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Persecutions against Ismaʿili Missionaries in Central Asia: The Case of Nāser Khosrow

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Abstract

Local governors in Central Asia persecuted Ismaʿili missionaries (*dāʿīs*) since the early years of Ismaʿili activity there. The rise of the Fatimid State, from the tenth century onwards, encouraged the activity of those missionaries who were receiving support from the Fatimids, leading to increased persecutions of Ismaʿilis in Iraq and the eastern provinces of the Abbasid Caliphate.

This study will deal with the activity of those missionaries and the difficulties and persecutions that they faced, with a focus on the case of the *dāʿī* Nāser Khosrow (1004–1088/394–481) in Central Asia. At the time, Nāser was considered as a model *dāʿī* representing the activity of Ismaʿili missionaries. Throughout his life, he suffered bitterly in his role as the main *dāʿī* of the Fatimids. Despite the hostile atmosphere and insecurity, Nāser Khosrow succeeded in becoming a highly significant philosopher and poet, but died in a sorrowful situation, isolated in the valley of Yomgān.

Keywords

Persecution – Ismaʿili missionaries – Nāser Khosrow – Fatimids – Abbasids – Central Asia

Introduction

By the tenth century, Central Asia was home to a diverse mix of Shiʿi sects, Sunni groups (mainly Hanafite and Shafīʿite), and various other ethnic and religious communities. During this period, sharp struggles erupted from the

conflicting views of rationalists and religious groups, against the backdrop of political conflicts between local dynasties. Amidst this atmosphere, Ismaʿili missionaries (sing. *dāʿi/hojja*) were increasingly active in the area following the rise of the Fatimids in Egypt and Syria. One of those missionaries was Hākim Nāser Khosrow (1004–1088/394–481), a renowned Ismaʿili Persian poet, philosopher, and traveler in the Islamic East (Central Asia), who served the courts of the ruling class, but who suffered different forms of persecution until his exile to Yomgān in the Pamir Mountains. Nāser is considered one of the most important and talented Ismaʿili figures, particularly in light of his activity in the fields of religion, poetry, literature and philosophy (Hunsburger 2000).

This study follows the persecution of Ismaʿili missionaries in Central Asia, focusing on the case of Nāser Khosrow. Although several studies have been published on this individual, most of them deal with his poetry and his religious and philosophical thought, as well as their cultural effect, locally and in general. By contrast, I trace Nāser's activities as an Ismaʿili *dāʿi* and his adaptation to the changing religious and political circumstances along the way, explaining the reasons for the persecution of Ismaʿili missionaries in general, and Nāser Khosrow in particular, as well as the extent to which these persecutions affected his status and thought.

Political and Religious Situation in Muslim East at the Time of Nāser Khosrow

A variety of different religious beliefs thrived in Khorasan. In addition to orthodox Muslims, mainly Hanafite and Shafiʿite, there were also different religious communities, including Mazdaeans (Zoroastrians), Jews, Shiʿis, Khārijis, Moʿtazelis, and others (Moqaddesi, 252–253). During this period, sharp struggles erupted in the Islamic East due to the conflicting views between rationalists and traditionalists (*ahl al-raʾy va-ahl al-hadith*) (Kraemer 1986, 60–86).

During the “Shiʿi Century” and even afterwards, religious conflicts arose not only between Sunni and Shiʿi groups in the eastern regions of Central Asia, but also among different Shiʿi sects.¹ Ismaʿili missionaries had already spread to the East even before the Fatimids occupied Egypt and Syria in 969/358. As a result, a schism appeared between Ismaʿili Qarmatis and the Fatimids, leading to political, military, and religious conflicts between the adherents of the two sects (de Goeje 1978; Daftary 1993, 123–139; *idem* 2005; *idem* 2007; Halm 1996,

¹ Several studies have already examined the early Ismaʿilis and Qarmatis; see . Berkey, 2003; Halm, 2004; Kraemer, 1986; Stern, 1960; Waterson, 2008.

378–381; *idem* 1997, 53; Madelung, 21–73; Walker 1993; *idem* 1996; *idem* 2002, 180–181; Stern, 56–90; Pabani, 2012).

One of the renowned early Isma'ili *dā'i* was Abu Hatim Razi (d. 934/322), who centered his *da'wa* in the city of Rayy and influenced the people in the surrounding areas of Daylam, Tabarestān and Isfahan in Iran. Many people became his adherents and converted to the Isma'ili doctrine. As a result, many high-ranking people were also affected by this *da'wa* and became Isma'ili supporters, including Mardāvij b. Ziyār, Asfār b. Shiruya. The *dā'i* Ahmad Nasafi (d. 942/331), too, influenced the Samanid Sunni ruler, Nasr b. Ahmad, to support the Isma'ilis in central Asia (Nezām al-Molk, 253–257; Ebn Nadim, 1997, 266; Kraemer, 1986, 87; Hasan, vol. 3, 206–207). Another Isma'ili *dā'i*, Abu Ya'qub Sejestāni (d. around 1000/390), and his adherents, acted on behalf of the Fatimids in Central and Eastern Iran (Daftary 1999, 29–43; Walker, 1996). Hence, a confrontation arose in those regions of Central Asia between the two competing Isma'ili sects; adherents of the Fatimids and of the Qarmatis (Halm 1997, 53; *idem* 2004, 163–170, 175–178; Hasan, vol. 3, 207–209).

At that time, the Ghaznavids, a Sunni dynasty centered in Ghazna, led by Sultan Mahmud Ghaznavi (r. 998–1030/389–421) fought against their political enemies, in an act of defiance against the Shi'i influence (Ebn al-Athir, vol. 7, 48, 81, 85–86, 160–161, 164, 184–185, 196–197, 204, 353). The Ghaznavids persecuted liberal and intellectual people of rational thoughts and ideas, particularly the Isma'ili sect that developed and expanded under the tolerant Samanid Sunni ruler, who had supported intellectual life in Bukhara and the other major cities of Transoxiana (Ebn Kathir, vol. 12, 30–34; Kraemer 1986, 11–72; Tha'alebi, vol. 4, 115; Nezām al-Molk, 247–272; Hasan, vol. 3, 90–103).

Sultan Mas'ud Ghaznavi, the last leader of the dynasty, was defeated in 1040/432 by the Saljuq sultan Toghril-Beg (d. 1063/455), who brought an end to the Ghaznavid rule and led the expansion of the Saljuqs (Beyhaqi 1956; Ebn Kathir, vol. 12, 53–54, 73–75; Hasan, vol. 3, 105–109). During their reign in Central Asia, the new Saljuq dynasty was intolerant towards Isma'ilis and other Shi'i sects described as esoteric (*bāṭiniyya*). Toghril-Beg and his descendants promoted a Sunni revival and the restoration of the Sunni domain in other areas they seized in Iraq and Syria after occupying Baghdad in 1055/447 (Makdisi, 155–168; Ephrat, 139–157; Berkey, 189–202; Mahamid 2010, 69–81). The Saljuq vizier Nezām al-Molk (d. 1092/485), for example, did not hide his enmity towards Isma'ilis and actively revived Sunni traditions during his term in office (Nezām al-Molk, 195–216). As a result of Nezām al-Molk's policy towards heretics and Shi'is, he was assassinated in 1092/485 by an Isma'ili activist in revenge for his anti-Isma'ili policies (Bosworth 2012; Waterson, 79; Ebn al-Athir, vol. 8, 161–163; Ebn Kathir, vol. 12, 154–155).

These events and developments shaped Nāser Khosrow as he developed as an intellectual and gained life experience. In his youth, Nāser had experienced the miserable economic situation spread through Central Asia via disease and drought, in addition to wars between domestic ruling classes and religious conflicts among Sunni and Shi'i Muslims in the area. Living during this time of conflict, Nāser Khosrow served both dynasties, the Ghaznavids and the Saljuqs, as a clerk of financial accounts, where he observed their anti-Isma'ili policies (Nāser Khosrow 1970, 9, 11–12; Hunsburger 2000, 4–8).

Nāser Khosrow was born in Qabodiyon (present-day Tajikistan) in 1004 in the district of Balkh, receiving an education that led him to serve in high posts at the courts of rulers. But, as noted, those posts and careers did not satisfy his passions. Propelled by a sense of emptiness caused by his lack of goals, Nāser Khosrow sought out an acceptable truth that would lead him to his targets. At the same time, he faced greater persecutions and problems that complicated his life further and obligated him to move from one place to another until his death in 1088.

As a result of these political, religious, and economic circumstances, Nāser Khosrow could not endure misery and suffering, which influenced his attitude to religious and human thoughts.

Compared with the situation of the Muslim East, the Isma'ili Fatimids' domain spread from their center in Cairo across Northern Africa, Syria and the holy sites of the Hijaz. However, the Fatimids also sent missionaries and worked secretly in other areas of the Muslim world, even those not under their control and which were called "islands (*juzur*)" in Isma'ili propaganda (*da'va*). Egypt, thus, served as a source of inspiration, attraction, and education for many Isma'ili believers, missionaries, and rational intellectuals from the Muslim East and other parts of the Muslim world. It is also worth mentioning that the Isma'ili religious and educational institutions had flourished in Cairo, such as the al-Azhar Mosque, Dār al-'Elm, *majāles al-hekma/al-'elm* ("sessions of wisdom/knowledge"), and the Fatimid Library (Mahamid 2006a, 4; *idem* 2006b, 37–38, 41–49; Halm 2004, 170–175; Walker 2008, 1–39; Hasan, vol. 3, 211–212).

Despite the prosperity of the courts of the Sunni rulers, the Ghaznavids and the Saljuqs, Nāser Khosrow reached the conclusion that he could not continue to live there or to suffer the political and religious persecution in addition to the cruel behavior of the rulers with regards to sections of the population in the area. His poetry reveals that he was preoccupied with the political situation that prevailed in areas of Central Asia and the behaviour of the rulers, a thing that bolstered his feelings of political persecution and compelled him to seek a place of refuge, security and justice. Nāser Khosrow reflected upon

this situation and his feelings toward the rulers and religious men (*ʿolemā*) of the Muslim East, expressing dissatisfaction with their social, political, and religious conduct. Hunsberger and Schimmel posited that his poetry's structure makes this collection of poems one of the greatest in Persian literature in its combining of a sense of political and religious persecution with internal feelings (Hunsberger 2000; Nāser Khosrow 2001, 12–19). Nāser Khosrow included many themes within his poetry, reflecting his suffering in the course of his search for justice:

I was prepared to seek justice from the devil of the time.
 But all I found in the king's service was enslavement . . .
 I gained nothing at all except toil and suffering from
 the one to whom I had gone for the sake of healing.
 When my heart became disappointed with kings and princes,
 I turned to the people of the mantle, turban and cloak.
 I told myself that they would show me the path of religion . . .
 Therefore, I wasted some years of my life with them in a lot
 of empty prattle and useless disputations.
 But their wealth and piety was only corruption and hypocrisy,
 and I said: "O God, why have I become afflicted again?" . . .

HUNZA'I AND KASSAM, 1997, P. 60

Internal Torment and Chasing after Reality and Truth

Besides his dissatisfaction with the sociopolitical and religious situation prevailing in Central Asia, Nāser Khosrow, as a scholar of various philosophies, literature and religious sciences, experienced internal tensions that led him to seek a hidden truth. What characterizes Nāser Khosrow is his resilience in the face of the difficulties and failures he encountered. He encouraged others to stand strong and not to give in to a sense of despair despite difficulties and crisis, augmenting a feeling of power and resistance.

Nāser Khosrow's internal torment is expressed in his philosophical view, which explores the role of a human's soul and its responsibility to manage ideas of nature and to lead to salvation and a better future. Hunsberger, in her important study on Nāser Khosrow, describes his character as an "actual human being, who lived and developed over time, who faced the fears of a tortuous spiritual quest and whose passion for life was fuelled by the conviction that everything has a higher purpose" (Hunsberger 2000, 32).

This philosophy stemmed from a deep religious knowledge of the sciences of the Qur'ān and the traditions of Mohammad, other religions, and the fact that he acquired preeminent knowledge of different rational sciences (Nāser Khosrow 1970, 13–14). Nāser Khosrow's religious and philosophical talents led him to dispute the beliefs of other religious men and scholars. While seeking truth and answers to contemporary questions of belief and behavior, Nāser could not completely achieve his desire to discover the full facts and truth of life. Prior to traveling to Egypt, he suffered persecution for his suspiciousness towards people's habits and beliefs, which he had expressed in his different writings. After, Nāser was accused of disbelief and heresy, and as a result of a deep conflict within him, he decided to find the solution and truth for which he searched. It seems that he could not assimilate with the people amongst whom he lived and he preferred to be separate, far from them: "My heart is filled with the slander of the people; I am / therefore separated from them in speech and action" (Hunza'i and Kassam, 1997, p. 59).

Nāser Khosrow's solution was to escape from the persecutions and vicissitudes of Central Asia. His views pushed him to change his way of life in search of the hidden truth. At the age of forty, he decided to embark on a spiritual change. Disappointed with the state of ignorance among the local population, he traveled in search of better life values than those common to his native region. Nāser's travel to the holy places and Egypt took seven years (1045–1052/437–444), three of them spent in Fatimid Egypt (Nāser Khosrow 1970).

Historical sources indicate that in 1044/436 there were several Isma'ili missionaries (*do'at*) in Central Asia inspired and supported by the Fatimid Caliph in Egypt, Imam Mostanser (r. 1036–1094/427–487). Those missionaries had spread the Isma'ili *da'va* in Khorasan and, as a result, many communities accepted the Isma'ili doctrine. The Sunni Saljuq sultans and governors considered the political and religious strengthening of Isma'ilis in Central Asia as forces working on behalf of the Fatimids. The Saljuqs began repressing and persecuting these communities and their activists (Ebn al-Athir, vol. 8, 39–40; Maqrizi, vol. 2, 49–50). Therefore, it can be assumed that the arrival of several active Isma'ili Persians in Egypt, from Asia, during this period was a direct result of the suppression and persecution in the East as well as the attraction of Fatimid Egypt at that time as a safe haven and educational center. In addition to Nāser Khosrow, these activists included Hamid al-Din Kermāni, Mo'ayyad fi'l-Din Shirāzi, Hasan b. Sabbāh and others (Mahamid 2006a, 1–17; *idem* 2006b, 37–60; Daftary 1998, 64–66).

Nāser Khosrow probably knew of Isma'ili Fatimid rule in Egypt, its Islamic values, the Fatimids' tolerance towards other ethnic and religious groups under their rule, and their claim to being descendants of the Prophet Mohammad

(through ‘Ali and Fatema). Ivanow, for instance, questions whether he was an Isma‘ili before traveling to Fatimid Egypt. But his contact with the Fatimids left a strong impression upon him (Ivanow 1948). In his *Safarnāma*, Nāser Khosrow describes his seven years of travel from Khorasan to Mecca and Egypt and back again to Central Asia (Hunsberger 2000, 91–197). He relates a dream, reflecting his state of inner conflict, in which someone advised him that it is necessary to search for something that spreads reason and increases wisdom, and then Nāser was directed towards Mecca (the *qebla*), (Nāser Khosrow 1970, 34–35). This persecution, even if only in his dreams, may have led him to decide to embark on his pilgrimage to the Fatimid center in Cairo, where he spent around seven years, and during which he became convinced of the Isma‘ili faith, while receiving higher training and instruction in the Isma‘ili doctrine in Cairo.

More evidence about this period of change in Nāser’s life can be found in his poetry. Praise and positive statements about the Fatimids appear in his works, especially his poems. Farhad Daftary states in his essay that the Fatimid Caliphs were acknowledged as the rightful imams by the main body of the Isma‘iliyya, in and beyond the Fatimid domain, of them were the main missionaries, such as Nāser Khosrow and others (Daftary, 2007, 144–145).

A good example of Nāser’s search for the truth occurred during his travel through Jerusalem on his way to Egypt, where he commented on the local lore regarding the ability to hear the cries of sinners in hell in the Valley of Hinnom (*Vādi Jahannam*): “I went there but heard nothing” (Nāser Khosrow 1970, 56–57).

When Nāser Khosrow arrived at the Fatimid court in Egypt, he admitted in his poems that he attained the solution to the problem that had haunted and persecuted him during his life. As a result of his journey to the Fatimids, the descendants of Mohammad, and the help of the Fatimid Imam Mostanser, he managed to oust the demons that persecuted him. Consequently, Nāser felt himself rising in the sky with angels, glittering as the sun after darkness, which he describes in his poem “Journey to the Light”:

When it betrayed me and no escape was left to me,
 at last I went to the progeny of Mustafa for help.
 I found help against the devil’s persecution and cunning
 when I entered the sanctuary of the Imam of mankind.
 Shall I tell you what happened to me when I fled the devil?
 Suddenly I found myself in the company of angels.
 When the light of the Imam shone upon my soul, even though
 I was black as night, I became the shining sun.

HUNZA‘I AND KASSAM, 1997, PP. 60–61

In his *Safarnāma*, Nāser Khosrow contrasts the situation in greater Egypt with that of Muslim Egypt, praising the country, its customs, and the government administration under the rule of the Fatimid Imam Mostanser bi-Allāh, whether in realms of security, economics, agriculture, crafts, or trade. He admired the law and order of the Fatimid state, the organization of its army, the security, and the peace and calm that prevailed under their rule. Nāser Khosrow came to the conclusion that this regime was legitimate for the control and defense of Islam (Nāser Khosrow 1970, 76–110; Daftary 1998, 103; Hunsburger 2000, 91–197; Mahamid 2005, 355–366).

Nāser also expressed his joy and gratitude to the Ismaʿili *dāʿi* in Egypt, Moʿayyad fi-ʿl-Din Shirāzi, one of the renowned Persian missionaries who acted on behalf of the Fatimids, from whom Nāser learned the science of wisdom and obtained esoteric and exoteric knowledge (*al-zāher va-ʿl-bāten*). Some of the principles of Ismaʿili faith are detailed in his poem:

Now that you are happy to be among the best,
you should have pride over your fellow men,
since from the heart of the master Muʿayyad,
God has opened the door of wisdom to you.

HUNZAʿI AND KASSAM, 1997, P. 61

Despite the controversy over whether Nāser Khosrow belonged to the Ismaʿili sect before his travels to Egypt or not, it is evident that his stay with the Fatimids was a period of inner transition and a turning point in all aspects of his life, during which he began the search for his religious ideal. The Fatimid palace in Cairo was not only a center of political authority but also the seat of the chief *dāʿi*, known as the *majles al-dāʿi* or *majles al-daʿva*. Meetings and assemblies of the senior Ismaʿili *ʿolemā* were held in the palace, both for decision-making purposes and for sessions of Ismaʿili training and education (Mahamid 2006a, 1–17). Nāser was trained and educated in the Ismaʿili doctrine and *daʿva* centers there, such as the Dār al-ʿElm and the al-Azhar mosque, as well as in the sessions of *daʿva* (*majāles al-daʿva*, *al-majāles al-mostanseriyya*, and *al-majāles al-moʿayyadiyya*) in the Fatimid palace (Thiqat al-Imām 2006; Shirāzi, 1994). Nāser Khosrow was privileged to be in the court of the Fatimid caliph Mostanser and participated in his sessions, mentored under Moʿayyad fi-ʿl-Din Shirāzi (Nāser Khosrow 1970, 107–108). In addition, he visited Mecca on pilgrimage four times during this period.

Religious and Political Persecution in Central Asia

Nāser Khosrow returned to his homeland of Khorasan profoundly influenced by Isma'ili doctrine and its religious principles with their esoteric and exoteric characteristics. In addition, he had acquired significant knowledge of the philosophical sciences of the ancient Greeks. Nāser was appointed by Mostanser as the main missionary (*hojja*) in Khorasan (*sāheb jazirat al-sharq*), which is the highest class in the hierarchy of the Isma'ili preachers (Hunsberger 2000, 7).

Persecution of Nāser Khosrow and the Isma'ili sect in general did not cease with his return to Balkh. He began praising the Isma'ili Fatimids and sent preachers to the different regions of Central Asia. Nāser began his *da'va* in Balkh, from where he sent more minor preachers to various districts in the area. Hunza'i noted that Nāser enhanced and widened the circle of his activities through his powerful pen and his logical speech. He also sent books and other materials to remote areas in order to advertise the service of the Isma'ilis, in addition to maintaining the intellectual activities of his followers (Hunza'i 2003). In his poetry, Nāser Khosrow admitted that Yomgān served as a centre of his *da'va*: "Listen to these wise thoughts of the Hujjat, who resides in Yomgān like a king... Each year a book of *da'wat*, I send to the various parts of the world" (cited in Niyozov, 10).

The repressive policies of the Saljuqs strengthened Nāser Khosrow's efforts to reject them and deny their legitimacy to rule in Khorasan. It is possible that Nāser's hostility towards the Saljuqs and his propaganda against them weakened their power and grip in some areas of Central Asia. As a result, the Saljuqs initiated steps to persecute and oppress Nāser Khosrow and his followers.

As Nāser's teachings spread, he became a religious and political threat not only against the Saljuqs in the Muslim East, but against the Sunni Abbasid order in general. The Abbasids bolstered their counter-propaganda through Sunni *'olemā*, the local Sunni population, and through the Saljuqs and other local rulers in Central Asia (Daftary 1998, 81–106). Both the Abbasids and the Saljuqs saw in Nāser Khosrow a dangerous propagandist who served the aims of Fatimid rule and the Isma'ili *da'va* from Egypt. After bitter conflicts between Shi'i and Sunni groups in Iraq and in Central Asia, the Abbasid caliph al-Qā'em bi-Allāh (d. 1075/467) summoned a meeting of several Sunni *'olemā* and other high-ranking clergymen in Baghdad in 1052/444. There, they issued a proclamation strongly denying the legitimacy of Fatimid rule and negating the Fatimid claims to descent from 'Ali and Fatema. They also claimed that the

Fatimids were heretics and mocked them as fire-worshippers (*majus*). Copies of the protocols of the Baghdadi *'olemā* were made public. The Caliph al-Qā'em did not conceal his hostile position to the Isma'ili *dā'īs* and issued a warrant for their execution (Ebn Moyassar, 13; Ebn al-Athir, vol.8, 64; Ebn Kathir, vol. 12, 70; Hunsberger 2000, 7–8, 221–222).

Thereafter, Nāser Khosrow experienced real danger and constant persecution. After his house was robbed and vandalized, he fled from his *da'va* center in Balkh. As a precaution, he was forced to move between various retreats in Central Asia during his travels as he preached in favor of Isma'ilis. From 1061/453 to 1063/456, Nāser moved from one refuge to another, wandering among Balkh, Māzandarān, Nishāpur, and Badakhshān, until his last refuge in Yomgān in the Pamir Mountains (northern Afghanistan today) (Hunsberger 2000, 327). Yomgān served as his last refuge where Nāser found safety from persecution, and he remained there until his death in 1088/481. Ivanow indicates that the political situation of the period prevented Nāser Khosrow from leaving the narrow valley of Yomgān, and so it became a site of self-imprisonment and refuge until his death (Ivanow 1948; Schadl, 70).

Nāser Khosrow's writing ability, speech, and *da'va* sparked a number of religious conflicts and arguments with hostile orthodox *'olemā*. However, his theological and philosophical ability managed to attract many followers to the Isma'ili doctrine (Hunsberger 2000, 322–325). Thus, Nāser expanded the circle of Isma'ili activity and organized its *da'va* in various regions of Central Asia. It is noticeable that Nāser's views, attitudes, and religious ideas following his return from Egypt differ from those before his journeys. As noted above, many of his poems express his relationship with the Fatimid Imam. Meanwhile, Nāser seems to have behaved actively, and with confidence, as an Isma'ili missionary without any fear of opponents. In turn, he began writing essays of philosophy and tracts of poetry and other religious products. Through these he expressed his beliefs and intellectual thoughts, and thus continued to attract more and more supporters in the area, and became known as a renowned Persian philosopher (Hunsberger 2000, 8–9, 19; Schadl, 74).

Nāser's thoughts were based upon philosophical principles and an interpretation of the esoteric and exoteric, which made it difficult for common people to understand his message. As a result, some of his followers thought they had license to neglect the principles of religion. *'Olemā* and clerics of all kinds, relatives and friends—even from Nāser's family—saw his sermons and contradictory opinions as damaging to Islam. This led to intensified persecution and strong hostility, both from the Sunni rulers and *'olemā* and from the local Sunni population. Nāser, who relied on the rational and philosophical sciences, found it difficult to accept the views of Sunni *'olemā* (Hunsberger

2000, 226–227). According to Nāser Khosrow, he tended to get facts and truth by using his intellect not, as it was conducted in the Shari‘a among other Muslims, as a matter of blind faith and imitation which did not require the use of intellectual thought, such as the example mentioned above about the faith conducted in Quds (Jerusalem) around the Valley of Hinnom (*Vādi Jahannam*) (Nāser Khosrow 1970, 56–57). Several studies have dealt with the interest that Nāser devoted in his *œuvre* in the search for truth and reasoning using the intellect in order to reach the desired knowledge (Schadl, 74; Hunsberger 2000, 231–232).

As Nāser’s Isma‘ili *da‘va* became stronger and widespread, his opponents ramped up their attacks, accusing him of heresy and condemning him for being an infidel (*kāfer*), an atheist (*molhed*), a Qarmatian, a Mo‘tazeli, and a *rāfedi*. Once he established himself safely in Yomgān, a remote area of Badakhshān, Nāser Khosrow preached vigorously to his followers and to the local population. He owed some of his success in reviving and communicating with the local communities to the ruler of Badakhshān, the amir Shams al-Din Abu al-Ma‘āli ‘Ali b. Asadi, who became one of his followers. Consequently, Nāser found there a safe place from which he could spread the Isma‘ili *da‘va* under the auspices of the amir (Daftary 1998, 103–104; Hunsberger 2000, 8, 227; Schadl, 70). Schadl states that persecution in Badakhshān was commonplace, forcing the Isma‘ilis who took refuge in this mountainous area to practice dissimulation (*taqiyya*) by adopting the outward appearance of Sunnism or even Sufism. Gradually, local nobles and chiefs, such as the aforementioned Abu al-Ma‘āli ‘Ali, were won over, along with their subjects. Despite the initial setback, the spread of Isma‘ilism in Badakhshān flourished and mainly among intellectual urban circles (Schadl, 72–73).

However, while Nāser found security and refuge with this amir in the valley of Yomgān, he was still in a state of deep sorrow and depression. Hunsberger has cited the verses composed by the mystic Persian poet Farid al-Din ‘Attār, (d. c. 1193/589) about a hundred years after Nāser Khosrow, describing “The Tale of Nāser Khosrow and his Seclusion” in which he describes Nāser’s loneliness and exile in Yomgān:

The cry of Nasir Khusraw when he dwelt in Yumgan
 Arched even past heaven’s nine-storied vault.
 A little corner he took to hide himself away,
 Hearing the Prophet himself had named the very spot. . . .
 Like a Ruby in Badakhshan he hid himself away.
 ‘Mid the hidden hearts of mountain, he chose the cover of Yumgan . . .

HUNSBERGER 2000, 20–21

Despite his life of loneliness and exile in mountainous Badakhshān, Nāser Khosrow continued his preaching and his writing of religious and philosophical compositions, essays, and poetry. His exile in the narrow valley of Yomgān did not prevent his fame from spreading. As a result, the Ismaʿīlī creed was not only common in Badakhshān, but also in adjacent areas in Central Asia. In addition to Nāser's educational and cultural heritage, he received great respect as a holy man and ascetic. Locals attributed supernatural characteristics and miracles to him and he received many names that signified his high status.² Nāser Khosrow was not only famous due to his literary writing skills, but also for his talents as a man of religion, based on various rational sciences, who created a sense of unity and harmony amongst communities in Central Asia and beyond (Hunsberger 2000, 223). Consequently, Nāser's grave in Yomgān became a shrine of pilgrimage (*mazār*) which is still frequented today (Schadl, 75–76; Shakarmamadov 2003; Gross, 164–192).

Through the writing of Nāser Khosrow, especially his poems, one sees that his views fueled internal philosophical torment. His poems show the degree of sadness resulting from a life in exile far from his homeland. Nāser stayed faithful to Khorasan, expressing often his longing:

Pass by, sweet breeze of Khurasan,
To one imprisoned deep in the valley of Yumgan,
Who sits huddled in comfortless tight straits,
Robbed of all wealth, all goods, all hope.

HUNSBERGER 2000, 9, 228; SCHADL, 70

Elsewhere, Nāser Khosrow expressed his deep longing for his homeland:

Who asks, from this miserable, sad exile,
“O Khurasan, how goes it without me?”
Are you still as I saw you in springtime?
Send news, if still you are the same.

HUNSBERGER 2000, 234

2 These titles included *hākem* (“ruler”), *hazrat seyyed, pīr* (“elder”), *amīr, shāh seyyed, shāh-e bozorgvār* (“great king”), *mowlā* (“guardian”), *shīd-e Yomgān* (“sun of Yomgān”), *ʿoqāb-e Yomgān* (“eagle of Yomgān”), *hojjat* (“proof”), *soltān al-ʿārefīn* (“the master of the mystics”), and *borhān al-mohaqqeqīn* (“the investigator of proofs”) (Schadl, 74–77); In her study *Nasir Khusraw, the Ruby of Badakhshan: A Portrait of the Persian Poet, Traveller and Philosopher*, Alice Hunsberger has mentioned and discussed several titles and characteristics of Nāser Khosrow. see: (Hunsberger, 2000).



FIGURE 1

Nasir Khusraw's Shrine (mazar) in Yumgan Valley in Badakhshan province.

SOURCE: [HTTP://ARCHNET.ORG/SITES/8495](http://archnet.org/sites/8495).



FIGURE 2 *The front façade of Nasir Khusraw's shrine (mazar) in Yumgan Valley in Badakhshan.*

SOURCE: SCHADL, 82.

On the other hand, Nāser Khosrow tried to release himself from his sorrow and exile in isolated Yomgān by expressing his deep belief that God protects and honors him:

Under God's protection I am here in Yumgan.
 Look closely, and consider me not a prisoner.
 No one says that silver or diamonds or rubies
 Are prisoners in the rocks or lowly.
 Even though Yumgan itself is lowly and worthless,
 Here I am greatly valued and honored.

SCHADL, 63; HUNSBERGER 2000, 245

Conclusion

In general, Isma'ili missionaries faced persecution in Central Asia for their political, religious and even intellectual thoughts. Nāser Khosrow's persecution and exile is noticeably expressed in all aspects of his life. In one of his poems, he mourns, "The scorpion of exile has stung my heart so, / that you would say heaven invented suffering just for me" (Hunsberger 2000, 228). This experience can likely be applied to the other Isma'ili missionaries in the area, but the case of Nāser Khosrow was unique and significant. Although he had obtained a high-ranking position as an Isma'ili *dā'i* and had gained the knowledge and wisdom that he sought, Nāser remained afflicted by feelings of anguish, loneliness, and hostility.

In his youth, Nāser Khosrow had experienced the miserable economic situation, diseases and wars between domestic ruling classes as well as the spread of religious conflicts in Central Asia. As a result, Nāser could not endure misery and suffering, so he reached the conclusion that he could not continue to live there or to suffer from the political and religious persecution. Prior to traveling to Egypt, he suffered persecution for his suspiciousness towards people's habits and beliefs. His feelings of political persecution compelled him to seek a place of refuge, security, and justice. So he traveled in search of better life values, which he found in the Fatimid court in Egypt.

Persecution of Nāser Khosrow and the Isma'ili sect in general did not cease with his return from Egypt to Central Asia. He began praising the Isma'ili Fatimids and sent preachers to different regions of area. He encouraged others to stand strong and to not give in to a sense of despair despite difficulties and crisis, augmenting a feeling of power and resistance. It is possible that Nāser's hostility towards the Saljuqs and his propaganda against them weakened their power in some areas of Central Asia. In addition, Nāser's philosophical principles and an interpretation of the esoteric and exoteric, made it difficult for common people to understand his thoughts. This led to intensified persecution. As a result, the Saljuqs persecuted Nāser Khosrow and his followers that let him move from one refuge to another until his last refuge in Yomgān in the Pamir Mountains, where he found safety from persecution and where he remained until his death in 1088/481.

Amid his seclusion and distress, Nāser Khosrow turned his energies inward and his late poems are characterized by despair, sadness, and bitterness. But, as at other stages of his life, he was able to open the doors of hope through painstaking research to uncover the hidden truth. Despite the security and refuge that Nāser found in the valley of Yomgān, he was in

a state of deep sorrow and depression. His exile in Yomgān did not prevent his fame from spreading. He is considered today to be one of the greatest philosophers of Islam in general and Ismaʿilism in particular, and his heritage in Central Asia continues to reverberate, affecting daily social practices, ethics, and culture.

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