposed mud bricks. These were the remains of a temple, a citadel, churches, mosques and a vaulted public bath.† In the same district there are still extensive sites where the Arabs graze their flocks amongst the tottering ruins of Byzantine churches or of an Umayyad pleasure palace.

* The above account is largely derived from two sources. The first of these is the traditional story as given to me by Emir Muhammed Milhem, a very intelligent and knowledgeable leader of the Salamiyya community, to whom I am grateful for a great deal of help. Second are two letters dated January 21, 1844, and March 22, 1844, from Mr. E. V. Elias, British Consul-General in Beirut. These letters are preserved in the archives of the Consulate at Beirut, and I am much indebted to the authorities for permission to use the information given therein.

† Lady Hester Stanhope and her physician, Dr. Meryon, passed through Salamiyya not long before the Isma'ili reoccupation. There are descriptions in *The Travels of Lady Hester Stanhope* (by Dr. Meryon), London, 1846, vol. ii, p. 93 and pp. 210-12.

The Isma'ili story runs that Emir Isma'il, learned in the history of his people, was determined to find and to occupy their ancient capital. He knew approximately where it was and so claimed from the Hama authorities lands east of the city. Then he led his little band of followers into the steppe, first to one site which gave no clue, and then to another and finally to Salamiyya. Here the Beduin knew the old name, and the foundation inscription of a mosque, 1,100 years old, which is still proudly exhibited, showed that the goal had been reached. Immediately there started the process of colonization which has continued until today. The little group of men lived in and defended the old citadel, and ploughed the land nearly with their weapons at the ready. Then messengers were sent back to the Isma'ilis of the Alawite mountains and the great trek began. Gradually the people were collected and came to build up their little polity of a score of villages grouped round their centre of a thousand years before.

In leading his people in this new venture Emir Isma'il's energies were at last well directed. Many stories are still told of him and of other personalities of the pioneering days. The land was freely granted by the Turks, but it had to be won, and the nomads were only slowly fought off or bought off. The Isma'ili area of expansion infringed on Mowali territory in particular, and also on those grazing grounds for which the 'Aneza tribes—Sba' Fed'a'n and Rualla—fought each other during the second half of the nineteenth century. A loose alliance was formed with the Sba', an alliance which is still useful in troubled days. The Emir was not content with war and diplomacy. He urged his people to the plough by force if necessary, and is even said to have had young men whipped if he caught them lounging in the market place in their best clothes when they should have been working in the fields.

Since the middle of the nineteenth century, then, there have been two main groups of Isma'ilis in Syria, those of the Qadimous-Masyaf area in the mountains west of Hama, and those of the Salamiyya area on the plains east of Hama. The first group number perhaps 10,000 today, and the second between 25,000 and 35,000. Elsewhere there are only a few scattered villages.

The two groups are divided not only geographically, but on a sectarian basis. All were formerly Nizaris (the Indian Khojas), members of the main Isma'ili group, who trace their line of Imams through Nizar, that son of the Fatimid Caliph el Mustansir Bi'llah (d. 1094) who was supported by Hasan es Sabbah. The forty-seventh Imam of this line is the Aga Khan. (The Indian Bohras and most of the Isma'ilis of Yemen derive from the followers of Nizar's brother and rival Musta'li.) The great majority of the Salamiyya Isma'ilis are still fervent followers of Aga Khan and of his son and successor Ali Khan, but the mountain group have broken away and do not regard these two princes as Imams. The schism may not be final. Relations between the two groups are friendly. Emir Muhammad Milhem, one of the leaders of the Salamiyya group, puts it like this: "If they are not sure of our present Lord, Aga Khan, the truth will appear to them in the near future and they will return to the spring from which we all drink."*

* But see Ivanov in *J.R.A.S.*, 1938, p. 79.

The mountain group are not, on the whole, well off. As in all the Syrian mountains, land hunger, overpopulation and poverty are chronic evils. This must have been a factor behind the migration to the Salamiyya area. There is still a drift from the mountains to the wealthier eastern areas, as well as seasonal migration. Landowners of the Salamiyya area import men, women and children by the cart- and lorry-load to help at harvest time, and some stay for lengthy periods. That some of these mountaineers are poor, backward and ignorant is not surprising in view of the difficulty and inaccessibility of their environment—this is the price paid for survival in such a region of refuge.

The Isma'ilis of the Salamiyya area are a fortunate people. Their land is fertile and well watered, and they have flourished. They have been successful in creating and maintaining their little state within a state, and till recently have done very much as they liked. They are proud and clanish, with a reputation for toughness. Their attitude to the non-noble Arab tribes and to other peasant groups tends to be condescending, not unlike that of the Druzes of the Jebel Druze to their neighbours. Living on the open steppe which merges into desert, and in close contact with the nomads, they have adopted or conserved many attractive Arab traditions. Each village headman maintains his guest house where travellers are welcome to bitter coffee and a meal, and in the town of Salamiyya the Emirs keep hospitable state. All love horses and interest themselves in breeding, and a network of horse-coping links the Isma'ilis with the Beduin of all the deserts and with the race tracks of Beirut and even Alexandria. Most of their 100,000 sheep are out amongst the tribes in the desert in winter, and in summer the tribesmen come in to village territory with their flocks. All these contacts strengthen the "Arab" tradition amongst the Isma'ilis, and of course they wear the flowing clothes and head-dress of all the Syrian plainsmen.

Their relations with official Sunni Islam are strained and complex. Like most dissident minorities, they tend to be "agin" the Damascus government. More than once, especially in the first World War, they have earned trouble for themselves by their pro-British sympathies, of which, of course, the Englishman hears more than is warranted. In this they exhibit the usual propensity of minority groups to cleave to a protector, the pro-British orientation springing from their loyalty to H.H. Aga Khan.

The Aga Khan is the spiritual and temporal head of the sect and possesses attributes of divinity. A tithe is paid to him, and he is at the centre of all religious and political considerations of his people. Amongst the great majority of the ordinary men, uninitiated into religious secrets, loyalty to the Imam is paramount to the near exclusion of most other religious belief. A large share of the reverence due to the Imam has already been transferred to H.H. Ali Khan, who succeeds his father and who has already taken over some of his duties. Extraordinary and magnificent scenes of enthusiasm greet "The Prince" when he visits the town. His arrival is the opportunity for a fantasia when dozens of horsemen gallop along with his car, firing rifles into the air as they go, and then a great crowd is assembled in the town to greet him. People fight to see

him or touch his clothes, and whilst he stays the community is in a ferment. The boys of the town march about chanting:

Ali Shah, hāmīna,
Fi sēt wa marīna,
Wa illi ma bihubbī
Minisuf bi saramīna.

(The "marīna"—Martini—for rifle is interesting.)

Ali Shah, our leader,
With sword and rifle girt,
And we will crush beneath our feet
Whoever loves him not.*

I do not know how systematized is the process of initiation into religious knowledge, but it is certain that the majority of the people—like their Sunni neighbours—bear their religion lightly and are ignorant of all theological subtlety. Prayers are held three times a day in the unassuming mosques, but only a small proportion of the men attend regularly. Theirs, the casual observer would say, is a free-and-easy religion; for whilst they do not fast in Ramadan they join with fervour in the celebrations at the end of it; polygamy is allowed and so is alcohol—although both these pleasures are usually indulged in only very moderately.

There is at present some falling away from the sect, slight but of interest. Not many of the triumphs of orthodox Islam have been won by direct and brutal proselytizing accompanied by persecution. Minority sects in fact frequently react to persecution by developing faithfulness and cohesion. Sunni Islam has more generally spread by a process of social infection. Representing the dominant classes, practised by the great majority of the population, permeating the whole social and psychological fabric of the Arab peoples, Sunnism imperceptibly gathers to itself new adherents. In periods of relative prosperity and tolerance such as the present this is probably particularly marked. It is also true that in such periods there is a general falling away from the beliefs and practices of religion—people who are comfortable in this life are less concerned with the welfare of their spiritual selves in the life to come. "Houris in Paradise I do not look for: does any man of sense?" as Walid II put it. There is likely to be a particular falling away from, or diminution of interest in, Isma'ilism and related sects. Having sprung originally from a movement of protest against unfavourable economic, social, political and religious conditions, they have developed the secret and mystical elements in their religious life as a compensation and a refuge, and stress the idea of the second coming of a messianic Imam. Sunni Islam, however, triumphs even at such times, for the demands it makes are not rigorous, and there must be a considerable relief felt by ex-members of heretical sects when they find how easy it is to become one of the favoured, dominant majority

* H.H. Ali Khan's marriage to Rifa Hayworth naturally disturbed conservative opinion, as doubtless subsequent events will have tended to do. However, the theologians' view that the Imam's spirit is inviolable and unaffected by worldly affairs is echoed by the common man's feeling that the Prince can do no wrong and may naturally marry as he wishes.

and to leave behind them all feelings of being a peculiar people. A squabble with the Emirs, or a revolt against the tithe-paying, may lead to a group of themselves quietly themselves Sunnis, or perhaps at first merely withdrawing movement has, however, hitherto been slight. Prince Ali Khan has in a dozen village schools and sending missionaries from East Africa to preach in the mosques he has done something to combat indifference and ignorance.

In taking the bold step of migrating and creating for themselves a new environment in and around Salamiyya, the Isma'ilis provided a stimulant for themselves which many oriental groups sadly lack. In breaking with tradition and initiating a pioneering movement they developed a somewhat more active and enterprising turn of mind and body than some of their neighbours, and because of the fertility of the area in which they have settled they are fortunate in being able to gain considerable reward by work and investment. Partly for these reasons the process of economic and social change which is going on throughout the Middle East is particularly apparent in this area.

During the mandatory period security was established, the country well administered, communications improved and increased trading and other links established with the world. The circumstances of the second World War favoured the country's economy in general and that of the Salamiyya area in particular. Under the Office des Céréales Panifiables, an internationally administered, quasi-military organization set up under the aegis of the Middle East Supply Centre, all the wheat and barley the area could produce was bought at good guaranteed prices. Many men were able to enlist in the French local levies or in the British army, or to obtain employment as civilians in the hundreds of camps, depots or offices established in Syria and Lebanon. There was a general rise in prices, including those of agricultural products, and a rise in the standard of living of all but the poorest in this producing area. The demands of the war and severe restrictions on imports gave rise to inflation. The Salamiyya area was only dependent to a small degree on imports, and the greater part of the newly earned surplus cash was saved.

Since the end of the war there has been a prolonged spending boom. A good deal of money has gone on consumer goods such as cars and radios, which were a rarity before the war but which are commonplace now. Some has been spent on goods of more general and direct value to the community, like the dozen or so buses which now ply between Hama, Salamiyya and the villages. The most important investments have been in farm improvement and especially in motor pumps, many hundreds of which have been installed in the area. These bring the subsoil water to the surface, where it is largely used to irrigate cash crops—grain, vegetables, fruit, vines and notably cotton. Cotton growing is immensely profitable, owing to the high world prices now prevailing, and the acreage under this crop is constantly being extended. The traditional near-subsistence economy based largely on unirrigated wheat and barley growing is giving place before these changes to a complex cash economy.

People are now better off than ever before, better fed and in better health. With economic change has gone a broadening of outlook and a demand for education. The fatalistic, passivist spirit so characteristic of the backward areas of the Moslem Arab lands is disappearing, and at the same time there has been a weakening of the power of custom and of religion itself. The power of the Emirs has also been weakened. Ten years ago these hereditary landowners and chiefs were undisputed masters of their people. A number of government posts were in their hands, but more important than that they were the accepted representatives of the people, and all the affairs of the community were channelled through them. The restricted scope of the economic, social and political machinery of the region both made their existence necessary and guaranteed its continuance. They lived off the products of their lands, needing relatively few goods and services from outside the area, and they paid for most of the services rendered to them locally by patronage, protection, hospitality and occasional gifts of bags of wheat. They were hospitable and extravagant, knowing nothing of profit and loss accounts, spending freely when they had money and living on credit when they had none. Various factors are against them today. Although some of them are notable men, they have not the strength of character and mind which made Emir Isma'il and his companions such formidable figures. Their own interminable quarrels help to weaken them. Most notably, however, modern economic conditions do not favour them. Their needs are now greater, for they must now have cars and radios and other luxuries, whilst they still maintain their guest houses and stables. They need cash for an increasing range of goods and services—to buy fuel for their new motor-pumps, for example, and to pay wages to their chauffeurs. The smaller man, labourer or mechanic, equally involved in the cash economy now prevailing, demands money payment for his services, and becomes increasingly discontent with an inequitable share-cropping system or with patronage. The latter is of far less use than it was—protector-lords are now out of fashion, and in cases of official business the ordinary man is turning more freely direct to members of the new official middle class, who have displaced most of the Emirs from their government posts.

Faced with the need for money, the big landowners frequently sell or lease part of their land, and in this way help to undermine their own fortunes. Many of their own people and of the new, non-Isma'ili immigrants—contractors or tradesmen or officials—are now wealthier and better educated than some, at least, of the Emirs, and so the esteem in which the latter are held declines. There are, however, exceptions—young, able men of the old families become improving landlords, whilst some have the education to fill official posts. The characteristics of the district are thus changing rapidly. Modernization is in full swing, and there is a weakening of the old religious and social ties.

On the other hand, links with Prince Ali Khan and world Isma'ilism are now closer than ever before, and there is a growing interest in social reform. There is a tremendous demand for education. An organization called "El Ikhwān es Safa" (The Brethren of Purity) has been founded. The name is significant, for it derives from the medieval association of

thinkers in whose works were expressed many of the philosophical and religious tenets of Isma'ilism. The new brotherhood is now actively interesting young educated men in religious, philosophical and social affairs. It seems possible that Isma'ilism may develop new strength and adapt itself to the changing conditions of Syria today.