Sectarian References of Political Position of Nizārī Ismāʿīlīs in 11th and 12th centuries

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Reinterpretation of Quran and hadith, both of which had been mainly seen two basic sources of Islam, was a critical issue of the late 8th century when the last *tabiins*[1] were died. *Esbab-ı nüzul*[2] which only could place each verse of Quran in the context of early 6th century of Mecca and Medina gave way to diversified interpretations of Quran in new conquered lands, especially in Zoroastrian culture of Iran and in Hellenistic culture of Near East. However, these varied theological understandings on the basic sources of Islam to disclose its "real interpretation" were related to politics more than theology. Before *cahilliyye, Banu Hashim* and *Banu Umayya* were two dominant families in Mecca, which had always conflicted with each other to control governance of the city and the struggle rose again when Prophet was died in 632. The critical turning points were the murder of third caliphate Uthman, being family member of *Banu Umayya* and be accused of usurping the divine right to rule of Ali given by Prophet Muhammed,[3] and rising of Muaviye who also member of *Umayya* clan and claimed sovereignty against the caliphate of Ali, being *Hashimi*. After the murder of Hussein, son of Ali, by Yazid in 680, most of the opponents against Umayyads gathered around uninstitutionalized Shia identity.[4] However, it had more adopted in newly conquered areas, like Iran, rather than being localized under the theme "usurpation" of divine right to rule of *ahlal Beyt* in specific area, which also means most of pre-Islamic elements in these regions faced theological syncretism in a political resistance form against Umayyads and Abbasids.[5] Notion of usurpation relating to victimized Shia identity revealed probably the same reaction under the theme Arab invasion and Turkish rule in Iran[6] and a required

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[1] The term is used for those who saw the companions of prophet Muhammed, named *sahabe*.
[2] Which means "*the reasons of reveletion*" in the Islamic studies
[3] Farhad Daftary, *The Isma'ilis Their History and Doctrines* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 39.
[4] Mustafa Öztürk, *Kuran ve Aşırı Yorum Tefsirde Batınilik ve Batıni Te'vil Geleneği* (Ankara: Ankara Okulu Yayınları, 2016), 72.
[5] Farhad Daftary, *The Isma'ilis Their History and Doctrines*, 56,57.
[6] Farhad Daftary, *Ismailis in Medieval Muslim Societies* (London: New York, I.B.Tauris Publishers, 2005), 125,126.

religious legitimation for opponents were provided with esoteric exegesis of Quran and hadith, namely *batıni tev'il*, which had also included serious neo-Plotanic influence.[7]

Ismailism was one of the first sect of Shia, which systemized this *batıni* interpretation[8] of basic sources of Islam for political purposes,[9] and had an influence on the people from Samarkand to Northern Africa through its *dais*.[10] When Fatimids became independent state in 909 under *Ubeydullâh el-Mehdi* and in a short time took Egypt, Syria and Hijaz, Ismailism institutionalized official Shia identity by creating *Al-Ahzar madrasa* in Cairo, religious institution, and constructing a theology that included *imamet* theory of Sultans.[11] After the death of Fatimids caliphate *el-Mûstensir-billah* (1094), two successors, *Nizar* and *Ebu'l Kasım Ahmed* struggled for the throne and *Nizar* executed after his defeat.[12] *Nizari İsmaili* movement that was organized as an opponent group doctrinizing that their *imam*'s right to rule was usurped by *Ebu'l Kasım Ahmed* constructed a state like organization in Iran, Syria and Iraq and advanced their *batıni* exegesis for religious legitimation of their political actions over the region in 11th and 12th centuries.[13]

Nizari İsmailism began to systemize its institution in Iran, geostrategic location of which was most important because of its near position to Abbasids caliphate in Iraq and its roots through Central Asia and India, by *Abd al-Malik bin Attash* in nearly 1067's.[14] However, there were more reasons of why it succeeded to spread over Iran, relating to becoming visible Shia identity in Iranian society that had displeasure against Arab and Turkish invasions. When *Hasan Sabbah* took the title *hujja* in the community after *Abd al-*

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[7] Farhad Daftary and Gurdofarid Miskinzoda, *The Study of Shiʿi Islam History, Theology and Law* (London: I.B. Tauris Publishers, 2014), 135, 136, 137.

[8] Öztürk, 149.

[9] Farhad Daftary, *The Isma'ilis Their History and Doctrines*, 35, 36.

[10] Öztürk, 70, 74.

[11] Öztürk, 74, 75.

[12] Öz, Mustafa. "Nizariyye" In *Türkiye Diyanet Vakfı İslam Ansiklopedisi*, 33 vols, İstanbul: Türkiye Diyanet Vakfı Yayın Matbaacılık ve Ticaret İşletmesi, 2013. 200, 201. It is available online at http://www.islamansiklopedisi.info/dia/pdf/c33/c330141.pdf

[13] Ibid., 200, 201

[14] Farhad Daftary, *Ismailis in Medieval Muslim Societies*, 126.

Malik bin Attash's return to Egypt, he organized and advanced it in stricter political manner and succeeded a serious uprising in Iran against Sunni *Seljuks* in 1080's[15], which showed that Ismaili *dawa* was not a secret belief in Iranian society[16] but it's a sort of national sentiment that could help it to find openly supporters in most of the cities in Iran.[17] Adding that they were the first major sectarian group in Islam, using Persian as religious language, we can clearly relate their hostile notion on "*aliens*", mostly Arabs and Turks, with this Iranian identity.[18] Looking at critical figures in *Nizari İsmaili dawa*, being mostly Iranians, and *Hasan Sabbah*'s origin, borned in Qum and educated in Rey that was one of the center of Ismaili school in 11th century,[19] sectarian roots depending on national sentiment can disclose organized hostility against Sunni-Seljuk authority in Iran. Political actions of *dais*, categorizing their assassination lists, focused on Sunni governors in Iran and Iraq like *imams*, *kadıs*, *alims*, *amirs*, *sultans* and *viziers*.[20] We have more than 50 significant names between 11th and 12th centuries, who assassinated by *Nizari İsmailis*, included Sultan *Berkyaruk* and *Davud bin Sultan Mahmud* and Vizier *Nizam-ul Mulk*[21] that condemned Nizari Ismailism in his *Siyasetname*.[22]

Doctrine of the movement, named *ta'lim* that had been further described by Hasan Sabbah,[23] based on "*absolute authority to interpret law and inscriptions by imams rather than icma*".[24] So, Imams being in *ahlal Bayt* were "*Quran-ı Natıq*"[25], who only could reveal esoteric meaning of Quran in distinction between *tenzil* that is understandable interpretation

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[15] Farhad Daftary, *Ismailis in Medieval Muslim Societies*, 129.
[16] Ibid., 132
[17] Ibid., 131, 132
[18] Ibid., 131 "*Turks are jinns, not humans, they were not sons of Adam*"
[19] Ibid., 131
[20] Ayşe Atıcı, "*Büyük Selçuklu İmparatorluğunda Batıni Hareketi, Hasan Sabbah ile İlk Halefleri ve İran Nizari İsmailileri*" (Master's thesis, Ankara University, 2005), 121.
[21] Ibid., 242.
[22] Farhad Daftary, "*The 'Order of the Assassins:' J. von Hammer and the Orientalist Misrepresentations ofthe Nizari Ismailis*" (Iranian Studies, 2006: 71-81), 73.
[23] Farhad Daftary, *Ismailis in Medieval Muslim Societies*, 128.
[24] Jorunn J. Buckley, "*The Nizârî ismâ'îlîtes' Abolishment of the sharî'a during the "Great Resurrection" of 1164A.D./559 A.H.*" (Studia Islamica, 1984: 137-165), 139.
[25] Ismail K. Poonawala, "*Kuran'ın İsmaili Yorumu*" translated by Mustafa Öztürk (Ondokuz Mayıs Üniversitesi İlahiyat Fakültesi Dergisi, 2003: 365-388), 367.

of revelation received by the prophet and *te'vil* that is esoteric exegesis of Quran by the *imams*.[26] Before defying *batıni-zahiri* distinction in Nizari İsmailis, to find out how imams were, without any dispute, religious leaders, which further provided them with strong legitimation argument for their political purposes. They were sources of *te'vil*[27] and without them the sacred book would be meaningless.[28] Imams also infallible[29] and supreme teachers.

The base of doctrine is contrast between *zahiri*, being visible/ discoverable/ understandable/ interpretable/ inferable by everyone, and *batıni*, being invisible/ indiscoverable/ uninterpretable/ esoteric, exegesis of religious sources and also everything in the universe.[30] Most of the terms used in Quran such as the earth,[31] sky,[32] mountains[33] and trees[34] were described in the form of their *batıni* meanings, which was defined only by imams and they had no any significant base of Islamic studies in the contemporary interpretations works of 11th and 12th centuries but their political context that led them to construct changeable exegesis.[35] This *Batıni* interpretation also divided and reconstructed basic orders of the religion. For instance, *al wudu'*, ablution, is not only to clean from any dirties or to wash for the rituals but means also to purify with the truth received by imams[36] whereas *salah*, prayer, is to accept Ismaili *dawa*[37] and *savm*, fasting, is to keep secrets into community[38] and *hajj*, pilgrimage, is to face with Imam, which is because he is *batıni* symbol of *kaba*.[39] We see also abolishment of *sharia*, which disclose itself in two bases. The former is a doctrine in which contemporary imams and those who take title *hujja* were equalized

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[26] Poonawala, 372.
[27] Ferhad Daftary and Gurdofarid Miskinzoda, 152.
[28] Ibid., 154
[29] Buckley, 140.
[30] Öztürk, 214.
[31] Poonawala, 379.
[32] Ibid., 381.
[33] Ibid., 382.
[34] Ibid., 383.
[35] Öztürk, 329, 330, 331.
[36] Ibid., 404, 405.
[37] Ibid., 406, 407.
[38] Ibid., 409, 410.
[39] Ibid., 413, 415.

with prophet Muhammed[40] and the latter is to construct distinction between prophet related *sharia* and imams related *sharia*.[41] So, that led us to theory how Nizari İsmailis movement existed in 11th and 12th centuries as a political reaction, getting support of both those who had *ahlal Bayt* identity in the idea of "usurpation" of caliphate of Ali and his sons and those who had displeasure in newly conquered lands and trying to protect their identities against Arab and Turkish invasions. Hence, Nizari İsmailis grew up as a religion-politics movement using utilitarian perspective to interpret of the basic sources of Islam and construct a theological legitimation.

Farhad Daftary and Gurdofarid Miskinzoda in their books, named "*The Study of Shiʿi Islam History, Theology and Law*" focus on the structures of how Shia identity existed and legalized itself in the forms of theology and law. Three articles in the first chapter give historical information of early Shi'i existence and its sectarian developments, specifically under the Ismailism. Second chapter, "*The Quran and its Shi'i interpretation*", which we used mostly, try to connect historical developments of sectarian division of Shia with different interpretations of basic sources of Islam, which included how esoteric exegesis in the early Shi'i understanding advanced and related to political context of 9th, 10th, 11th and 12th centuries. First 3 chapters of the book is very important to cite theological means of early Shiism and its process towards modern times, which can also disclose how Shia, from its origin to its basic sources, related to political issues in the context of each Shiʿi interpretation, specifically Ismaili works.

Farhad Daftary's other book, named "*The Ismailis Their History and Doctrines*" is more around relations between Ismaili doctrine that historically changed with political issues, which gives us a linear process of theological understanding in three period, Fatimid, Alamut and post-Alamut period. The book explains specific terms belonging Ismaili terminology in

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[40] Buckley, 144.
[41] Ibid., 144.

their context and categorizes each sectarian division in Ismailism according to their historical

background. He allocated *Nizari Ismailism* in its early stage and its development over Iran

and Iraq, listing each political figure from early stage to Aga Khan, modern period of Nizari

Ismailism.

The article of Daftary, "*The "Order of the Assassins:" J. von Hammer and the*

Orientalist Misrepresentations of the Nizari Ismailis" on *Iranian Studies* is a review article

which focus on how orientalist view described Nizari Ismailis in a fantastic figure that

completely is misrepresented. Author criticize Joseph von Hammer's "Assassins" book,

claiming that rather than describing Nizari Ismailism in its historical context by using

primary sources of important Nizari figures, orientalist view, in the example of J. von

Hammer, uses most popular two sources which depended their thoughts on "hostility" against

Ismailism, medieval Sunni and Crusader sources. He tries to disproof sectarian and

anachronistic biases and beliefs of both Sunni and Crusader approach on Nizari Ismailism

and giving specific examples to historicize events in their context. This book is important to

see what is difference between fabricated description of orientalist view and contextualism of

Daftary.

Master's thesis of Ayşe Atıcı "*Büyük Selçuklu İmparatorluğunda Batıni Hareketi,*

Hasan Sabbah ile İlk Halefleri ve İran Nizari İsmailileri" gives us total look for Nizari

İsmaili's historical developments but more for its political influence in the period 11th and

12th century in Iran against Seljuks rule. Author depended most of the events in her thesis on

primary sources and criticizes many primary sources that included different narratives on the

same event rather than simply citing historical events by using specific sources. Although

focusing more on how Nizari Ismaili affected Seljuks governance in Iran and Iranian society

in the period of 10th, 11th and 12th centuries, she simply defines Nizari doctrine, lacking of

systemizing a correlation between religious doctrine and political issues in their context.

The book of Mustafa Öztürk, named "*Kuran ve Aşırı Yorum, Tefsirde Batinilik ve Batini Tefsir Geleneği*", is one of the extensive work on how Shia existed, and its interpretation of Quran changed in historical process. Author firstly explained basic doctrine of *batıni* view and focus on the term *batıni te'vil* and before specifically explanation of *batıni* exegesis by opening a title for each one he revealed hermeneutic influence on *batıni te'vil* tradition. Author, in the third and fourth chapter, tries to show doctrinal forms of *batıni te'vil* on political issues after giving specific historical information about political effects of Ismailism on Egypt, Iraq, Yemen, Iran and Syria. Looking at the bibliography of the book, having more than 450 works and included a lot of primary sources in the content of each chapter, Mustafa Öztürk contextualizes base of religious thought of Ismailism by relating most of the *batıni* doctrine to political issues in the 10th, 11th and 12th centuries.

Jorunn J. Buckley, in his article "*The Nizârî ismâ'îlîtes' Abolishment of the sharî'a during the "Great Resurrection" of 1164A.D./559 A.H.*" issued reinterpretation of sharia in the late 12th century when Nizari Ismailis constructed their authority over Iran and Iraq and how their political figures, *imams* and *hujjas*, reinstituted exegesis of law in the sense of getting supreme authority. Buckley, specifically, focus on replacement of sharia and on how new "*qıyama*" thesis of Nizari leaders played a role in the abolishment of sharia. He gives historical background of new sectarian approach in Nizari Ismailis, describing in its political context of leaders in Alamut after Hasan Sabbah. The article can be seen supplementary means to understand how Ismaili movement evolved its religious understanding from beginning that was related to more or less Islamic discourse to the 12th and 13th century when sectarian identity of the movement became more related to localized political issues.

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