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Introduction: progress in the study of the Ismāʿīlīs

A major Shīʿī Muslim community, the Ismāʿīlīs have had a long and eventful history dating back to the formative period of Islam, when different communities of interpretation were developing their doctrinal positions. The varying viewpoints of the then nascent Muslim community (*umma*) on certain central theological issues and the question of leadership after the Prophet Muḥammad were eventually elaborated in terms of what became known as the Sunnī and Shīʿī interpretations of the Islamic message. The Shīʿa themselves, upholding a particular conception of leadership and religious authority in the community, were further subdivided into a number of communities and smaller groups or sects. This was not only because they disagreed over who was to be their rightful spiritual leader or imam from amongst the Prophet's family, the *ahl al-bayt*, but also because divergent trends of thought and policy were involved.

By the time of the ʿAbbāsid revolution in 132/750, Imāmī Shīʿism, the common heritage of the major Shīʿī communities of the Ithnāʿashariyya (or Twelvers) and the Ismāʿīliyya, had acquired a special prominence under the leadership of Jaʿfar al-Ṣādiq, their ʿAlid imam. The Imāmī Shīʿīs, who like other Shīʿī groups upheld the rights of the *ahl al-bayt* to the leadership of the Muslims, propounded a particular conception of divinely instituted religious authority, also recognizing certain descendants of the Prophet's family from amongst the ʿAlids, the progeny of the Prophet's cousin and son-in-law ʿAlī b. Abī Ṭālib, as their imams possessing the required religious authority. The Ismāʿīlī Imāmī Shīʿīs, named after Ismāʿīl the son of Imam Jaʿfar al-Ṣādiq, acquired their independent existence in the middle of the 2nd/8th century and, in the course of their history, the Ismāʿīlīs themselves became further subdivided into a number of major branches and minor groups. Currently, the Ismāʿīlīs are made up of the Nizārī and Ṭayyibī Mustaʿlian branches, and they are scattered as religious minorities in over twenty-five countries in Asia, the Middle East, Africa, Europe and North America. Numbering several millions, they represent a diversity of ethnic groups and literary traditions, and speak a variety of languages, including Arabic and Persian as well as a number of Indic and European languages.

Phases in Ismāʿīlī history

The pre-Fāṭimid period of Ismāʿīlī history in general and the opening phase of Ismāʿīlism in particular remain rather obscure in Ismāʿīlī historiography, not least because of the dearth of reliable information. It is a known fact that on the death of Imam al-Ṣādiq in 148/765 his Imāmī Shīʿī following split into several groups, including two groups identifiable as the earliest Ismāʿīlīs. By the middle of the 3rd/9th century, the Ismāʿīlīs had organized a revolutionary movement against the ʿAbbāsids. In 286/899, the unified Ismāʿīlī movement, designated by the Ismāʿīlīs themselves as *al-daʿwa al-hādiya*, the rightly guiding mission or simply as the *daʿwa*, was rent by its first major schism over the question of the leadership or imamate in the community. The Ismāʿīlīs were now divided into two rival factions, the loyal Ismāʿīlīs and the dissident Qarmaṭīs. The loyal Ismāʿīlīs upheld continuity in the Ismāʿīlī imamate and recognized the founder of the Fāṭimid dynasty and his successors as their imams. The Qarmaṭīs, centred in Baḥrayn, acknowledged a line of seven imams that excluded the Fāṭimid caliphs. By the final decades of the 3rd/9th century, Ismāʿīlī *dāʿī*s or religio-political missionaries were successfully active over an area stretching from North Africa to Central Asia.

The early success of the Ismāʿīlī *daʿwa* culminated in 297/909 in the foundation of an Ismāʿīlī *dawla* or state, the Fāṭimid caliphate. The Ismāʿīlīs had now entered a new phase of their history. The revolutionary activities of the early Ismāʿīlīs had resulted in the establishment of a state in which the Ismāʿīlī imam was installed as caliph, representing a serious Shīʿī challenge to the authority of the ʿAbbāsid caliph, the spokesman of Sunnī Islam. The Ismāʿīlīs, who as Shīʿī Muslims had elaborated their own interpretation of the Islamic message, now effectively offered an alternative to Sunnī Islam that was defined as the true interpretation of Islam by the Sunnī religious scholars supported by the ʿAbbāsid establishment. The Fāṭimid period was in a sense the 'golden age' of Ismāʿīlism, when the Ismāʿīlī imam ruled over a vast empire and Ismāʿīlī thought and literature attained their apogee. It was during the Fāṭimid period that the Ismāʿīlī *dāʿī*s, who were at the same time the scholars and authors of their community, produced what were to become the classic texts of Ismāʿīlī literature dealing with a multitude of exoteric and esoteric subjects. Ismāʿīlī law, which had not existed during the pre-Fāṭimid secret phase of Ismāʿīlism, was also codified during the early Fāṭimid period. It was indeed during the Fāṭimid period that Ismāʿīlīs made their important contributions to Islamic theology and philosophy in general and to Shīʿī thought in particular. Modern recovery of their literature clearly attests to the richness and diversity of the literary and intellectual traditions of the Ismāʿīlīs of the Fāṭimid times.

A new phase in Ismāʿīlī history was initiated on the death of the Fāṭimid caliph-imam al-Mustanṣir in 487/1094 and the ensuing Mustaʿlī–Nizārī schism

in Ismāʿīlism. The succession to al-Mustanṣir was disputed between Nizār, his eldest son and original heir-designate, and the latter's much younger brother Aḥmad who was actually installed as Fāṭimid caliph with the title of al-Mustaʿlī bi'llāh. Subsequently, Nizār rose in revolt to assert his claims, but he was eventually defeated and killed in 488/1095. As a result of these events the unified Ismāʿīlī community and *daʿwa* of the latter decades of al-Mustanṣir's reign was permanently split into two rival branches, the Mustaʿliyya and the Nizāriyya.

The Mustaʿlian Ismāʿīlīs themselves split into Ḥāfiẓī and Ṭayyibī factions soon after the death of al-Mustaʿlī's son and successor on the Fāṭimid throne, al-Āmir, in 524/1130. The Ḥāfiẓī Mustaʿlians, who acknowledged the later Fāṭimids as their imams, disappeared soon after the collapse of the Fāṭimid dynasty in 567/1171. The Ṭayyibī Mustaʿlians recognized al-Āmir's infant son, al-Ṭayyib, as their imam after al-Āmir, and then traced the imamate in al-Ṭayyib's progeny. However, all Ṭayyibī imams after al-Āmir have remained in concealment, and in their absence the affairs of the Ṭayyibī community and *daʿwa* have been handled by lines of *dāʿī*s. Ṭayyibī Ismāʿīlism found its permanent stronghold in Yaman, where it received the initial support of the Ṣulayḥid dynasty. By the end of the 10th/16th century, the Ṭayyibīs had divided into the Dāʾūdī and Sulaymānī branches over the issue of the rightful succession to the position of the *dāʿī*. By that time the Ṭayyibīs of South Asia, known locally as Bohras and belonging mainly to the Dāʾūdī branch, had come to outnumber their Sulaymānī co-religionists centred in Yaman. The Ṭayyibīs in general maintained the intellectual and literary traditions of the Ismāʿīlīs of the Fāṭimid period, as well as preserving a good portion of that period's Ismāʿīlī Arabic literature. The Ṭayyibīs, representing the only extant Mustaʿlian community, nowadays account for a minority of the Ismāʿīlīs. The history of Ṭayyibī Ismāʿīlism, in both Yaman and India, revolves mainly around the activities of different *dāʿī*s, supplemented by polemical accounts of various disputes and minor schisms in the Dāʾūdī Bohra community.

The Nizārī Ismāʿīlīs, concentrated originally in Persia and Syria, have had a completely different historical evolution. The Nizārīs acquired political prominence within the Saljūq dominions, under the initial leadership of Ḥasan-i Ṣabbāḥ, who founded the independent Nizārī state and *daʿwa* in Persia. The Nizārī state, centred at the mountain fortress of Alamūt in northern Persia, lasted some 166 years until its destruction by the Mongols in 654/1256. After Ḥasan-i Ṣabbāḥ (d. 518/1124) and his next two successors, who ruled as *dāʿī*s and *ḥujja*s, the Nizārī imam's chief representatives, the imams themselves emerged at Alamūt to lead their state, community and *daʿwa*. Preoccupied with their revolutionary activities and living in hostile surroundings, the Nizārīs of the Alamūt period did not produce a substantial body of religious literature. They produced mainly military commanders and governors of fortress communities rather than outstanding religious scholars. Nevertheless, they did maintain a literary tradition,

and elaborated their teachings in response to the changed circumstances of the Alamūt period.

The Nizārī Ismāʿīlīs survived the Mongol destruction of their fortress communities and state, and this marked the initiation of a new phase in their history. The post-Alamūt period in Nizārī Ismāʿīlism covers more than seven centuries, from the fall of Alamūt in 654/1256 to the present time. The Nizārī communities, scattered from Syria to Persia, Central Asia and South Asia, now elaborated a diversity of religious and literary traditions in different languages. Many aspects of Ismāʿīlī activity in this period have not been sufficiently studied due to a scarcity of primary sources. More complex research difficulties arise from the widespread practice of *taqiyya* (precautionary dissimulation of one's true religious beliefs and identity) by the Nizārī groups of different regions during most of this period when they were obliged to safeguard themselves under a variety of disguises against rampant persecution.

The first two post-Alamūt centuries of Nizārī history remain particularly obscure. In the aftermath of the destruction of their state, the Nizārī imams went into hiding and lost their direct contact with their followers. The scattered Nizārī communities now developed independently under local leaderships. By the middle of the 9th/15th century, the Nizārī imams had emerged in Anjudān in central Persia, initiating what has been designated as the Anjudān revival in Nizārī *daʿwa* and literary activities. During the Anjudān period, lasting some two centuries, the imams reasserted their central authority over the various Nizārī communities. The Nizārī *daʿwa* now proved particularly successful in Badakhshan in Central Asia, and in the Indian subcontinent where large numbers of Hindus were converted, the Indian Nizārīs being called locally Khojas. The modern period in Nizārī history, representing the third sub-period in post-Alamūt Nizārī Ismāʿīlism, may be dated to the middle of the 13th/19th century when the residence of the Nizārī imams was transferred from Persia to India and subsequently to Europe. Benefiting from the modernizing policies and the elaborate network of institutions established by their last two imams, known internationally by their hereditary title of the Aga Khan, the Nizārī Ismāʿīlīs have emerged as an educated and progressive Muslim religious minority. The chronological categorization discussed in this section provides the general framework for the structure of this book.

Ismāʿīlī historiography

Ismāʿīlī historiography and the perceptions of the Ismāʿīlīs by others, as well as stages in modern Ismāʿīlī studies, have had their own fascinating evolution, of

which we shall present a brief survey in this chapter. Ismāʿīlī historiography in particular has had its own distinctive features, closely related to the very nature of the Ismāʿīlī movement. The Ismāʿīlīs were more often than not persecuted as 'heretics' or 'revolutionary activists', which necessitated the observance of the Shīʿī principle of *taqiyya* or precautionary dissimulation. The Ismāʿīlī authors, who were for the most part theologians, served as *dāʿī*s in hostile environments. Owing to their training as well as the necessity of observing secrecy in their activities, the Ismāʿīlī *dāʿī*-authors were not particularly keen on compiling any type of historical account. This is attested by the fact that only a few works of a historical nature have come to light in the modern recovery of Ismāʿīlī textual materials. These include al-Qāḍī al-Nuʿmān's *Iftitāḥ al-daʿwa* (*Commencement of the Mission*), completed in 346/957, which is the earliest known historical work in Ismāʿīlī literature covering the background to the establishment of the Fāṭimid caliphate. In the later medieval centuries, only one general Ismāʿīlī history was written by an Ismāʿīlī author, the *ʿUyūn al-akhbār* (*Choice Stories*) of Idrīs ʿImād al-Dīn (d. 872/1468), the nineteenth Ṭayyibī *dāʿī* in Yaman. This is a seven-volume history running from the time of the Prophet and the early Shīʿī imams until the commencement of the Ṭayyibī Mustaʿlian *daʿwa* in Yaman and the demise of the Fāṭimid dynasty. It is noteworthy that the pre-Fāṭimid period of Ismāʿīlī history in general and the initial phase of Ismāʿīlism in particular remain rather obscure in Ismāʿīlī historical writings. There are also a few brief, but highly valuable, historical narratives of specific events, such as the *dāʿī* Aḥmad b. Ibrāhīm al-Nīsābūrī's *Istitār al-imām*, dealing with the settlement of the early Ismāʿīlī imam, ʿAbd Allāh, in Salamiyya in the 3rd/9th century, and the eventful journey of a later imam, the future founder of the Fāṭimid state, ʿAbd Allāh al-Mahdī, from Syria to North Africa.

There were, however, two periods in Ismāʿīlī history during which the Ismāʿīlīs concerned themselves particularly with historiography, and they produced or commissioned works which may be regarded as official chronicles. During the Fāṭimid and Alamūt periods, the Ismāʿīlīs possessed their own states and dynasties of rulers whose careers and achievements needed to be recorded by reliable chroniclers. In Fāṭimid times, numerous histories of the Fāṭimid state and dynasty were compiled by contemporary historians. With the exception of a few fragments, however, the Fāṭimid chronicles of Ismāʿīlī and non-Ismāʿīlī authors did not survive the downfall of the dynasty in 567/1171. The Sunnī Ayyūbids who succeeded the Fāṭimids in Egypt systematically demolished the renowned Fāṭimid libraries of Cairo, persecuting the Ismāʿīlīs and destroying their religious literature.

The Ismāʿīlīs of the Fāṭimid period also produced a few biographical works of the *sīra* genre with significant historical value. Amongst the extant works of this

category mention may be made of the *Sīra* of Jaʿfar b. ʿAlī, chamberlain to the founder of the Fāṭimid dynasty, the *Sīra* of Ustādh Jawdhar (d. 363/973), a trusted courtier who served the first four Fāṭimid caliph-imams, and the autobiography of al-Muʾayyad fi'l-Dīn al-Shīrāzī (d. 470/1078), who held the office of chief *dāʿī* in Cairo for almost twenty years. Other biographical works, such as the *Sīra* of the *dāʿī* Ibn Ḥawshab Manṣūr al-Yaman (d. 302/914) written by his son Jaʿfar, or the autobiography of the *dāʿī* Abū ʿAbd Allāh al-Shīʿī (d. 298/911) quoted in al-Nuʿmān's *Iftitāḥ al-daʿwa*, have not survived. The Fāṭimid period was also rich in archival material of historical value, including a variety of treatises, letters, decrees and epistles (*sijillāt*) issued through the Fāṭimid chancery of state, the *dīwān al-inshāʾ*. Many of these documents have survived directly, or have been quoted in later literary sources, notably the *Ṣubḥ al-aʿshāʾ* of al-Qalqashandī (d. 821/1418).

The Nizārī Ismāʿīlīs of the Alamūt period, too, as we shall see, maintained a historiographical tradition. In Persia, at least, they compiled chronicles in the Persian languages recording the events of the Persian Nizārī state according to the reigns of the successive lords of Alamūt. All the official chronicles, held at Alamūt and other major Nizārī strongholds in Persia, perished in the Mongol invasions that destroyed the Nizārī state in 654/1256, or soon afterwards during the Īlkhānid period. However, the Nizārī chronicles and other documents were used extensively by a small group of Persian historians of the Īlkhānid period, notably Juwaynī (d. 681/1283), Rashīd al-Dīn Faḍl Allāh (d. 718/1318) and Abu'l-Qāsim Kāshānī (d. ca. 738/1337). These remain our major sources for the history of the Persian Nizārīs of the Alamūt period. The Syrian Nizārīs, unlike their Persian co-religionists, did not compile chronicles and instead they are treated in various regional histories of Syria, such as those produced by Ibn al-Qalānisī (d. 555/1160) and Ibn al-ʿAdīm (d. 660/1262). Much valuable information on the Ismāʿīlīs of different periods is contained in the universal histories of Muslim authors, starting with that of al-Ṭabarī (d. 310/923) and its continuation by ʿArīb b. Saʿd (d. 370/980). The Ismāʿīlīs of the Fāṭimid and Alamūt periods are also treated extensively in the universal history, *al-Kāmil*, of Ibn al-Athīr (d. 630/1233), who represents the culmination of the Muslim annalistic tradition.

The religious literature of the Ismāʿīlīs, which was not generally available to outsiders, is indispensable for tracing the doctrinal history of the community. The doctrinal treatises of the Fāṭimid period are also invaluable for understanding aspects of the teachings of the earlier times when the Ismāʿīlīs evidently propagated their ideas mainly by word of mouth. In addition, some of the Ismāʿīlī texts of the Fāṭimid period, such as the *majālis* collections of different authors, contain historical references not found elsewhere. Similarly, the Nizārī Ismāʿīlī teachings of the Alamūt period may be studied on the basis of the meagre extant literature

of that period, in addition to the accounts found in later Nizārī sources as well as those of the Persian historians of the Īlkhānid period. In the unsettled conditions of the early post-Alamūt centuries, following the Mongol destruction of the Nizārī state, the Nizārīs engaged in very limited literary activities. These were revived during the Anjudān period in Nizārī history, and the doctrinal works of that period, such as the writings of Abū Isḥāq Quhistānī (d. after 904/1498) and Khayrkhwāh-i Harātī (d. after 960/1553) do contain important historical details. Meanwhile, Persian Nizārī works had become permeated with Sufi ideas and terminologies. Other Nizārī regions, notably Central Asia and South Asia, developed their own indigenous literary traditions during the post-Alamūt centuries.

Anti-Ismāʿīlī writings of other Muslims

In the course of their history the Ismāʿīlīs were often accused of various 'heretical' teachings and practices and, at the same time, a multitude of myths and misrepresentations circulated about them. This state of affairs was a reflection of the unfortunate fact that the Ismāʿīlīs were, until the middle of the twentieth century, perceived and judged almost exclusively on the basis of evidence collected or often fabricated by their enemies. As the most revolutionary wing of Shīʿism with a religio-political agenda for uprooting the ʿAbbāsids and restoring the caliphate to a line of ʿAlid imams, the Ismāʿīlīs from early on aroused the hostility of the ʿAbbāsid–Sunnī establishment of the Muslim majority. With the foundation of the Fāṭimid state in 297/909 the Ismāʿīlī challenge to the established order had become actualized, and thereupon the ʿAbbāsid caliphs and the Sunnī *'ulamā'* launched what amounted to an official anti-Ismāʿīlī propaganda campaign. The overall aim of this systematic and prolonged campaign was to discredit the entire Ismāʿīlī movement from its origins onward so that the Ismāʿīlīs could be readily condemned as *malāḥida*, heretics or deviators from the true religious path. Muslim theologians, jurists, historians and heresiographers participated variously in this campaign.

In particular, Sunnī polemicists fabricated the necessary evidence that would lend support to the condemnation of the Ismāʿīlīs on specific doctrinal grounds. They concocted detailed accounts of the sinister teachings and immoral practices of the Ismāʿīlīs while denying the ʿAlid genealogy of their imams. A number of polemicists also fabricated travesties in which they attributed a variety of abhorrent beliefs and practices to the Ismāʿīlīs. These forgeries were circulated widely as genuine Ismāʿīlī treatises and, in time, they were used as source material by subsequent generations of Muslim authors writing about the Ismāʿīlīs.

By spreading these defamations and forged accounts, the polemicists and other anti-Ismāʿīlī authors gradually created, starting in the 4th/10th century, a 'black legend'. Accordingly, Ismāʿīlism was depicted as the arch-heresy, *ilḥād*, of Islam, carefully designed by a certain ʿAbd Allāh b. Maymūn al-Qaddāḥ, or some other non-ʿAlid impostors, or possibly even a Jewish magician disguised as a Muslim, aiming at destroying Islam from within.[1] By the 5th/11th century, this fiction, with its elaborate details and stages of initiation towards atheism, had been accepted as an accurate and reliable description of Ismāʿīlī motives, beliefs and practices, leading to further anti-Ismāʿīlī polemics and heresiographical accusations as well as intensifying the animosity of other Muslim communities towards the Ismāʿīlī Muslims. The components of the anti-Ismāʿīlī 'black legend' continued to fire the imagination of countless generations of Sunnī writers throughout the medieval era.

Many of the essential components of the anti-Ismāʿīlī 'black legend', relating especially to the origins and early history of Ismāʿīlism, may be traced to a certain Sunnī polemicist called Abū ʿAbd Allāh Muḥammad b. ʿAlī b. Rizām (or Razzām) al-Ṭā'ī al-Kūfī, better known as Ibn Rizām, who lived in Baghdad during the first half of the 4th/10th century. He wrote a major treatise in refutation of the Ismāʿīlīs. Ibn Rizām's anti-Ismāʿīlī tract, *Kitāb radd ʿalā'l-Ismāʿīliyya* (or *Naqḍ ʿalā'l-Bāṭiniyya*), does not seem to have survived, but it is quoted in Ibn al-Nadīm's *al-Fihrist*, completed in 377/987.[2] More importantly, it was used extensively a few decades later by another polemicist, the Sharīf Abu'l-Ḥusayn Muḥammad b. ʿAlī, an ʿAlid from Damascus better known as Akhū Muḥsin. An early ʿAlid genealogist, Akhū Muḥsin wrote his own anti-Ismāʿīlī tract, consisting of both historical and doctrinal parts, around 372/982. This work, too, has not survived. However, long fragments from the Akhū Muḥsin account have been preserved by several later authors, notably the Egyptian historians al-Nuwayrī (d. 733/1333), Ibn al-Dawādārī (d. after 736/1335), and al-Maqrīzī (d. 845/1442), who was the first authority to have identified Ibn Rizām as the principal source of Akhū Muḥsin while condemning both as unreliable.[3] The unreliability of Ibn Rizām had already been pointed out by his contemporary, the chronicler al-Masʿūdī.[4]

It was also in Akhū Muḥsin's polemical tract that the *Kitāb al-siyāsa* (*Book of Methodology*), one of the most popular early travesties attributed to Ismāʿīlīs, came to be cited. Used by several generations of polemicists and heresiographers as a major source on the secret doctrines of the Ismāʿīlīs, this anonymous tract evidently contained all the ideas needed to condemn the Ismāʿīlīs as heretics on account of their alleged libertinism and atheism. Akhū Muḥsin claims to have read this book and presents passages from it on the procedures for winning new converts that were supposedly followed by Ismāʿīlī *dāʿīs*, instructing them

through some seven stages of initiation (*balāgh*) leading ultimately to atheism and unbelief.[5] The same book, or another forgery entitled *Kitāb al-balāgh*, was seen shortly afterwards by Ibn al-Nadīm.[6] The heresiographer al-Baghdādī (d. 429/1037), who used polemical materials in his own defamatory account of the Ismāʿīlīs, even claims that the *Kitāb al-siyāsa* was sent by the founder of the Fāṭimid dynasty to Abū Ṭāhir al-Jannābī (d. 332/944), the leader of the Qarmaṭī state of Baḥrayn.[7] By this claim al-Baghdādī not only attempted to accord authenticity to this forgery, but also made the Qarmaṭīs subservient to the Fāṭimids in order to further defame the latter. Needless to add, the Ismāʿīlī tradition knows of these fictitious accounts only from the polemics of its enemies. At any rate, anti-Ismāʿīlī polemical writings provided a major source of information for Sunnī heresiographers who produced another important category of writings against the Ismāʿīlīs. The polemical and heresiographical traditions, in turn, influenced the Muslim historians, theologians and jurists who had something to say about the Ismāʿīlīs. The Sunnī authors, who were generally not interested in collecting accurate information on the internal divisions of Shīʿism and treated all Shīʿī interpretations of Islam as 'heterodoxies' or even 'heresies', also availed themselves of the opportunity of blaming the Fāṭimids and indeed the entire Ismāʿīlī community for the atrocities perpetrated by the Qarmaṭīs of Baḥrayn. On the other hand, the Imāmī Shīʿī heresiographers, such as al-Nawbakhtī (d. after 300/912) and al-Qummī (d. 301/913–914), who like their Sunnī counterparts were interested in defending the legitimacy of their own community, were better informed on the internal divisions of Shīʿism and were also less hostile towards the Ismāʿīlī Shīʿīs. In fact, these earliest Imāmī heresiographers provide our main source of information on the opening phase of Ismāʿīlism.

By the end of the 5th/11th century, the widespread literary campaign against the Ismāʿīlīs had been quite successful throughout the central Islamic lands. The revolt of the Persian Ismāʿīlīs led by Ḥasan-i Ṣabbāḥ against the Saljūq Turks, the new overlords of the ʿAbbāsids, called forth another prolonged Sunnī reaction against the Ismāʿīlīs in general and the Nizārī Ismāʿīlīs in particular. A new literary campaign, accompanied by military attacks on the Nizārī strongholds in Persia, was initiated by Niẓām al-Mulk (d. 485/1092), the Saljūq vizier and virtual master of their dominions for more than two decades, with the full endorsement of the ʿAbbāsid caliph and the Saljūq sultan. Niẓām al-Mulk devoted a long chapter in his own *Siyāsat-nāma* (*The Book of Government*) to the condemnation of the Ismāʿīlīs who, according to him, aimed 'to abolish Islam, to mislead mankind and cast them into perdition'.[8]

However, the earliest polemical treatise against the Persian Ismāʿīlīs of the Alamūt period was written by al-Ghazālī (d. 505/1111), the most renowned contemporary Sunnī theologian and jurist. He was, in fact, commissioned by the

ʿAbbāsid caliph al-Mustaẓhir (487–512/1094–1118) to write a treatise in refutation of the Bāṭinīs, another designation meaning 'esotericists' coined for the Ismāʿīlīs by their detractors who accused them of dispensing with the *ẓāhir*, or the commandments and prohibitions of the *sharīʿa* or the sacred law of Islam, because they claimed to have found access to the *bāṭin*, or the inner meaning of the Islamic message as interpreted by the Ismāʿīlī imam. In this widely circulated book, commonly known as *al-Mustaẓhirī* and completed shortly before al-Ghazālī left his teaching post at the Niẓāmiyya Madrasa in Baghdad in 488/1095, the author elaborated his own notion of an 'Ismāʿīlī' system of graded initiation leading to the ultimate stage (*al-balāgh al-akbar*) of atheism.[9] The defamations of al-Ghazālī were adopted by other Sunnī writers who, like Niẓām al-Mulk, were also familiar with the earlier 'black legend'. Sunnī historians, including especially Saljūq chroniclers and the local historians of Syria, participated actively in the renewed literary campaign against the Ismāʿīlīs, while the Saljūqs' persistent failure to dislodge the Nizārīs from their mountain fortresses belied their far superior military power.

By the opening decades of the 6th/12th century, the Ismāʿīlī community had become divided and embarked on its own internal, Nizārī versus Mustaʿlian, feuds. In the event, the Mustaʿlian Ismāʿīlīs, supported by the Fāṭimid state, initiated their anti-Nizārī campaign to refute the claims of Nizār (d. 488/1095) and his descendants to the Ismāʿīlī imamate. In one such polemical epistle issued in 516/1122 by the Fāṭimid caliph al-Āmir, the Nizārī Ismāʿīlīs of Syria were for the first time referred to with the designation of *ḥashīshiyya*, without any explanation.[10] This term was later applied to Syrian Ismāʿīlīs in a derogatory sense, without actually accusing them of using hashish. The Persian Nizārīs, too, were designated as *ḥashīshī* in some Zaydī Arabic sources produced in northern Persia during the Alamūt period.[11] It is important to note that in all the Muslim sources in which the Nizārīs are referred to as *ḥashīshī*s, this term is used only in its abusive, figurative sense of 'low-class rabble' and 'irreligious social outcasts'. The literal interpretation of the term for the Nizārīs is rooted in the fantasies of medieval Europeans and their 'imaginative ignorance' of Islam and the Ismāʿīlīs.

Medieval European perceptions of the Ismāʿīlīs

Christian Europe was alarmed by the expanding fortunes of the Muslims and their military conquests. Islam was to become a lasting trauma for Europe, an expression of the 'other'. This fundamentally negative perception of Islam was retained for almost a thousand years, well into the seventeenth century when the Ottoman Turks, who had rekindled the past aspirations of the Muslims,