Isma‘ili Da‘wa and Politics in Fatimid Egypt.

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This paper will discuss the mutual influence between politics and the Isma‘ili da‘wa, particularly after the establishment of the Fatimid government in Egypt. Some questions arise at this point, such as: ‘what were the circumstances that influenced the developments in the role of the da‘wa?’ and, ‘had the office of dā‘ī undergone a process of politization as a result of the personal political interests promoted by the viziers?’ In examining these questions, I will attempt to emphasize the interrelations between the Isma‘ili da‘wa and the political circumstance during the Fatimid regime in Egypt.

Prior to al-Mahdī's appearance on the scene by the beginning of the tenth century, the da‘wa mechanism had a more theoretical aspect, whose purpose was to overthrow the Abbasid rule, which the Isma‘īlis and several other Shi‘i movements deemed illegitimate. On the other hand, the da‘wa served as a means to establish the universality of the Isma‘ili Imamate. However, with the constitution of the Fatimid rule in North Africa (Ifrīqyā) the Isma‘īlis had found it difficult to effect a doctrinarian union among the various factions of the Shi‘a. Furthermore, the Isma‘ili Fatimid government was faced with a demanding political trial, without the support of an applicative and established judicial system to assist it in addressing the challenges of the new situation.

Following the occupation of Egypt by the Fatimids in 969, the Ismā‘iliyya managed to enforce its political authority for nearly 200 years, during which it did not succeed in converting the Sunna, nor did it coerce the local residents to convert their religious belief, as had been claimed by several scholars.¹

The propaganda and preaching institution (da‘wa) formed a central ingredient of the Fatimid establishment – both religious and political.² The Fatimid caliphate put a special emphasis on the strengthening, systematization and overt institutionalization of the da‘wa. Judge al-Nu‘mān bin Ḥāyyūn is considered the first Fatimid legislator to have created a considerable body of knowledge, for the use of the Isma‘ili judiciary and da‘wa systems, in addition to having written historical essays relating to the Ismā‘iliyya.
Historical sources available today show that despite the linkage between the office of the Isma’ili judge (Qāḍī) and that of the missionary (Dā’ī), it was not before the days of Imām al-Ḥākim bi-Amr Allāh (r. 996-1021) that the first official appointment, that of the judge Ḫūsayn bin ‘Alī bin al-Nu’mān (999-1004),3 had been made for the office of "Judge of Judges" (Qāḍī al-Quṭūī) and "Preacher of Preachers" (Dā’ī al-Du’āt). Later in the Fatimid period, the missionary functions were transferred to the viziers.

The function of chief dā’ī was of utmost importance in the Fatimid government and served as a central pillar in the propagation and reinforcement of the Isma’ili mission both in areas under direct Fatimid domination, and those outside the state boundaries (ḡazīra). The hierarchy of the da’wa establishment was organized with the utmost care and precision, beginning with the chief dā’ī and ending with the Isma’ili initiate (mustaḡīb), the main objective being the perpetuation of the Isma’ili propagation and its success.

The Fatimid palace was not only a center of political authority but also the seat of the chief dā’ī, known as the Mağlis al-Dā’ī or Mağlis al-Da’wa. Meetings and assemblies of the senior Isma’ili ‘ulama were held in the palace, both for decision-making purposes or as sessions of Isma’ili training and education.4

The enforcement of Fatimid authority over all aspects of administration – political, civilian and religious – was gradual so as not to provoke unrest within the local Sunni majority.5 In 364/974 (A.H./C.E.) the Isma’ili judge ‘Alī bin al-Nu’mān was appointed chief judge of the Fatimid state,6 thus ending the predominance of the Sunni law system for the duration of the Fatimid period. In fact, the chief judge was often involved in da’wa activities and bore the additional title of "Preacher of Preachers" (Dā’ī al-Du’āt). Such were the Banū al-Nu’mān during the first Fatimid period.7

The authority over the da’wa remained generally in the hands of the presiding chief judge, up until 441/1049 when the last of the al-Nu’mān’s sons, al-Qāsim, left office. Consequently, Abū Muḥammad al-Ḥasan bin ‘Abd al-Rahmān al-Yāzūrī (d. 450/1058) was appointed vizier and responsible for the da’wa authorities, in an attempt to keep him away from the influence of al-Sayyida al-Wālida, the mother of Imām al-Mustanṣir. Thus, for the first time, the vizier took hold of the Isma‘ili da’wa.
The appointment of vizier Badr al-Dīn al-Ğamālī (1072-1094) marked the beginning of a new period, dominated by mighty and powerful viziers who were nicknamed "the viziers of the sword" (wuzarā’ al-sayf). They took control of nearly all administrative authorities including the Isma’īli mission. They appointed preachers, missionaries and judges as their delegates, and came to be known by the title of "Guiding missionaries of the Isma’īli believers and guarantor of the judges of the Muslims" (Hādī Du’ūt al-Mu’mīnīn wa-Kāfil Quḍūt al-Muslimīn).

Isma’īli Da’wa and Education

The Fatimids made use of the tradition that mosques have been centers of Islamic life, to propagate and reinforce the Isma’īli doctrine among the populace, as exemplified by judge al-Nu’mān ibn Ḥāyūn at al-Manṣūriyya mosque during the rule of the Caliph al-Manṣūr and Caliph al-Mu’izz in Ifrīqyā (North Africa). Due to the fact that the Isma’īli religious interpretation and da’wa relied on both esoteric (al-bāţīn) and exoteric (al-ẓāhīr) meanings of the holy scriptures (and other religiously-related phenomena) and the educational system was also adapted to these principles. The Fatimids were therefore extremely cautious in conducting lessons and da’wa sessions.

With his appointment as chief judge of the Fatimid state on behalf of Imām al-Manṣūr in Northern Africa, al-Nu’mān undertook a complex and multi-faceted duty: administering the Isma’īli law; training judges and notaries (‘udūl) for future dispatching to remote lands; preaching and holding sermons in al-Manṣūriyya mosque; and teaching the Isma’īli doctrine to initiates and other occasional listeners. The sermons held by al-Nu’mān became a regular educational venue at the al-Manṣūriyya mosque – an Isma’īli educational institution in its own accord. However, what distinguished the Isma’īli teaching was the fact that the lectures given by al-Nu’mān required the prior approval of the Imām, who also determined the guidelines concerning the method of teaching and performing da’wa with respect to its exoteric and esoteric components, and to the aimed audience. This was due to the fact that the Imām was considered the highest source of interpretation (ta’wīl) and knowledge (‘ilm/ḥikma).

We find al-Nu’mān’s method being implemented under the Fatimid rule in Egypt in the form of "sessions of wisdom" (maḡālis al-ḥikma). Maḡālis were arranged according to the mastery level of the participants and their affinity to the
ruling class: al-awliyā’, al-ḥāṣṣa, ḥurum (the caliph’s wives), sessions dedicated to the simple folk, to foreigners and sessions for women held in al-Azhar mosque. The books and teaching materials used by the dā’ī in these sessions also required the caliph’s prior approval.⁸

Among other responsibilities, the chief dā’ī was also the supervisor of the state's Isma’ili educational system, his main task being to direct the scholars and ‘ulama in propagating the principles of the Ismā‘iliyya and strengthening its foundations. Thus, it is difficult to separate between religious preaching conducted for missionary purposes and for the reinforcement of the Isma’ili doctrine, and religious education whose objectives were to prepare ‘ulama, missionaries and functionaries’ who worked in the Fatimids' service.

The founding and functioning of the Fatimid educational and religious institutions was inspired and directly supported by the Fatimid caliphs (central government). Consequently, they acted as missionary centers in the service of the Ismā‘iliyya, both directly and indirectly. The gatherings, lectures, sermons, and lessons (mağālis al-da’wa /mağālis al-ḥikma) conducted in these institutions attracted students and inspired individuals not only from among the Isma’ili adherents but also from other religious streams in the population. According to al-Maqrīzī, one of the lessons held by the Isma’ili judge Muhammad bin al-Nu‘mān in 385/995 was so overcrowded that the result was the death of eleven people.⁹

The Cairo mosque al-Azhar acted as a multipurpose institution in the service of the Ismā‘iliyya. It was built by the Fatimid commandant Jawhar al-Ṣiqillī as a symbol for the Fatimid Isma’ili rule and a place to be used by the Fatimids and their adherents for conducting the Isma’ili religious rituals, so as to prevent friction with Egyptian Sunni devotees. Heinz objects to the above contention and argues that since it was built, al-Azhar functioned exclusively as an educational institution.¹⁰

Heinz's claim raises a number of important questions: Can we isolate purely educational goals from missionary objectives in the context of a religious Isma’ili establishment? And in a broader context, is such a division of purposes possible in Islamic educational institutions of the medieval age? ‘Alī bin al-Nu‘mān who was chief dā’ī and judge until his death in 374/984, held his first lessons at al-Azhar mosque in the month of Șafar 365/ October 975.
Vizier Ya’qūb ibn Killis (d. 380/990) was the first to formalize the Isma’ili educational activity at al-Azhar with the assistance and funding of the Fatimid government (Caliph al-’Azīz). In 378/988 Ibn Killis received the official authorization of Caliph al-’Azīz’s to undertake the tutoring of 37 students of the Isma’ili law. Al-’Azīz also allocated stipends and salaries for the students and their supervisors as well as accommodations in the mosque's vicinity.

Despite the great controversy surrounding al-Ḥākim's capricious policy and his mysterious lifestyle, he was considered one of the mightiest Fatimid caliphs who strived for the formalization of the Isma’ili mission and education. The Cairo Dār al-‘Ilm was also an institution devoted to Isma’ili da’wa through the teaching of rational and philosophical sciences, as well as a place for acquiring religious and general education. One additional indication to the missionary function of Dār al-‘Ilm was the appointment of the chief dā’ī as the supervisor of this institution, thus reinforcing the connection between education and da’wa, both of which served one major goal – the buttressing of the Ismā’iliyya.

The number of students and adherents who attended the study sessions (mağālis) at the Fatimid palace grew substantially during the reign of Caliph al-Ḥākim bi-Amr Allāh (d. 411/1021). Separate sessions for men and women were held almost daily.

Several reasons may have influenced the establishment of Dār al-‘Ilm by al-Ḥākim: overcrowded lessons and mağālis al ḥikma; the need to separate lessons and mağālis according to the topic being studied; and possibly the Imām’s own ambitions. Despite its distinct Isma’ili character, the institution had drawn numerous students from various origins and religious schools, some of which belonged to the Islamic orthodoxy, particularly to the Šāfi‘iyya, Mālikīyya and Ḥanafiyya. Al-Maqrīzī indicates that Dār al-‘Ilm-type institutions spread all over Egypt during the Fatimid period, reaching a total of nearly 800. Not only the Dār al-‘Ilm benefited from the increased support of al-Ḥākim but also institutions such as al-Azhar, al-Muqṣ and Rāṣīda mosques. To fund the various maintenance and regular functioning expenses of these institutions al-Ḥākim endowed ample waqf.

The libraries at the Fatimid palace and the Dār al-‘Ilm in Cairo were placed under the direct supervision of the chief dā’ī. These libraries were badly damaged and looted in times of crisis, particularly during the "great crisis" (al-šidda al-‘umrā).
of al-Mustansır's period and at the end of the Fatimid era following the abolishment of the caliphate by Ṣalāḥ al-Dīn.

Uprisings that broke up in Cairo during the "great crisis" disturbed the regular activity of Dār al-ʿIlm and interfered with its educational and missionary goals. The second half of the Fatimid period was characterized by a decrease in the Fatimid Ismaʿili educational and missionary activity, which was overshadowed by the political struggles among viziers, army commandants and governors, in addition to the schisms within the Fatimid dynasty.

The Fatimid educational system also spread outside Egypt into various cities of Fatimid Syria, although in a more limited form. Despite the little facts we have regarding these institutions, we may assume that apart from daʿwa, the Fatimids attempted to propagate the Ismaʿili doctrine in various regions outside Egypt through their educational and religious institutions.

The Shiʿi mission was serviced in Aleppo by an institution named Dār al-Daʿwa. Additionally, the library of Sayf al-Dawla al-Ḥamadānī had a secondary destination as a Dār al-ʿIlm. According to Ibn al-Furat's version, the Ismaʿilis strengthened their position in Aleppo during the second half of the 5th/11th century, mainly as a result of the support received from the Seljuq city commander, Emir Raḍwan bin Tutuš. The best indication of the status attained by the Ismāʿīliyya in Aleppo was the erection of a special mosque in the service of its adherents, in addition to the establishment of a Dār al-Daʿwa, and the unhindered functioning of these two institutions. As a result, numerous Ismaʿili adherents were drawn to the city from Persia as well as from various other Syrian regions. The historian Ibn al-Ṣanʿa mentions that the majority of Aleppines at the beginning of the 6th/12th century were under the influence of the Shiʿa. The traveler Ibn Jubayr claims that during his journey through Syria in 580/1184 (the reign of Sultan Ṣalāḥ al-Dīn al-Ayyūbī) the Shiʿi adherents in Damascus outnumbered the Sunni adherents.

The new vacancies in the Fatimid administration proved to be a factor that served the Ismāʿīliyya well, particularly during the first Fatimid period. Scholars and clergymen from various regions moved to Egypt to offer their candidacy to the available administrative and religious judiciary positions. Several of these religious appointments were carried out despite the fact that the chosen candidate belonged to one of the orthodox schools of Islam. These scholars came from various origins: some
were from the East while others came from various regions in Syria itself. This phenomenon highlights the decisive, albeit mostly unintentional, role played by these high-ranking appointments in "converting" the religious perceptions of the office bearers to the Ismāʾīliyya. Yaʿqūb ibn Killis for instance, came from Baghdad and was of Jewish origin. Later, he converted to Islam and served under the Fatimids as a vizier, legislator and Ismaʿīli teacher.

The previously mentioned vizier al-Yāzūrī (d. 450/1058), served under the Fatimids and contributed to the growth of the Ismāʾīliyya, belonged to the Ḥanafī school and served as a judge in the city of Ramleh. Later, during the reign of Caliph al-Mustanṣir he moved to the Fatimid palace in Cairo and subsequently was appointed vizier and then chief judge and chief dāʿī of the Ismāʾīliyya.23

Various historians claim that it was al-Yāzūrī who launched the missionary campaign against the Abbasids and chose the renowned Ismaʿili dāʿī al-Muayyad fī al-Dīn al-Šīrāzī. Thanks to the financial and moral support supplied by Al-Yāzūrī, al-Muayyad succeeded in gathering numerous new initiates in Iraq, among them the Turkish commander of the Abbasid army in Baghdad, al-Basāsīrī.

Schisms Within the Ismaʿīli Daʿwa and Politics

The unconditioned belief in the holiness of the Imām (al-wilāya) is one of the main pillars of the Ismaʿīli creed, one endowing the Imām with saintly qualities. This custom of endowing the Imām with eminent religious qualities was strongest during the first Fatimid period, but seemed to be decreased significantly after al-Ḥākim's reign. Thus, revealing the Imāms themselves as political leaders resulted in a disruption between their perceived religious qualities and their political status.

The Fatimid daʿwa highlighted the saintly attributes of the Imām, which were said to be transferred unto him by way of inheritance in the form of a divine spark. Endowing the Imām with divine qualities is also apparent in the writings of Ibn Hāniʿ al-Andalusī, a poet who dedicated his work to the Ismaʿili daʿwa.24

The third Egyptian caliph, al-Ḥākim bi-Amr Allāh, was the most radical of the Fatimid caliphs, whose followers divinized through the daʿwa. Several historians describe him as strange and eccentric at times. The number of those who affirmed al-Ḥākim's divine authority grew during his reign, reaching 16,000 people according to
the historian Ibn al-Furāt. As previously mentioned, al-Ḥākim's period is considered a
time of lively activity in both education and Isma‘ili da‘wa.25

Interesting is the fact that the missionaries who promoted the divine image of
Īmām al-Ḥākim were of foreign origin, particularly from Persia. Such as Ḥāmza bin
‘Alī al-Zawzanī (al-Labbād), Muḥammad bin Ismā‘īl al-Darazī (Naṣīṭūkūn), Ḥasan bin
Ḥaydara al-Firgānī (al-‘Aḥram/ al-Ağda‘) and others.

The da‘wa disseminated in Egypt by these missionaries was twofold:
promoting the divine image of Īmām al-Ḥākim, and simultaneously execrating the
name of the first three caliphs of the Islam. Seeing the unrest this raised among the
Sunna adherents, al-Ḥākim helped his missionaries flee to Syria, according to some
sources, and provided them with financial and moral support in order to enable them
to continue their da‘wa activities. The missionary work in Syria gave birth to a new
faction within the Ismā‘iliyya, known as Aḥl al-Tawḥīd or al-Daraziyya (the Druze),
named after the missionary Muḥammad al-Darazī. This community later became a
separate sect with its own independent beliefs and religious principles.26 After his
mysterious disappearance (or murder), Īmām al-Ḥākim's image of a divine incarnation
grew even stronger among his followers, to such an extent that his death was denied
and his disappearance considered a miracle. It appears that the promulgation of al-
Ḥākim's sanctity may have been considered as hindering the Isma‘ili da‘wa, and was
one of the factors which brought his sister, Sitt al-Mulk, to conspire his murder.

The branching out of the Aḥl al-Tawḥīd (the Druze) can be considered as the
first schism within the Ismā‘iliyya during the Fatimid period in Egypt. It was a
product of the radical propaganda against the Sunna and the intense belief in the
divine qualities of Īmām al-Ḥākim. It is noteworthy that apart from al-Ḥākim's
missionaries, the majority of the other prominent Isma‘ili dā‘f-s (propagandists), who
were in Egypt and gained renown during the Fatimid period, were also of Persian
origins. Let us list several of these missionaries: Ḥamīd al-Dīn al-Kirmānī (d. after
410/1020); Al-Muayyad fī al-Dīn al-Šīrāzī (d. 470/1078); Nāṣir-i Khusrāw (d.
481/1088); Ḥasan ibn al-Šabbāḥ (d. 518/1124) arrived in Egypt during al-Mustanṣir's
reign in 471/1078. Ḥasan al-Šabbāḥ became a protagonist of the Isma‘ili da‘wa in the
East and established a center for the da‘wa activities in the Alamūṭ fortress. He was
also the leader of the al-Nizāriyya faction after the death of Imām al-Mustansir in 487/1094.

During the second part of the Fatimid period in Egypt, and particularly in the aftermath of the great crisis (al-ṣidda al-ʿumā) there was a decline in the status of the Fatimid caliphs vis-à-vis the authority of the mighty "viziers of the sword" (wuzarāʾ al-sayf). This weakening of the caliphs, the restrictions imposed on their authorities and the accession disputes and conflicts within the Fatimid dynasty had a negative impact on the Ismaʿili daʿwa. Four major schisms have marred the image of the Fatimid government in this period:

1. **Al-Nizāriyya and Al-Mustaʿliyya;** a schism between two sons of the Caliph al-Mustansir – Nizār and Aḥmad (al-Mustaʿli). The split within the Ismaʿili daʿwa gave birth to a severe schism within the Ismāʿiliyya, with each side trying to justify its rights and claims to authority. In a political attempt to prove his father's legitimate right to the scepter, Imām al-Āmir bin al-Mustaʿli (d.524/1130) went on a missionary journey. He summoned a general assembly with the participation of Ismaʿili ʿulama and clergymen, administration officials and other dignitaries, and made Nizār's sister publicly acknowledge al-Mustaʿli's right of ascendancy. This public acknowledgment is known among historians by the name of al-Hidāya al-Āmiriyya (the Āmirī guidance).

2. **Al-Ḥāfiẓiya and al-Ṭayyibiyya:** Following al-Āmir's assassination in 524/1130, a dispute over the caliphate broke out between al-Ḥāfiẓ, the cousin of the late Caliph al-Āmir and the supporters of al-Āmir's infant son, al-Ṭayyib. This led to another schism within the political circles of the Fatimid dynasty as well as within the daʿwa establishment. This new schism, nicknamed al-Ṭayyibiyya, was once again focused outside the Egyptian borders, particularly in Yaman and India, by way of the Ṣulayḥid dynasty. In Egypt, the moderate faction of the Ismāʿiliyya continued its activities, struggling for existence in the shadow of the political conflicts.

3. **The dispute over the succession of Imām al-Ḥāfiẓ (Ḥasan and Ḥaydara).** The dispute over the title of crown prince (wilāyat al-ʿahd), which broke out in 527/1133 between the two sons of Caliph al-Ḥāfiẓ, Ḥasan and Ḥaydara, gave birth to another schism.
4. The involvement of the mighty viziers (viziers of the sword): In the period of who were originally army commanders and were known as the "viziers of the sword", the Isma'ili da'wa depended heavily on the attitude of the vizier toward the Ismāʿīliyya.

Let us review several cases in which the viziers of the sword attempted to undermine the Ismāʿīliyya in the Fatimid state. Vizier Badr al-Dīn al-Ǧamālī set up a campaign to strengthen the Armenian elements in the army and within the general population by initiating the renovation of Christian religious establishments in Egypt. The most acute and outstanding change took place during the tenure of vizier al-Afḍal bin Badr al-Dīn al-Ǧamālī (487-515/1094-1121). Besides playing an active role in determining the successor of Imām al-Mustanṣir, he also abolished some of the Ismāʿīliyya customs that prevailed in Egypt since the establishment of the Fatimid regime, and particularly such Isma’ili rituals as the birth ceremonies of the Prophet, ‘Alī, Fāṭima and the ruling Imām.

In 524/1130, following the assassination of Caliph al-Āmir, vizier Kutayfāt (Aḥmad) the son of al-Afḍal, attempted to remodel the governing policies of the Fatimid state according to the Imāmiyya, a rival Shi‘i faction whose conceptions were opposed to those of the Ismāʿīliyya. In addition, he appointed Sunni judges for the Ṣāfi‘iyya and the Mālikīyya beside the Imami and Isma‘ili ones. This was considered a revolutionary step that contradicted the governing principles to which the state had been adhering since the beginning of the Fatimid regime in Egypt, the days of Imām al-Mu‘izz. Although short-lived, this move was certainly viewed as a novelty and precedent in the Fatimid government of this period. It was also as a sign of the growing weakness of the Isma’ili da’wa and its potential inability to withstand similar future maneuvers, and of the extent of political involvement in the religious and da’wa affairs.

As part of the succession dispute between the two heirs of Imām al-Ḥāfīẓ, his son Ḥasan adopted a hostile policy toward the Isma’ili judges, clergymen and his father's followers. After doing away with Ḥasan as a contender to the throne, Imām al-Ḥāfīẓ took an opposite direction, leaning more and more on the Isma’ili clergy (arbāb al-‘amā‘im) for staffing key functions in the state administration. Additionally, he appointed Christian functionaries such as the priest Abū Nağāh and the Armenian
vizier Bahrām to high-ranking offices. Despite his attempts, al-Ḥāfīz did not succeed in improving the status of the Ismāʿīliyya and in restoring it to its past splendor.

Towards the end of the Fatimid period, the Ismaʿili daʿwa experienced a gradual decline vis-à-vis the Sunni propaganda, which started to gain strength in Syria under the auspices of the Seljuqs/ Zangids, whose influence managed to infiltrate the rows of the Egyptian orthodoxy as well. This tendency gained even more impetus when Ṣalāḥ al-Dīn al-Ayyūbī moved to Egypt after being requested by the last Fatimid caliph al-ʿĀḍid to restore peace and order. In 564/1168 Ṣalāḥ al-Dīn was appointed vizier of the Fatimids and at the same time continued to be the commander of the Zangid army in Egypt, and a loyal soldier of Sultan Nūr al-Dīn Zangī in Syria. This duality of authorities has given Ṣalāḥ al-Dīn formidable power and status, which he promptly used to persecute the Ismāʿīliyya in Egypt. His policy was twofold: on the one hand he continued to weaken the Ismāʿīliyya by replacing its judges with Sunnis, particularly from among the Šāfīʿiyya (Ṣadr al-Dīn ibn Dirbās); on the other hand he took assertive steps to strengthen the Sunna by erecting educational establishments (madrasas) to service the orthodoxy, in the same manner as the Zangids had done in Syria. Ṣalāḥ al-Dīn's actions gradually led to the complete abolishment of the Fatimid caliphate in 567/1171. Egyptian loyalty and political association was officially transferred to the Sunni Abbasid caliphate.

Ismaʿili daʿwa and Abbasid Counter-Propaganda

Ismaʿili daʿwa had existed in the eastern Islamic lands even before the rise of the Fatimids in Egypt, posing a challenge to the Abbasid rule in the region. Vis-à-vis the Ismaʿili daʿwa, the Abbasid counter-Fatimid propaganda also gained strength. Its missionaries conducted fierce campaigns against the customs and tenets of the Shiʿa, in order to discredit any arguments supporting its legitimacy to rule over the Islamic community. Sensing the imminent danger of the Ismaʿili daʿwa, the Abbasid caliph al-Qādir (r. 991-1031) decided to launch a counter campaign. In 402/1011 he summoned a meeting in Baḡdad to which were invited several senior ʿulama, judges and clergymen. The outcome of this meeting was a protocol (maḥḍur) which strongly negated the Fatimid claims to the ancestry of ʿAlī bin Abī Ṭālib and his spouse Fāṭima, daughter of the prophet Muḥammad. According to the ʿulama of Baḡdad, the
Fatimid caliph al-Ḥākim was a descendant to the missionaries of al-Ḥawāriği sect. The Abbasids also claimed that the Fatimids were heretics who, with their customs and philosophy repudiated the Islam. Several nicknames used by the Abbasids denoted this alleged heresy – *kuffār, fussāq, fuğğār, mulḥidīn, zanādiqa*.\(^{33}\)

The Abbasid propaganda against the Fatimids continued to receive official authorization from of the Abbasid caliphs, who kept close council with the ‘ulama of the Sunna in Bağdad. In 444/1052, following a series of bitter clashes between the Shi’a and the Sunna in Iraq and in the eastern Islamic lands, the Abbasid caliph al-Qā’im summoned in Bağdad a meeting with ‘ulama, judges and clergymen, in order to think up ways to contradict the Fatimid claims. Once again, the ‘ulama issued a decree that denied the legitimacy of the Fatimid rule, and negated their ancestry to the descendants of ‘Alī and Fāṭima. They went on to attribute the Fatimids to one of the Amgushid groups (*al-Maḡūs*), known by the name of *al-Dīšāniyya*. Copies of the protocols (*maḥḍar*) of the Bagdadi ‘ulama's decision were made public and circulated in various regions with the intention of strengthening the counter Fatimid propaganda.\(^{34}\)

Following the demise of the Fatimid Caliph al-Mustanṣir (d. 487/1094), and attempting to capitalize on the schism between the *Nizāriyya* and the *Musta‘liyya*, the Abbasid caliphate (Caliph al-Mustaẓhir, r. 1094-1118) issued another protocol (*maḥḍar*), which again denounced the Fatimids. This protocol was also made public and read aloud in the presence of senior officials. The protocol declared that the Fatimids were heretics and denied the legitimacy of their political and doctrinarian claims.\(^{35}\)

Sunni propaganda often took the form of educational-religious and intellectual activities, characterized by a strong Sunni revivalist current. Sunni historians and clergymen invested great efforts in writing historical and religious works, in which they spoke against the Shi’a, denying its reasoning on the one hand, and highlighting the blessings of the Sunna on the other. The Sunni Abbasid judge Abū Bakr Muḥammad ibn al-Bāqlānī (d. 403/1012) who was in office during the reign of the Abbasid Caliph al-Qādir wrote an essay named *Kaṣf al-ʿAsrār wa-hatk al-ʿAstār*. In it he responds to the challenges posed by the *Ismāʿiʿliyya*, discloses the secrets of its philosophy and portrays it in a negative light.\(^{36}\)
Abū Ḥāmid al-Ḡazālī (d. 505/1111) was an illustrious sheikh. Some of his works deal with the revival of the Sunna and the defamation of the various Shi‘i factions. Among his major works in this context we find Ḥyā’ ‘Ulām al-Dīn, Al-Munqiq min al-Ḍalāl, Al-Qiṣṣās al-Mustaṣqīm, and Ḥuǧǧat al-Ḥaqq. Another essay, which dealt directly with the Ismā‘īliyya and the denial of its claims was Faḍā‘iḥ al-Bāṭiniyya wa-Faḍā‘il al-Mustazhiriyya. In this work, al-Ḡazālī draws a comparison between the Fatimid Shi‘a, which he depicts in grim outlines, and the blessings of the Sunni regime of the Abbasid Caliph al-Mustaṣḥir.

The da‘wa competition also motivated the construction of religious educational institutions, which serviced the orthodox schools of Islam. The Seljuq vizier Nizām al-Mulk is considered the first to establish a system of religious institutions, which was known by his name, al-Nizāmiyya, and was supported by waqf endowments made by senior officials. Nizām al-Mulk himself also wrote a book, named Siyāsāt-Nāme, in which he expounds on the Sunni religious sciences and refutes the innovations and the Shi‘i movements, the theologians (al-Mutakallimūn), the philosophers, the Sufis and the Isma‘īlis (al-Bāṭiniyya). Nizām al Mulk's negative attitude towards the Ismā‘īliyya, is probably what induced its adherents to plot his assassination in 485/1092.

The Seljuq domination of Syria enabled their masters (the Zangids) to initiate revivalist operations in the region both by concentrating actions against the Ismā‘īliyya and by erecting educational institutions to service the Sunna, emulating the al-Nizāmiyya madrasa in Iraq. By the end of the Zangid period (569/1173) there were 27 institutions in Damascus and 19 in Aleppo, among them centers for religious higher education including madrasas, ḥānqāhs, ribāts and zāwiyas. The beginning of the 6th/12th century saw an escalation in the struggles between the Sunnis and the Isma‘īlis within Syria, especially after the death of the ruler of Aleppo Raḍwān bin Tāj al-Dawla Tuṭuš (d. 507/1113). The ensuing uprisings took the lives of many Isma‘īlis. The rest fled to the Lebanon and Naṣā‘riyya mountains, The most crucial period for the victory of the Sunna in Syria was that of Sultan Nūr al-Dīn Maḥmūd ibn Zangī, who worked persistently in all possible ways for its revival.
It is clear that historians, Sunni ‘ulama and Abbasid officials have constantly attempted, in various ways, to harm the Fatimids, to create a negative image of their dynasty and to delegitimate their claim to the caliphate. Several historians intentionally diminished the importance or caliber of the Fatimid rulers in Egypt, assigning them titles that were irrelevant to their status such as: the emirs of Egypt (Umarā’ Miṣr); the rulers of Egypt (Aṣḥāb Miṣr); the caliphs of Egypt (al-Khulafā’ al-Miṣriyyūn). Others used the title of al-Khulafā’ al-‘Ubaydiyyūn instead of al-Fāṭimiyyūn.

We find even more negative images being used by historians and Sunni ‘ulama who were under the influence of the Abbasid propaganda or that of the rulers in Syria and Egypt after the abolition of the Fatimid regime. For example, the Syrian historian of the Ayyubids Ibn Wašīl al-Ḥamawī, in his essay Mufrarīg al-Kurūb fī Aḥbār Banī Ayyūb (a work dedicated to the history of the Ayyubids and their qualities), emphasizes the negative image of the Fatimids. He denies their alleged ancestry to ‘Alī and Fāṭima and even ascribes them Jewish origins. As previously mentioned, there were historians who even referred to the Fatimids as heretics, and made use of such titles as al-Malāḥida, al-Magūs, Ḥīzb al-Ṣayāfīn, al-Bāṭinatiyya, al-Rāfiḍa and so on. These historians accused the Isma‘ili da’wa of being fallacious and untruthful, of calling to heresy and of giving birth to superstitions (da’wat al-ilhād, da’wat al-mubātil, al-kufr wal-bid’a).

In a propagandist act, following the abolition of the Fatimid caliphate in 567/1171, Sultan Nūr al-Dīn ibn Zangī sent his judge, Šīhāb al-Dīn ibn Abī ‘Aṣrūn to the court of the Abbasid caliph in Bağdad with messages from the sultan, to spread the news of the Fatimid downfall throughout Iraq. The Abbasid caliph showed his satisfaction and appreciation by sending presents, grants and blessings to the rulers of Syria and Egypt, Nūr al-Dīn Zangī and Šalāḥ al-Dīn al-Ayyūbī. He also sent black pennants and other Abbasid symbols to be distributed among the ‘ulama and mosque preachers in Syria and Egypt, as an indication of the enforcement of the Abbasid rule and of the Fatimid defeat.
Summary

In the same manner as the Isma‘ili da’wa fulfilled a central role in the rising of the Fatimids to political power and their proliferation during the first Fatimid period, so were the Fatimid politics the main reason behind their downfall. Contradictions with the basic principles of the Isma‘ili doctrine regarding the inheritance of the Imamate and the differences in educational background and opinions among the missionaries have given birth to bitter schisms within the Fatimid dynasty, schisms which were also reflected in the Isma‘ili da’wa and doctrine. These have rendered the Fatimid Isma‘ili regime vulnerable to enemies from within and without. And since the Fatimid authority in Egypt has remained the weakest and most moderate stream of Ismā‘iliyya, particularly during the second Fatimid period, it has lost many of its political powers together with its religious and doctrinarian characteristics.

Notes

3 The appointment sijill was issued on Şafar 389/February 999; Abū al-‘Abbas Ahmad al-Qalqashandī, Šubḥ al-A‘ṣā fi Şinā‘at al-Inšā‘, (10), (Muḥammad Qandīl al-Baqī‘i ed.), (Cairo, 1972), 384-388.
prominent Isma‘ili doctrinarians of the Fatimid dynasty. He died in Egypt in 363/973 after arriving there with the Caliph al-Mu’izz li-Dîn Allâh. The last of the judges from among the Banû al-Nu’mâns was al-Qâsim bin al-Nu’mân. He was dismissed in 441/1054 and replaced by Abû Muhammad al-Yâzûrî, who also served as vizier under Caliph al-Mu’tasim. See also, Šams al-Dîn ibn Ḥālikân, Wafâyât al-A’yan, (5), (Ihsân ‘Abbâs ed.), (Beirut, 1968), p. 415.

7 The Abbâsids too had a similar official in the service of their religious propaganda (da’wa). His title was known in the Shi’a as Ḥuǧǧa or Ḥâǧîb. During the Fatimid period this function was known as Dâ’î al-Du’ât, see: Al-Maqrîzî, Ḥiftat, (2), p. 226.


10 See, H. Halm, p. 41.

11 Al-Azhâr was established in Cairo as a mosque and educational institution for the Fatimids. On the educational procedures in al-Azhâr see, al-Maqrîzî, Ḥiftat, (2), p. 226; ibid, (4), pp. 49-55, 192. See also, Muhammad ‘Abdallâh ‘Anân, Târîḫ al-Ċâmi’ al-Azhâr, (Cairo, 1942).


14 On the lessons (Maḡâlîs al-Da’wa) at the Fatimid palace see, Ḥiftat, (2), pp. 222; 324-326; ibid, (4), p. 158.


16 ‘Abd al-Mun‘îm Mâǧîd, Târîḫ al-Ḥâdîra al-‘Islâmîyya flî al-‘Uṣûr al-Wasâq, (Cairo, 1985), p. 164. Although this number is uncertain, it indicates the vast prevalence of this type of institution during the Fatimid period.


20 On the educational and da’wa functions of the library of Sayf al-Dawla al-Hamdânî see, Yûṣuf al-‘Ish, pp. 159-160.


22 Muḥammad bin Ṭahm ibn Ğubayr, Riḥlat ibn Ğubayr, (Beirut, 1984), p. 252. Nâṣîr Ḥusraw, too, claimed before him in his travel accounts in the area in 1047-1050, that the Shi’a was majority in some of the Syrian cities. See, N. Ḥusraw, Safar-Nâmah, (Yaḥyâ al-Ḥâṣîb ed.), (Cairo, 1970), pp. 48, 50, 53.

23 See the biography of vizier al-Yâzûrî, Ibn al-Ṣayrafi, pp. 42-47; Taqiq al-Dîn al-Maqrîzî, Al-Muṣaffâ al-Kabîr, (3), (Muḥammad al-Ya’lîwî ed.), (Beirut, 1991), pp. 366-408; Al-Maqrîzî, Itti’âz..., (2), pp. 236-247; Muḥammad bin ‘Ali ibn Muṣāyar, Ahbâr Miṣr, (Ayman Fu’ad Sayyid ed.), (Cairo, 1981), pp. 16-17; Hatîm Maḥâmîlî, pp. 43-48, and see pp. 212-214 the excerpt from the manuscript by Ibn al-Gawzi, Mirât al-Zamân, Paris manuscript, No. 1506, ff. 29-30, Arabe. Biographies of administration functionaries in the Fatimid palace show that many among them originated in eastern lands and thus did not adhere initially to the Ismâ‘îlîyya. This is an indication of the extent of tolerance shown by the
Fatimids towards ‘ulama, scholars and functionaries who belonged to different religious streams. See for example the biographies of numerous Fatimid viziers included in Ibn al-Šayra‘ī’s work, Al-Iṣâra ilā man Nāl al-Wazāra. On the role played by the Jewish family Banū Tustur in the Fatimid service in Egypt see, Moshe Gil, Haṭustarim: Hamishpaḥa Ve-hakat, (Tel Aviv, 1981), (in Hebrew).

22 See the whole poem: Muṣṭafa Ğālib, pp.195-198
33 Ibn Muyassar, p. 63.
34 Ibn al-Āḍīr, (11), p. 322.
37 See, Ibn al-Āḍīr, (8), pp. 70, 72, 83. He refers to Caliph al-Muṣṭaṣhīr by the title Šāhīb Misr (the Owner of Egypt / the Ruler of Egypt). Ibn Muyassar, 13, 63, refers to the Fatimid caliphs with the title al-Khulafāʾ al-Miṣrīyyun (the Caliphs of Egypt). Ibn Kaṯīr names them Aṣḥāb Misr, Aṣḥāb Misr wa-l Šīm (the Rulers of Egypt and Syria) and occasionally Mulāk Misr (the Kings of Egypt). See Ibn Kaṯīr, (11), pp. 314, 319, 321; ibid, (12), pp. 70, 286;
39 Ibn al-Furāṭ, (4), pp. 154, 155, 176-177. When describing the protocol issued by the Abbasid caliph and the ‘ulama in Bāṣṭad to denounce the Fatimids and the Ismā‘īliyya, Ibn al-Āḍīr refers to the Fatimids by such titles as Amgušīds and Jews (ал-Dirāsāt min al-Maḡūṣ wa-Qaḏlāhiyya min al-Yahūd...). Ibn al-Āḍīr, (8), p. 64; See also, Ibn Kaṯīr, (12), pp. 70, 289-290.