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Fear and Violence in Late Ottoman Syria: The Ismaʿilis and the School of Agriculture

Abstract

This article explores the changing relations between state officials and the Shiʿi Nizari Ismaʿilis in early 20th-century Ottoman Syria. It examines the history surrounding the founding of the School of Agriculture in the majority Ismaʿili town of Salamiyya. Ottoman authorities had only recently discovered that the Ismaʿilis were followers of an imam in Bombay, the Aga Khan III. Once the community was associated with a British Empire loyalist like the Aga Khan, officials suspected collusion. Subsequent criminal investigations sanctioned legal and political persecution against the Ismaʿilis. Arresting and imprisoning the Ismaʿilis, however, could only do so much. Officials decided on a policy to correct their beliefs through state schooling and turn the Ismaʿilis into loyal Ottomans. Provincial authorities, meanwhile, took advantage of Istanbul's doubts over the Ismaʿilis' loyalty to the Empire. They proceeded to arrest the Ismaʿilis and confiscate tens of thousands of gold liras in cash and jewellery from the community. The cash and valuables were buried in a fund which ultimately paid for the School of Agriculture. This article concludes that violence was mandated by all levels of government and prefigured any educational policy for the Ismaʿilis in Syria because of fears the community was a fifth column.

Keywords: Late Ottoman Empire, Syria, Salamiyya, Shiʿa, Ismaʿilis, Aga Khan, Education, State School, School of Agriculture

1. Introduction

In 2010, just before the calamity of war devoured Syria, local press in Hama announced the centenary of the Agricultural College (*al-Thānawiyya al-Fanniyya al-Zirāʿiyya*) in the town of Salamiyya. To mark the milestone school staff and alumni organised festivities and reunions, and gave press interviews on the institution's unique history. It was, for instance, the first agricultural training school in Greater Syria open to all young Ottomans – the Alliance Israélite-funded Mikveh Agricultural School at Jaffa began its lessons in 1870 but accepted only Jewish colonists.[1] The school in Salamiyya, moreover, counted as an alumnus former Syrian President Adib al-Shishakli (d. 1964).[2]

Yet more interesting is what the school's founding says about Ottoman state-society relations in *fin de siècle* Syria. When the secondary school for boys, known during the

1 Green 2010, 387-388.
2 Haydar 2010; al-Qasir 2010.

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Ottoman period as the School of Agriculture (*Ziraat Mektebi*), opened in 1910, a significant change in the relations between state and society had already been underway for at least a half-century. Sultan Abdülmecid (r. 1839-1861) had initiated a process of centralisation known as the Tanzimat (regulations) which comprised reforms aimed at bringing all subjects and the land on which they lived into more frequent contact with, and under closer control of, Istanbul. Centripetal schemes for Greater Syria aimed to check mainly France's and Great Britain's rising economic and political influence, especially through their agents. They also sought to curb the parochial politics of notable families like the ascendant al-Shihabis of Mount Lebanon and al-ʿAzms in Damascus by giving them bigger stakes in imperial rule. Policy thus took shape in new types of education, bureaucratisation, taxation, conscription and land reform, among others. All this made the state much more visible and intrusive in its subjects' daily lives through school teachers and textbooks, census takers and tax collectors, state-run newspapers, passports, clock towers, post and telegraph offices and railways.[3]

Still, the social, political and financial problems continued. During the reign of Sultan Abdülhamid II (r.1876-1909), imperial survival was constantly threatened by debt crises, Balkan nationalisms, wars and territorial annexation by the Great Powers, and the immigration of large numbers of Muslim refugees. The loss of much of the Balkans and an influx of Circassians into Syria fleeing Russian expansion in the Caucasus forced Abdülhamid to direct resources and rhetoric towards the Arab provinces. The sultan saw an opportunity in the hallowed office of the caliphate.[4] Emphasising his role as leader of Sunni Muslims all over the world, Abdülhamid was keen that Ottoman identity reflected orthodoxy, and that education would promote this.[5]

Similar to other policies, education served empire. Where once young Ottomans fortunate enough to learn to read and write had studied with a private tutor, now the state assumed that role. State schooling was promoted as a better, *modern* way to make something of oneself. Private tuition, so the logic went, was old and obsolete. For state and subject, education was not just for the sake of knowledge, upward mobility or to staff the ever-expanding bureaucracy: education was to produce, above all, loyal Ottomans.[6] Education combatted missionary schools which had flourished since the mid-19th century and were blamed for all sorts of political and moral decay.[7] Similar to missionary schools, moreover, there was a civilising component to new Ottoman educational programmes. For example, the School for Tribes (*Aşiret Mektebi*) in Istanbul was established to inculcate in the children of Arab, Kurdish and Albanian tribal notables, including those from non-Sunni backgrounds, love and loyalty to the sultanate-caliphate. The assumption was that these communities were in need of enlightenment and that state schooling would civilise and turn them into loyal Ottomans.[8]

3 Reilly 2002, chapters 2 and 3; Makdisi 2000, chapter 4; Hanssen 2002, 51.
4 Karpat 2001, 125, 180.
5 Zürcher 2010, 277.
6 Fortna 2011, 49-54.
7 Fortna 2002, 77-93.
8 Deringil 1998, chapter 4.

I am, however, not so much interested in an institutional history of late Ottoman state schooling. Rather, I explore the interaction between official fears of subversion and state violence and how these coalesced and informed an educational policy for the Shiʿi Nizari Ismaʿilis in Greater Syria. I trace the changes in relations between the Ottoman state and its Ismaʿili subjects by examining the sordid history behind the School of Agriculture. Both the Ismaʿilis in the Ottoman Empire and the School of Agriculture remain nearly invisible in modern scholarship. Besides this, the history of the school serves as an illustrative case study of state-society relations in late Ottoman Syria for two interrelated reasons: first, the school is located in Salamiyya, a town whose majority of Ismaʿili inhabitants were almost everywhere else a demographic minority; and second, the school was built with money, valuables and land that provincial officials had confiscated from that community. Before I look at this in more detail, some background on the Ottoman Ismaʿilis is necessary to appreciate the new dynamics between the state and the Ismaʿilis, and equally, the changes within the community itself.

2. The Ottoman Ismaʿilis

Ottoman officials from the Ministry of Education (*Maarif-i Umumiye Nezareti*), Muhammad Rafiq al-Tamimi and Muhammad Bahjat, were commissioned to write a manual for administrators in Greater Syria. They went through the province of Beirut on two brief expeditions during World War I and recorded everything from geographies to genealogies.[9] In their text, *Beirut Province*, the officials detailed the Syrian Ismaʿilis' beliefs and history. They acknowledged that the Ismaʿilis, also known as the *Batiniyya* because of their esoteric (*bāṭin*) doctrines, had been in Greater Syria at least several centuries before the Ottoman conquest in 1516-1517. The two officials presented a fairly standard account of Ismaʿili doctrine: the Ismaʿilis were Shiʿa, partisans of ʿAli ibn Abi Talib (d. 660), Prophet Muhammad's son-in-law, but they differed from the Twelver Shiʿa (*Ithnā ʿAshariyya*) because of the genealogy of their seventh imam, Muhammad bin Ismaʿil (d. 796). Unlike the Twelvers, the Ismaʿilis follow a living imam whose legitimacy comes from his designation by his predecessor and his blood relationship to ʿAli. Importantly, the imam's guidance was necessary for the faithful as only he could interpret the true meaning of the Qurʾan.[10] The Nizari Ismaʿilis in Syria, as elsewhere, still consider the imam's teachings and gnosis fundamentals of their doctrine.

Since the Ottoman-Safavid wars of the 16th century, historians and chroniclers in the Ottoman Empire made the Shiʿa a foil for all that was reprehensible.[11] This negative perception continued well after the wars with the Safavids had ended. Late Ottoman history textbooks, for example, praised Sultan Selim I's (r. 1512-1520) fictional 'annihilation of approximately 44,000 Ismailis [sic.] and Sufis in Anatolia'.[12] The oth-

9 Hanssen 2005, 80-81; Gilsenan 1996, chapter 5.
10 Al-Tamimi and Bahjat 1916, 44-64.
11 Ocak 1998, 330-331.
12 Alkan 2000, 121.

ering of the Shiʿa, however, was largely rhetorical. For centuries, the Ottoman state and its Ismaʿili subjects had an unexceptional relationship characterised by the former's reliance on the latter for tax collection in their castled settlements which dotted the coastal mountains of Greater Syria, like that of Qadmus and, in the region of al-Khawabi, those of Markab, Masyaf and al-Kahf.[13] As Tanzimat reforms pressed on, the Ministry of Interior (*Dahiliye Nezareti*) became much more familiar with the Ismaʿilis. With greater frequency the state began to enter Ismaʿili villages and towns through the census taker and tax collector, and by the end of the 19th century, the Ismaʿilis had been reliably counted. Accordingly, there were about 10,000 Ismaʿilis in Greater Syria.[14] Later reports by the British War Office, their consul-general at Beirut and Ottoman sources vary between 9,000 and 15,000.[15]

Given that foreign meddling in the Empire was endemic, the key to understanding the changing relations between the Ottoman state and the Ismaʿilis lies in the community's association with an aristocratic British subject in India. In 1887, a small group of Syrian Ismaʿilis pledged their allegiance to a new imam in Bombay, Sir Sultan Muhammad Shah, the Aga Khan III (d. 1956). Before this, the Syrian Ismaʿilis had belonged to the Muʾmin-Shahi branch of the Nizari Ismaʿilis, whereas the Aga Khan and his followers were of the Qasim-Shahi line. This schism relates to a succession dispute between the Nizari Ismaʿili imam, Shams al-Din Muhammad's (ca. d. 1311) sons, ʿAla al-Din Muʾmin Shah (ca. d. 1338) and Qasim Shah (ca. d. 137?).[16] From then until the end of the 18th century, the Syrian Ismaʿilis had some contact with the Muʾmin-Shahi imams in the Deccan, India.[17] These reticent imams hardly posed a threat to Ottoman power and the last claimant to this line of the imamate disappeared at the end of the 18th century.[18] The Syrian Ismaʿilis, moreover, were divided into two competing factions, the Hajjawis and the Suwaydanis. The origins of these factions can be traced to the late 17th century. Some Ismaʿili notables close to a learned Sufi, al-Hajj Khidr bin Yusuf, had aspired to improve their standing within the community and backed the Sufi's bid for becoming the imam's local representative (*dāʿī*) over rival claimant Muhammad Suwaydan al-Qadmusi.[19] Ever since, the Hajjawis and the Suwaydanis have competed over control of communal affairs such as shrine maintenance, conflict me-

13 Merali 2018, 165.

14 Y. PRK. UM., 2/43 (13 September 1880), fol. 4; DH. TMİK. M., 255/23/24 (29 September 1907), fol. 1. NB. Vital Cuinet, geographer and secretary-general for the Ottoman Public Debt Administration (*Düyun-ı Umumiye-i Osmaniye İdare Meclisi*), provides similar numbers of Ismaʿilis (9,000) for the province of Beirut. He also correctly notes that the town of Salamiyya had 6,000 inhabitants but misidentifies them as Druzes, rather than Ismaʿilis; Cuinet 1896, vol. 1, 169-174; Cuinet 1898, vol. 3, 453-455.

15 WO., 33/456 (1908), part 1, appendix 2; FO., 424/229/46 (6 November 1911); al-Tamimi and Bahjat 1916, 80.

16 Daftary 1999, 446-448.

17 Tamir 1957, 596-597.

18 Douwes 2010, 491.

19 Khaddur 2012, 74-75.

diation, judgeships, and importantly, the collection and redistribution of alms (*zakat*).[20]

The Ottoman Ismaʿilis' pledge of allegiance to a quasi-statesman and religious figure as was the Aga Khan put the community in peril until the end of the Empire. This was a mistake on the part of the Ismaʿili leadership who had erroneously thought the pledge a sagacious move to solicit benefits and protection from an international patron. This was, after all, a tried and tested way by which Ottoman Christians had bettered their lot for centuries, best known through the protégé system which afforded them economic and legal protection by foreign consuls. These privileges were resented by the Muslim population and throughout the Tanzimat the state tried, unsuccessfully, to end them.[21] The Ismaʿilis' pledge moved Ottoman authorities to question their loyalties like those of the French-connected Maronites, the Russian-backed Orthodox Church or the American-converted Armenian Protestants. Official perceptions of disloyalty could have grave consequences, the most extreme case being that of the Armenians who were once considered most loyal, then, within just a few decades, most dangerous.[22]

The relationship between the Ottoman state and the Ismaʿilis was unique in that this was a Muslim community seen to be a client of a foreign Christian power through their imam, the Aga Khan's loyalty to the British Empire. The only other contemporaneous example was that related to the Oudh bequest. The king of Lucknow and Oudh, Ghazi al-Din Haydar (d. 1827), left the bequest which originated from loans made to the East India Company. In the course of time, the Government of India took control of the bequest and dispersed its funds to Indian pilgrims and students studying in the shrine cities of Najaf and Karbala. The British also used it to buy Iraqi Shiʿi jurists' silence on their imperial designs in neighbouring Qajar Iran.[23] The bequest was of significant concern for Ottoman authorities who spent a great deal of time and resources trying to contain creeping British influence over the jurists, including promoting Sunni orthodoxy by building mosques and schools.[24]

Around this time, the Aga Khan had invested certain Ismaʿilis with the responsibility to collect and remit the Syrian community's zakat, which ranged from one-tenth (*ʿushur*) to one-fifth (*khums*) of one's yearly income. Those who had collected the alms would then visit India, bringing with them cash and jewellery for the Aga Khan.[25] At the turn of the century, Ottoman officials discovered that the Ismaʿilis were organising these clandestine pilgrimages to Bombay and soon after, they levelled accusations of treason at the community.[26] The Ismaʿilis were then harassed, arrested *en masse* and tried for crimes ranging from treason to murder. Respite came, briefly, with the Young

20 Douwes 2010, 489-490.
21 Masters 2001, 130-141.
22 Suny 2015, 49.
23 Litvak 2000, 70-71.
24 Çetinsaya 2006, 99-106.
25 The Aga Khan III 1890; Husayn 1959, 121-122.
26 Hichi 1972, 69.

Turk Revolution in July 1908, forcing Abdülhamid to restore the Ottoman constitution (*Kanun-ı Esasi*) and support a general amnesty (*aff-ı umumi*) for all political prisoners, some of whom were Ismaʿilis.[27]

Constitutional rhetoric of freedom, justice, equality and fraternity (*hürriyet, adalet, müsavat, uhuvvet*) had little effect on ending the persecution. Instead, officials from the Ministry of Interior decided once and for all to turn the Ismaʿilis into loyal Ottomans. Of course, the Ismaʿilis had always been Ottoman subjects but at a time when the Empire was threatened from within and without, being Ottoman demanded more than paying taxes or serving in the army – loyalty took on a decidedly orthodox hue. Imperial salvation demanded steadfast loyalty of all subjects to the Empire, sultan-caliph and sacred law.[28] Upholding the sacrality of the sultanate was incumbent on each and every Ottoman subject and identifying subversive elements became an existential imperative.

A civilising mission also informed Istanbul's relations with marginal groups. For example, policymakers understood the rebellious Shiʿi Zaydis in Yemen to be *essentially* fanatic infidels but also redeemable. They could be lifted from their ignorance through Sunnitisation which, at the very least, meant nominal recognition of the legitimacy and authority of the sultan-caliph.[29] A similar relationship developed between the Ottoman state and the Nusayris of Greater Syria. The Nusayris were explicit targets of Sunnitisation. The policy, known as 'the correcting of beliefs' (*tashih-i akaid*), entailed the building of schools and mosques, and keeping Nusayri shaykhs on the state payroll.[30] So, by the turn of the 20th century, Ottoman officials began to record the Ismaʿilis' history in Syria and India, the history of the Aga Khan, their religious beliefs and practices, who their notables were, how they earned a living and the like. Armed with this knowledge, ministers agreed state schools and mosques had to be built to Ottomanise and Sunnitise the Ismaʿilis. The policy had already been tested in Iraq on the Yezidis and in Syria on the Nusayris with varying results.[31] Encouraged nonetheless, the new government dominated by the Committee of Union and Progress (CUP) pressed on with the goal of Hamidian educational policy: to engineer loyal Ottomans.[32]

3. Violence in Salamiyya

One key Syrian policy of the Tanzimat was the sedentarisation of marginal subjects into cultivatable but sparsely inhabited areas. The policy was two-pronged: it allowed for better surveillance of those generally beyond state control like the Ismaʿilis or

27 Douwes and Lewis 1989, 220-228.
28 Makdisi 2002, 47; Deringil 1998, 55.
29 Kuehn 2011, 4-19.
30 Winter 2016, 219-237.
31 Akbulut 2014, 100-105; Gölbaşı 2016, 145-146.
32 Alkan 2000, 109-110.

nomadic pastoralists; and it provided more revenue through the taxation of agriculture and animals. To encourage subjects to cultivate barren and peripheral areas, the Ottomans exempted willing settlers from taxes and military service.[33] The Ismaʿilis were one such community to take advantage of these policies because of the worsening situation in their mountainous villages, especially in al-Kahf, Masyaf and Qadmus. A dearth in land there had led to stiff competition and, consequently, intercommunal strife between the Ismaʿilis and their neighbours, the Nusayris.[34] Tensions were equally accentuated by the economic peripheralisation of the region from the 1830s onwards.[35] Thus seeking greener pastures, many from the community emigrated from the highlands down to the Syrian plains.

In the late 9th and early 10th centuries Salamiyya had served as headquarters for the pre-Fatimid Ismaʿili leadership, a glorious past which the Syrian Ismaʿilis had not forgotten.[36] In the mid-19th century, a small band of Ismaʿili pioneers had decided to take the state's offer of tax and military service exemptions if they were to settle the then-abandoned town and subdue the wily bedouin and nomads who stalked its hinterland.[37] Over the following few decades Salamiyya attracted more Ismaʿilis who were lured by the availability of farmland. In the first few years of the 20th century, the town had grown to become the largest Ismaʿili settlement in the Empire with a population of just over 5,000.[38] Salamiyya also benefitted from Nusayri and Circassian immigration, and by the turn of the 20th century had been designated the centre of its own district (*kaza merkezi*) within the sub-province (*sancak*) of Hama.[39] Throughout the 1880s, moreover, state concerns over protecting agricultural settlements from bedouin raids led to infrastructural projects in the region, such as the rebuilding of garrisons and the installation of telegraph lines into Salamiyya.[40] These projects improved inland Syria's economic links with markets further afield but equally enabled surveillance and swifter transport of troops.

The state soon moved into Salamiyya under the pretext of providing security against possible bedouin incursions. The Ismaʿili notables who sat on Salamiyya's administrative council (*meclis-i idare-i kaza*) saw the auguries, and by the end of the 19th century, a military administration (*miralaylık*) under direct control of the district governor (*mutasarrıf*) of Hama had replaced them.[41] The Ismaʿili notables opposed the intervention and sent a delegation to Istanbul. In the capital, however, they were ordered

33 Rogan 1999, 45.
34 Al-Khawabi 1933, 246.
35 Reilly 1987, 64-75.
36 Kramers and Daftary 2012.
37 Amin 1986, 157.
38 DH. TMİK. M., 255/23/24 (29 September 1907), fol. 1.
39 Al-Dbiyat 1980, 54-61; *Suriye Vilayet Salnamesi* 1900, 394.
40 MV., 22/13 (18 July 1887); MV., 25/27 (16 October 1887); İ. MMS. 104/4430 (8 December 1888-13 April 1889), fols. 1-12.
41 Khaddur 2010, 236-237; *Suriye Vilayet Salnamesi* 1885, 170-171; *Suriye Vilayet Salnamesi* 1889, 113-114.

to appear in front of a military tribunal for failure to maintain regional security. Yet before police could apprehend the delegation, they fled and made their way to India, hoping for the Aga Khan's help.[42] Back in Syria, some prominent Ismaʿilis began to encourage the community to revolt against the military administration. Most vociferous was Shaykh Ahmad al-Muhammad (d. 1906), the Aga Khan's Syrian representative responsible for the communication of the imam's edicts (*firman*s), and the collection of, and forwarding him, zakat.[43] When Istanbul alerted Hama about the delegation's escape from justice, provincial authorities had reason enough to arrest any obstinate Ismaʿilis. Soon afterwards, Shaykh Ahmad and several other Ismaʿilis were arrested and a cache of letters addressed to the Aga Khan was discovered along with money and a great deal of jewellery.[44] Authorities were suspicious both of the letters and the massive quantity of money and valuables in the possession of a relatively poor farming community. After Shaykh Ahmad's arrest, the governor (*vali*) of Beirut, Rashid Bey, wrote to Yıldız Palace, the residence of Abdülhamid and the locus of central administration. He claimed a preliminary investigation had proven that the Ismaʿilis were seeking the Aga Khan's intercession to attain British protection.[45] Authorities thus charged the detained Ismaʿilis with disturbing the peace, treason and murder.[46]

The trials of the Ismaʿilis began at the Damascus Court of First Instance (*Mahkeme-i Bidayet*) in 1902, but subsequent appeals and retrials went back and forth between the province and the Istanbul Court of Cassation (*Mahkeme-i Temyiz*) until 1908. During this time the state had ample opportunity to gather information on the Ismaʿilis, whose recent allegiance to the Aga Khan had only just been discovered. In his abovementioned missive, Rashid Bey informed the sultan that the Ismaʿilis considered the Aga Khan in India their caliph (*Hint'te bir adamları mevcut olup Sultan Muhammad Han* [the Aga Khan] *namıyla halife ismiyle yad eyledikleri*) and that every year their shaykhs collected thousands of liras and sent the money to him. He urged the government immediately appoint officials to keep tabs on the community.[47]

Foreign meddling was more than Ottoman paranoia, and the Aga Khan had tried to intervene in the trials. On the Aga Khan's behalf, British Ambassador Nicholas O'Connor (d. 1908) put pressure on Istanbul and the consuls at Damascus and Beirut did their best with officials there. For good reason, however, the Foreign Office and Government of India drip-fed the Aga Khan information or blocked his involvement altogether. For example, the Aga Khan wrote a letter to Abdülhamid in which he assured the sultan of the Ismaʿilis' loyalty to the Ottoman Empire. The letter never made it to Yıldız Palace as it had been destroyed on orders of the British embassy in Istanbul.[48] At Damascus, moreover, the consul had been instructed to keep contact with

42 Amin 1986, 228.
43 Al-Jundi 1991, 48.
44 Y. MTV., 210/101 (16 January 1901).
45 Y. PRK. UM., 27/94 (N.D. [ca. 1901]), fol. 1.
46 Khaddur 2012, 73-74.
47 Y. PRK. UM., 27/94 (N.D. [ca. 1901]), fols. 1-2.
48 FO., 371/145/1415 (8 January 1907), fols. 25-26.

the Ismaʿilis' lawyer should the prisoners need anything. He was, however, repeatedly told that the prisoners neither wanted consular help nor the Aga Khan's for they feared that any outside intervention would confirm the charges against them.[49]

Once the Ismaʿilis had been associated with the British through the Aga Khan in Bombay, Ottoman Ministry of Interior officials recommended a policy that had been designed to eliminate dual loyalties by correcting the Ismaʿilis' beliefs. Salamiyya, the largest Ismaʿili settlement, was seen as the most appropriate laboratory in which to test this. Correcting the Ismaʿilis' beliefs through education was first proposed by the Commission for the Acceleration of Procedures and Reforms (*Tesri-i Muamelat ve İslahat Komisyonu*). Their report, written in autumn 1907 and based on investigations led by the director of the Damascus Court of Appeal (*Mahkeme-i İstinaf*), Misbah al-Shihabi, concluded that in Salamiyya 'there is neither a mosque nor school…an official mosque along with one primary and another secondary school…must be established and built'.[50] But this hearts-and-minds approach had come too late. In light of the ongoing trials and tribulations, it was foolhardy to believe that mosques and schools would win over the nearly one thousand Ismaʿilis now implicated in the criminal investigations.[51] Furthermore, state violence had already led to the deaths of several Ismaʿilis, including Shaykh Ahmad, whilst others still languished in a Damascene prison. Thousands of gold liras and an equally great amount of jewellery had gone missing, too.[52] The Ismaʿilis' fear of persecution had become so acute that communal prayers and religious instruction were moved to a subterranean mosque below Salamiyya's town centre.[53]

When the trials finally ended in spring 1908, 55 Ismaʿilis were convicted on flimsy evidence, none of the cash or valuables had been returned, and few measures from the Commission's report had been taken.[54] The massive expansion of state schooling elsewhere in the Empire notwithstanding, private tuition at a reputable shaykh's home remained the surest way a young Ismaʿili could learn to read and write. Nonetheless, plans to build primary and secondary schools in Salamiyya were being discussed at the local and provincial levels both by the Ismaʿilis and Ottoman officials.[55] The Aga Khan in Bombay encouraged the Ismaʿilis to embrace education and communicated this through his new Syrian representative, Shaykh Nasir al-Muhammad (d. 1915), brother of the late Shaykh Ahmad. The Aga Khan championed education and, as president of the All-India Muslim League, he strove to improve education in India, playing a key role in transforming the Muhammadan Anglo-Oriental College into Aligarh

49 FO., 371/145/1415 (11 July 1906), fol. 16.
50 DH. TMİK. M., 255/23/24 (29 September 1907), fol. 6.
51 DH. TMİK. M., 255/23/24 (29 September 1907), fols. 4-5.
52 Al-Khawabi 1933, 256.
53 Kahla 2018, 86-88.
54 FO., 195/2277 (14 March 1908), fol. 9.
55 Amin 1986, 311-312, 325.

University.[56] He was equally keen to setup agricultural training programmes for the Ismaʿilis in India and Syria.[57]

Insofar as the Ottoman state was concerned, it had already recommended the building of schools in Salamiyya as early as 1907. In late spring 1908, the Syrian Directorate of Education (*Maarif Müdiriyeti*) sent the Commission for the Acceleration of Procedures and Reforms a follow-up to their aforementioned report. It stated that the Ismaʿilis already had their own private schools but that their notables were receptive to the building of state schools. This, the report added, was necessary 'to correct their outlandish beliefs' (*tashih-i akaid sahifeleri için*).[58] The communique was passed on to Grand Vizier Mehmed Ferid Pasha (d. 1914) two weeks before the Young Turk Revolution, which led to his dismissal from office. Despite the tumult, by winter the director of education in Syria wrote his superiors in Istanbul that land had been secured by the district governor of Hama but that the salaries for school teachers had yet to be granted. The director further noted that the budget for the project had to increase. The following month the Council of Education (*Meclis-i Maarif*) met in Istanbul and decided both to give the go-ahead for the schools in Salamiyya and to increase the budget. It took some time for ministers to agree on finances for the project, but by the following year Istanbul had relayed the news to the Directorate of Education in Syria.[59] Salamiyya, it seemed, would soon get its first primary and secondary state schools.

The recently freed Ismaʿilis who returned to Salamiyya likely did so with some reservations. Although the military administration in Salamiyya had handed back the running of the town to local authorities, the old Ismaʿili leadership had been sidestepped. Instead, Istanbul appointed its own officials to head the district (*kaymakamlık*), notably the well-connected Ismaʿil al-Shihabi from Mount Lebanon. Ismaʿil al-Shihabi took advantage of his position and began claiming land from the Ismaʿilis who had been arrested. To that end, he fully supported all investigations into the community's alleged collusion with the British, including those led by his relative, Misbah al-Shihabi.[60] Ismaʿil al-Shihabi did initiate some new building projects such as the governor's house, but the Ismaʿilis resented his control over the town.[61] The actions of the district governor of Hama, Nazim Bey, added to the disaffection against the Ottoman administration.

56 Rahman 1970, 69, 176, 214.
57 Boivin 2003, 278-280; al-Qasir 2010.
58 MF. MKT., 1073/10 (1 June 1908), fol. 1.
59 FO., 371/145/1415 (9 July 1908), fol. 3; FO., 371/145/1415 (12 November-24 December 1908), fol. 6; FO., 371/145/1415 (9 July 1909), fol. 7.
60 Khaddur 2010, 237-238.
61 Amin 1986, 228.

4. Violence and the School of Agriculture

The Empire's mostly agrarian-based economy made training in agricultural science an important part of educational reform. Agricultural schools were slated for development across the Empire and in 1891 a new purpose-built school was opened in the outskirts of Istanbul, the Halkalı Agricultural Training School (*Büyük Halkalı Ameliyat-ı Ziraat Mektebi*).[62] A number of agricultural schools had been built by 1910, when the district governor of Hama, Nazim Bey, conducted a ceremony to officially open the School of Agriculture in Salamiyya.[63] Because of Nazim Bey's contempt for the Ismaʿilis, the townsmen in the audience appeared less than friendly. A year earlier, officials in Latakia found letters suggesting that the Ismaʿilis in al-Khawabi were preparing to send cash and valuables to the Aga Khan in India – exactly what had led to the arrests and subsequent trials between 1901 and 1908. Following the discovery of the letters in Latakia, authorities alerted Ismaʿil al-Shihabi in Salamiyya who then ordered the arrests of a few Ismaʿilis, including the Aga Khan's representative, Shaykh Nasir.[64] The complacency of the governors of Beirut and Syria, Husayn Nazim and Ismaʿil Fazil Pashas, respectively, encouraged lesser officials in Markab, al-Khawabi and Salamiyya to arrest more Ismaʿilis and seize a total of 9,000 gold lira in cash and 3,000 lira worth of jewellery.[65] The stash allegedly contained British and French currency as well.[66] The money and valuables were eventually handed over to Nazim Bey for safekeeping.[67] Meanwhile, Shaykh Nasir, as the suspected ringleader in all this, was accused of evading conscription some years back in Beirut, sent to a military tribunal (*Divan-ı Harb-i Örfi*) in Istanbul and, in April 1910, exiled to Bursa.[68]

The British consul at Damascus, George Devey, wrote to Ambassador Gerard Lowther in Istanbul shortly after the school's opening ceremony, summing up Nazim Bey's involvement and local opinion of him:

> In the district of Hama and Homs the Mutf. [*mutasarrıf*] Nazim Bey has won for himself much local antipathy, and attack all constantly sent upon him, being Turkish by race, and published in the local press for increasing disorder and insecurity wh[ich] he is unable to supress. He was the victim of a low intrigue in November in the following manner; as your Excellency may remember, there are large numbers of Ismailians [sic.] in the district who adore Agha Khan of India, and a few years ago they were persecuted and imprisoned but finally all altogether released after the Constitution. They had collected for the Agha Khan a considerable sum of money, and jewels as personal offerings of value wh[ich] was confiscated at the time of their

62 Yıldırım 2013, 266-269; Kadıoğlu 2002, 101.
63 Alkan 2000, 52-53, 72; Yagi 2012.
64 BEO., 3661/274540 (9-11 November 1909), fol. 5.
65 BEO., 3661/274540 (18 December 1910), fol. 2.
66 BEO., 3884/291293 (14 November 1909), fol. 22.
67 BEO., 3661/274540 (6 November 1909), fol. 11.
68 Al-Khawabi 1933, 257-258.

> arrest. The money has since been assigned for a purpose of public utility and the Mutf. wished to have the jewels be sold, and the proceeds in cash added to the fund. He got leave to come to Damascus, and unwisely brought the jewels with him. On his consulting the Vali as to the idea of causing these valuables to be sold, his Excellency repeated his prohibition on the grounds that the individuals who had bestowed them might yet present themselves to reclaim them. The Mutasarrif returning after a day or two to his post found that the bag which contained the jewels had disappeared though entrusted to a very trustworthy sergeant, whether at Damascus or on the way or at Hama. Diligent search soon proved who the culprits were, and I understand that almost all the stolen articles have been found, and though an attempt was made to pass the matter off as a practical joke, it was most scandalous and I believe one or two notables or members of their families were arrested and are still in confinement. It is alleged that petty troubles and crimes of robbery and violence have been much more common of late in the Hama district.[69]

The consul's report illustrates that the provincial administration continued to abuse the Ismaʿilis. Despite the new constitutional era's promises of freedom and justice, the parallels between these events and the earlier persecution of Shaykh Ahmad and other Ismaʿilis in Salamiyya are striking. In both instances officials discovered letters that revealed some collusion with the British by way of the Aga Khan and money and a great deal of jewellery worth thousands of gold liras were confiscated and later misplaced. The cash and jewels that were found in 1909 were added to the previously confiscated money and valuables. It was, moreover, Nazim Bey who put the confiscated money in a fund which would ultimately pay for the School of Agriculture.

Nazim Bey explained that he punished the Ismaʿili notables, especially Shaykh Nasir, because they had manipulated the community into giving them their money and valuables, and that many Ismaʿilis had now grown fearful of them. With Shaykh Nasir's exile confirmed by Istanbul, Nazim Bey guaranteed that the region would not face these problems again.[70] This assessment, however, was far from true. At the same time, the former director of the Damascus Court of Appeal who had led the investigation into the Ismaʿilis' collusion with the British in 1906, Misbah al-Shihabi, had been subsequently removed from his post and reassigned as district officer in the village of Qadmus. Ismaʿili elders in Qadmus soon petitioned Istanbul regarding the tyrannical behaviour of Misbah al-Shihabi and his men (*bir takım müstebid ve mütegallib*). The official had been extorting the silkworm-breeders and weavers, taking their food, fabric and money, a large portion of which they claimed had been collected by the community to fund a primary school.[71] In another petition from Qadmus, Misbah al-Shihabi's men were blamed for exacerbating communal tensions among the townsmen and some newer arrivals from the Balkans and Crete, favouring the latter by en-

69 FO., 618/3 (11 January 1911), fols. 44-45.
70 DH. MUİ., 78/62 (17 May 1910), fol. 4.
71 HR. TO., 402/59 (4 May 1910).

couraging them to attack the Ismaʿilis.[72] Misbah al-Shihabi, it seemed, was working in co-ordination with Nazim Bey and Ismaʿil al-Shihabi when extorting the Ismaʿilis.

Violence and depredation were not limited to the provinces. In April 1909, a motley crew of soldiers and religious students staged a counterrevolution in Istanbul. The putschists resented, among other things, the CUP's increasing control over parliament (*meclis-i mebusan*), apparent indifference to the shariʿa, and promotion of alumni from military academies at the expense of less-educated officers. Socioeconomic grievances were recast as anti-CUP protests which targeted communities like the Armenians, who were believed to have benefitted unfairly from the Young Turk Revolution. The CUP quickly blamed Abdülhamid for the unrest and forced the sultan to abdicate. In his stead, Sultan Mehmed V (r. 1909-1918) ascended the throne. What then followed was a crackdown on political and personal freedoms, and the emergence of a CUP-dominated parliament bent on pursuing top-down political and social reforms.[73] Syrian officials like Nazim Bey and Ismaʿil al-Shihabi counted on this instability to keep hidden their misdeeds.

5. The Ismaʿili Response

The fact of the matter was officials expected little repercussions to their actions. After the courts had condemned the Ismaʿilis to treason, officials perceived the community easy prey. Nazim Bey might have even got away with the misappropriation of money and valuables if it were not for the numerous petitions that the Ismaʿilis had sent to Istanbul. Despite the expansion of, and access to, civil and criminal courts (*Nizamiye Mahkemeleri*), petitions remained extremely popular. Petitioning the sultan via his authorised representative, generally the grand vizier, was a long-standing practice through which Ottoman subjects sought justice especially if the courts had ruled unfavourably towards them. In fact, with the spread of telegraphy, petitioning Istanbul became quicker and cheaper, no longer requiring the time and money associated with delivery by hand at the capital.[74]

In November 1909, shortly after the arrests of their coreligionists, eight Ismaʿilis from al-Khawabi petitioned the grand vizier. According to their petition, the Ismaʿilis claimed that farmers from their community had been arrested and their earnings illegally confiscated. They petitioned the 18 imprisoned Ismaʿilis, including Shaykh Nasir, be released from jail because they had done nothing wrong (*hiç bir cürüm ve kabahatları yoktur*).[75] The eight Ismaʿilis from al-Khawabi sent a second petition immediately afterwards in which they stated much of the same, emphasising that officials seized and confiscated 'our zakat'. Both these petitions took great care to point out official hypocrisy in light of the newly-restored constitution, emphasising catchwords like freedom

72 HR. TO., 403/4 (21 June 1910).
73 Gingeras 2016, 34-38.
74 Ben-Bassat 2013, 30-35, 138.
75 BEO., 3661/274540 (30 November 1909), fol. 6.

(*hürriyet*, *serbest*), justice (*adalet*), oppression (*zulüm*), and despotism (*istibdad*).[76] To be sure, these concepts were part of the petition-writer's repertoire, but it still shows some familiarity of a rural farming community with the ideas *en vogue* at the time.

More petitions arrived at the office of the grand vizier. So, too, did missives from officials explaining their understanding of events. The minister of interior and later CUP triumvir, Talat Pasha (d. 1921), sought to justify the actions of provincial officials. Talat Pasha repeated that Shaykh Nasir and a few other accomplices had been arrested because they had manipulated the poor people of Salamiyya into giving them money. Talat Pasha suggested that in case no one came forward to reclaim the cash and valuables, they would be earmarked for a fund to construct an agricultural school in Salamiyya. This, he clarified, was something the town's residents had requested (*mahallinde bir ziraat mektebi tesis ve inşaşı bazıları tarafından istida edilmekte bulunduğunda bahis*).[77] A month later, the governor of Syria, Ismaʿil Fazil Pasha, confirmed that some in Salamiyya wanted to use the money for the building of an agricultural school.[78] In the meantime, however, Talat Pasha authorised officials to threaten with arrest any Ismaʿili who dared continue to petition the grand vizier.[79]

More likely than not central and provincial officials concocted the narrative about the Ismaʿilis' willingness to relinquish any claims to the cash and jewellery so long as the proceeds went to funding a state school. This becomes apparent in light of the Ismaʿilis' earliest petitions. The Ismaʿilis had not originally intended the money and jewellery to fund an agricultural school and these petitions referred to the cash and valuables as alms. What had caused the arrests in Salamiyya, moreover, was not the Ismaʿili notables' extortion of their coreligionists. Instead, it was the contents of two letters confiscated by authorities in Latakia which exposed Shaykh Nasir's plan to take the alms to the Aga Khan in Bombay.[80]

Yet by spring 1910, the Ismaʿilis had adopted the official narrative. With their money and jewellery still held by Nazim Bey and Shaykh Nasir's being exiled to Bursa, Yusuf Ibrahim and another Ismaʿili petitioned the grand vizier on behalf of the entire community. In their petition they stated that 'because of the injustice, we went to the Syrian government and reported that [the alms] were intended for funding an agricultural school'.[81] This implies that some Ismaʿilis had abandoned telling the truth and come to terms with the fact their money and jewellery was gone for good. The next best thing, accordingly, was to have something to show for it, in this case an agricultural school. A week or so later the Ismaʿilis of Salamiyya sent their own petition in which they agreed in principle to have the money and jewellery fund a state school. But, they continued, the cash and valuables should not have been confiscated in the

76 BEO., 3661/274540 (1 December 1909), fol. 7.
77 BEO., 3661/274540 (6 November 1909), fol. 11.
78 BEO., 3661/274540 (2 December 1909), fol. 15.
79 Al-Jundi 1991, 53.
80 BEO., 3661/274540 (9-11 November 1909), fol. 5; BEO., 3661/274540 (18 November 1909), fol. 8.
81 HR. TO., 402/25 (10 April 1910), fol. 2.

first place. Appealing again to justice and security, they argued that saving or giving away one's wealth was perfectly legal and nothing in the constitution said otherwise.[82]

Ottoman officials were now at least aware of the Ismaʿilis' petitions. Nazim Bey, however, continued to abuse his authority. The unfortunate incident that befell Yusuf Ibrahim, co-author of the above petition, is a case in point. In late winter 1910, twelve Ismaʿili elders from al-Khawabi petitioned the sultan regarding the recent arrest of Yusuf Ibrahim, a private tutor in the village of Tal Dara in the district of Salamiyya. They stated that some long-time residents had grown jealous of Yusuf's rising influence in the community and that they had accused him of vagrancy and disturbing public order (*serserilik*). The petitioners admitted that Yusuf was not from Tal Dara but had a family and home there, and Nazim Bey's order to banish him from the village to his hometown, Khirbat al-Faras in al-Khawabi, was unjust. Finally, they asked that Yusuf be allowed to return to Tal Dara and continue to teach the Ismaʿili villagers' children.[83] Shortly thereafter, Yusuf himself petitioned the sultan about his ill treatment by Nazim Bey. Yusuf claimed that the Aga Khan had chosen him to teach the children of Tal Dara. His growing influence, however, made the Tamirs, an Ismaʿili family – but mostly not followers of the Aga Khan – jealous. The Tamirs persuaded their relative Mustafa to inform authorities in Salamiyya on Yusuf. In early January 1910, Nazim Bey's men seized Yusuf in Salamiyya without reason and escorted him to Beirut where he spent three days in jail. From there he was taken to Tripoli for another three days, then to Tartus and finally to Khirbat al-Faras. Charged with vagrancy and disturbing public order, he was put under house arrest and banned from leaving.[84]

Istanbul took these petitions seriously and requested Nazim Bey to explain his actions.[85] The official justified his treatment of Yusuf with reference to Shaykh Nasir who had just been exiled to Bursa. Nazim Bey claimed that after hearing news about Shaykh Nasir's exile 'some dissenters from the ignorant people began to spread anti-government ideas'. He stated further that the local informant, Mustafa Tamir, had said Shaykh Nasir and Yusuf were close associates. Since Shaykh Nasir was no longer present, Nazim Bey saw in Yusuf his likely replacement for collecting alms and leading the Ismaʿilis in protest. Finally (and analogous to Shaykh Nasir's case), Nazim Bey claimed to have received notice from Beirut that Yusuf had evaded military service some years back which was why he had his men escort him there. After that, he said, Yusuf was no longer his problem.[86]

At the same time, Shaykh Nasir petitioned the Ministry of Interior from his exile in Bursa. Shaykh Nasir was keen to emphasise the amount of money and valuables that provincial authorities had forcibly taken from him (*ahiz ü gasp*) totalled some

82 DH. MUİ., 73/2/3 (18 April 1910), fol. 8.
83 DH. MUİ., 78/62 (20 February 1910), fol. 7.
84 DH. MUİ., 78/62 (11-21 March 1910), fol. 8.
85 DH. MUİ., 78/62 (25 March 1910), fol. 1; DH. MUİ., 78/62 (24 April 1910), fol. 2.
86 DH. MUİ., 78/62 (9 May 1910), fol. 5; DH. MUİ., 78/62 (17 May 1910), fol. 4.

15,000 lira worth; and that this theft was 'very unjust, deceptive and malicious'.[87] His petitions also appealed to mercy, writing that he was homesick and had to see his children and family in Salamiyya. He made clear that the money and jewellery had been collected by the Ismaʿilis per their 'ancient religious customs' and that it was 'for Sultan Muhammad Shah who, from the family of the house of the Prophet of God and leader of our religion and rites, resides in Bombay'. Shaykh Nasir retold how he ended up in Bursa: the district official in Salamiyya, Ismaʿil al-Shihabi, the district governor of Hama, Nazim Bey, and the governor of Syria, Ismaʿil Fazil Pasha, had conspired to seize (*müsadere*) the cash and valuables. To this end, they put him in chains and sent him to a military tribunal in Istanbul where he was summarily sentenced without any further investigation.[88]

The Ismaʿilis continued to petition the grand vizier for the return of their money and valuables. For over a year the Ismaʿilis had argued that the seizure contravened state law; now they additionally sought another venue in which to redress the injustice – the shariʿa courts. Four Ismaʿili notables thus went to the judge (qadi) and jurisconsult (mufti) at Salamiyya's shariʿa court, and requested a responsum (fatwa) on the matter. The petitioners wrote, 'we found that the representatives invested with the authority of the shariʿa do not see this act of seizing one's wealth appropriate'.[89] Only a few days later the same supplicants reiterated the aforementioned in another petition. This time, however, they also pointed out that just as their prayer rituals had always been different from those of other Muslims, so too their practice of almsgiving. They ended with assurances that though they might give money to the Aga Khan, this would not interfere with their ability to pay state taxes on time (*bütün tekalif-i emriyeyi vakit ü zamanıyla tediye etmekte bulunduğumuz gibi*).[90]

Complaints about Nazim Bey's corruption were not limited to the Ismaʿilis. In October 1910, notables in Hama petitioned Istanbul regarding the official's embezzlement of their money.[91] One of those supplicants, ʿAbd al-Qadir al-Shishakli, sent a few petitions to Istanbul in which he argued that Nazim Bey had cheated him and his associates out of thousands of liras to build the School of Agriculture in Salamiyya.[92] The notables' petitions were a boon to the Ismaʿilis' pleas. With the extent of Nazim Bey's abuses becoming clearer and because these better-connected men had now been affected by the graft, Istanbul had to act.

87 HR. TO., 404/2 (22 November 1910).
88 BEO., 3826/286945 (13 October 1910), fol. 3.
89 BEO., 3661/274540 (18 December 1910), fol. 2.
90 BEO., 3661/274540 (20 December 1910), fol. 12.
91 DH. MTV., 18/7 (25 October 1910), fol. 2.
92 DH. MTV., 18/7 (2 December 1910), fol. 1.

6. Righting Wrongs

Classical Ottoman statecraft emphasised that as a just ruler, the sultan would guarantee the security and prosperity of his subjects by his implementation of customary and holy laws. The sultan expected his subjects' loyalty in return, mainly shown through the timely payment of taxes. By the 20th century, the ideal social pact had become more nuanced, not least because of the new civil and criminal courts alongside shariʿa courts, greater legal standardisation and regulation through codices and recourse to the constitution after 1908. Many Ottomans, however, still looked to the sovereign as final arbiter of justice. The counterrevolution and subsequent political repression caused a legitimacy crisis for the CUP. Thus the party appealed to familiar concepts like that of the just ruler, whom parliament would hold to account on behalf of its electorate.[93] In petitioning the sultan, therefore, the Ismaʿili supplicants expected officials to end the violence and injustice.

Already throughout summer and autumn 1910, the ministries of Interior and Finance (*Maliye Nezareti*) had tried to ascertain where exactly the Ismaʿilis' cash and valuables had gone. Their requests for information were ignored by Syria's governor, Ismaʿil Fazil Pasha, and Hama's district governor, Nazim Bey, both of whom were transferred from their posts by the end of the year.[94] Even the minister of interior, Talat Pasha, had come to accept that injustice had been done to the Ismaʿilis. Writing to Grand Vizier İbrahim Hakkı Pasha (d. 1918), Talat noted: 'regarding their [the Ismaʿilis'] request to worship freely and have the money and valuables returned to their rightful owners, it has been established that the former governor of Syria, Ismaʿil Fazil Pasha, and the former district governor of Hama, Nazim Bey, had violently seized and embezzled 9,000 lira in cash and 3,000 lira worth of jewellery and in this manner the School of Agriculture has been founded.' He remarked further that at a recent sitting of parliament members had agreed the money should be deposited into a bank and returned to those affected by the seizure.[95] In late autumn 1910, unexpectedly, Nazim Bey promised to transfer 6,000 lira from the fund for the School of Agriculture to a bank in Beirut. This would suggest his superiors were pressing him to return at least some of the money especially since the school was about to open. This money, however, was for the aforementioned notables in Hama, ʿAbd al-Qadar al-Shishakli and his associates, not for the Ismaʿilis.[96]

Some things were working in the Ismaʿilis' favour. Evidently Talat Pasha had begun to carefully consider Shaykh Nasir's petitions because he was soon allowed to return to Salamiyya.[97] Still, Talat Pasha remained opposed to the Ismaʿilis' collection of a 'confessional tax' (*mezhep vergisi*) and its remittance to the Aga Khan. For him this was

93 Darling 2013, chapters 8 and 9; Karpat 2001, 381.
94 BEO., 3778/283291 (12 July 1910); BEO., 3802/285113 (8 September 1910); BEO., 3814/285999 (21 October 1910); BEO., 3814/286048 (24 October 1910).
95 BEO., 3661/274540 (26 December 1910), fol. 3.
96 DH. MTV. 18/4 (4 November 1910), fols. 2-4.
97 Al-Khawabi 1933, 258.

a matter of fiscal responsibility, or better, fiscal duty. After all, the Ismaʿilis were Ottoman subjects and as such owed allegiance to the Empire in the very least by paying their taxes and providing military service. Talat Pasha clearly thought this line of reasoning important when writing the grand vizier. He argued that the community could not bear the burden of being double taxed: 'the people were duty-bound to pay not just state taxes but this confessional tax too.' This, he continued, 'was given every year and inappropriately held in a purse, and when the aforementioned Shaykh [Nasir] returned to the area [to collect the tax] it disrupted public order and security' (*asayiş-i dahiliyi ihlal edecek*).[98]

Under pressure from the Ministry of Interior, in spring 1911 the governor of Damascus ordered a provincial inspection committee (*heyet-i teftişiye*) to investigate the Ismaʿilis' complaints. The head of the inspection committee, Bahjat Bey, asked Salamiyya's district official, Ismaʿil al-Shihabi, about the veracity of the Ismaʿilis' accusations. Ismaʿil al-Shihabi was adamant the money had been collected for building a school in the town and that Nazim Bey did nothing wrong. He remarked that he had no record of the exact amount of money which the Ismaʿilis claimed to have lost but blamed a few of their notables 'who lead the ignorant people' (*cühela-ı halka rehberlik etmekte bulunan*). According to Ismaʿil al-Shihabi, what these notables had really done was to deceive several hundred Ismaʿilis into giving them money under the pretext of remitting it as zakat to the Aga Khan in India. Their real intention, the district official claimed, had been to keep the cash and jewellery for themselves. Learning of the plot, some of the cheated Ismaʿilis had notified the local court. When the accused were asked to respond, they provided written testimony to the effect that the money and valuables were for an agricultural school. Ismaʿil al-Shihabi's story was clearly designed to exculpate both Nazim Bey and himself from any wrongdoing.[99]

Bahjat Bey's preliminary report concluded that many Ismaʿilis had stopped their remittance of zakat to the Aga Khan because of the previous trials and tribulations. The disaffected Ismaʿilis now attempted to excuse themselves from payment and went to authorities complaining that Shaykh Nasir had demanded an annual confessional tax from them. Bahjat Bey admitted that this communal division piqued Nazim Bey's interest and that the official then seized the cash and valuables. Contrary to what the Ismaʿili informants had hoped, Nazim Bey kept their money and jewellery, actions which, Bahjat Bey acknowledged, a mufti had subsequently ruled unlawful. The head of the inspection committee also noted another disagreement that arose among the Ismaʿilis after the cash and valuables had been confiscated. Aiming to increase their chances of getting the money and valuables back, some Ismaʿilis explained that the tax was in fact to fund a school – hence the differences in the aforementioned petitions over the exact purpose of the money and valuables. Bahjat Bey, moreover, attached documentation showing that several Ismaʿili notables had donated (*teberru eylemiş*) roughly 93 acres of land for the project. Regardless, the report con-

98 BEO., 3661/274540 (26 December 1910), fol. 3.
99 BEO., 3884/291293 (12 March 1911), fol. 10.

cluded, the Ismaʿilis wanted their money, valuables and the land on which the school was built to be returned to them.[100]

Throughout 1911, the Ismaʿilis continued to request the return of their money and jewellery. They wrote the grand vizier, arguing that nothing yet had been returned despite assurances from the head of the inspection committee that because Nazim Bey had acted unlawfully, the money and property could be reclaimed.[101] Other supplicants again appealed to the shariʿa and got a mufti to issue a fatwa on the matter with special reference to the alms going to the Aga Khan who, it was emphasised, was from the Prophet's family.[102] Finally, in late spring 1911, the Ismaʿilis from Salamiyya sent several representatives to Istanbul.[103]

In the meantime, the School of Agriculture had opened. It accepted up to 20 students a year from all over Syria, offered a three-year course in agriculture at the secondary level, and there were plans to provide students with boarding at the school lodges once all building works had finished.[104] The school began to appoint staff as well. Its first director was a graduate of the Halkalı Agricultural Training School in Istanbul, Ahmad Wasfi Zakariyya (d. 1964), who remained at his post until 1917 when he was conscripted into the Ottoman army. Zakariyya, a historian in his own right, described how he spent considerable time preparing the school for its first cohort. Zakariyya designed the curriculum from scratch which required his translation of the newest texts on agriculture from French to Arabic. He also began planting nurseries on the expansive land which the school had acquired from the Ismaʿilis and sought government support to import farming equipment from Europe.[105]

Zakariyya's activities had inadvertently jeopardised the Ismaʿilis' chances of getting anything back. Responding to the head of the provincial inspection committee, the governor of Syria, ʿAli Bey, stated that the return of any money or valuables to the Ismaʿilis was unlikely because orders to purchase new farming equipment from Europe and pay school staff had already been budgeted. As for the land which the community wanted back, it had been requisitioned by the Ministry of Forestry, Minerals and Agriculture (*Orman ve Maadin ve Ziraat Nezareti*). In his statement, ʿAli Bey called Nazim Bey and Ismaʿil al-Shihabi 'very fine men'. He suggested, instead, the Ismaʿilis had collected the money and jewellery for the school but once the project was given the go-ahead, some of them had changed their minds and requested the return of their contributions. More Ismaʿilis soon joined in the request. ʿAli Bey agreed with the local court's findings that the Ismaʿili notables had coerced the community into supporting their calls to return the cash, valuables and land.[106]

100 BEO., 3884/291293 (12 March 1911) fol. 3; BEO., 3884/291293 (26 March 1911), fol. 13.
101 BEO., 3884/291293 (10 April 1911), fol. 24; BEO., 3884/291293 (21 April 1911), fol. 5.
102 BEO., 3884/291293 (17 April 1911), fol. 2.
103 BEO., 3884/291293 (6 May 1911), fol. 27; BEO., 3884/291293 (3 June 1911), fol. 26.
104 BEO., 3884/291293 (12 March 1911), fol. 10.
105 Zakariyya 1934, 269.
106 BEO., 3884/291293 (10 March 1911), fol. 9.

The head of the inspection committee, Bahjat Bey, continued to solicit information from officials in Damascus, Hama, Salamiyya, Beirut, Latakia and Markab. The administrative council in Latakia had also been investigating the matter and come to similar conclusions. The Ismaʿilis in al-Khawabi, a sub-district (*nahiye*) of Latakia, had lost money and property as well and petitioned to get it back. Early on officials had been sent to Markab where they requested those who wanted their money and jewellery back to sign a receipt (*makbuz senedi*).[107] After waiting a year and a half, however, the money and valuables had still not been returned. Minutes from a council meeting in Latakia stated that the Ismaʿilis who had collected the money claimed it was indeed to fund a school but that this apparently had not been disclosed to the rest of the community. The council also admitted the money and jewellery had been confiscated by authorities in Salamiyya and used to build the School of Agriculture. Nevertheless, there was no implication of official wrongdoing.[108]

The presence of several Ismaʿilis and their legal counsel in Istanbul must have made an impact on officials because shortly after they left the capital, the cabinet (*meclis-i vükela*) met to discuss the matter. The two times ministers discussed the Ismaʿilis' situation, little was decided. They agreed officials had taken money and valuables from the community in Markab and Salamiyya but this was to fund a school, which was something the Ismaʿilis in Salamiyya supported. In any case, the money was now needed to import farming equipment from Europe and so could not be returned. The ministers noted that provincial officials would soon notify those in Markab that the return of their money and jewellery was not possible. The ministers recommended instead a primary school be built there or somewhere nearby.[109] It is unclear whether some Ismaʿilis had conspired against their coreligionists for their own personal gain, as the provincial inspection had concluded; or whether officials had extorted money and valuables from the sultan's subjects for their own personal gain, as the Ismaʿilis had claimed. What is obvious, however, was that despite the Ismaʿilis' petitioning, they were not getting their money, jewellery and land back.

7. Conclusion

In spring 1905, English writer (and spy) Gertrude Bell (d. 1926) came across a group of prisoners near Homs and enquired about them. Her guide replied,

> They are deserters from the Sultan's army: may God reward them according to their deeds! Moreover, they are Ismailis [sic.] from Selemiyyeh, and they worship a strange god who lives in the land of Hind. And some say she is a woman, and for that reason they worship her. And every year she sends an embassy to this country

107 BEO., 3884/291293 (14 December 1909), fol. 21.
108 BEO., 3884/291293 (14 April 1910), fol. 19.
109 MV., 155/80 (21 August 1911), fol. 1; BEO., 3952/296372 (12 October 1911), fol. 9; MV., 157/77 (21 October 1911), fol 1.

> to collect the money that is due to her, and even the poorest of the Ismailis [sic.] provide her with a few piastres. And yet they declare that they are Muslims: who knows what they believe?[110]

Persecuting the Ismaʿilis was made all the easier because of misperceptions such as this. The disloyal identity imposed on the Ismaʿilis emboldened officials like Nazim Bey and Ismaʿil al-Shihabi, who acted with impunity against them, using violence for personal aggrandisement. Perceptions thus informed policy and correcting the Ismaʿilis' beliefs through state schools and mosques became a priority from 1907 onwards. Even the interrogation notes from the 1902-1908 trials fixated on the Ismaʿilis' beliefs.[111]

The policy might have had some results. During World War I, officials from the Ottoman Ministry of Education arrived in the village of Halba. They were left somewhat bewildered that it had been designated the district centre of Akkar, north-east of Tripoli. It was as if the preceding half-century of reforms had barely made an impression on the village and villagers. Halba had plain buildings, few inhabitants (because of the war), and those who had stayed suffered from poor health and famine (dengue and locusts plagued Syria at the time). The mosque had no minaret and the villagers drank wine. Yet, to the surprise of officials, the Ismaʿilis of Halba prayed with the Sunni villagers five times per day and kept the fast during Ramadan. The officials knew that as one of the most backwardly-perceived communities in the Empire, the Ismaʿilis served as a yardstick to which the success of Ottomanisation and Sunnitisation could be measured. The officials remained sceptical of the Ismaʿilis' sincerity, but that reforms appeared to be making some headway offered a much-needed glimmer of hope amid the wartime carnage.[112]

All this seems to suggest that a sectarian cleavage had disturbed relations between the Ottoman state and its Ismaʿili subjects. This, however, was less of a sectarian issue than of imperial politics. Both the 1902-1908 trials and the later persecution were sanctioned because of the Ismaʿilis' connection to the British through their imam, the Aga Khan. Before the Ismaʿilis had pledged allegiance to the Aga Khan in Bombay, and before officials knew about it, the community was of no concern whatsoever. Yet in an era of heightened imperial competition, the Ottoman Empire began to demand clear and unambiguous articulations of loyalty. On the basis of very little evidence – a few letters and some possibly coerced statements – perceptions of the Ismaʿilis changed from ambivalent to alarming. They were now regarded as dangerous and disloyal and had to be made into good Ottomans. This logic was common enough that Nazim Bey and others thought little about the consequences which might result from their abuse of the Ismaʿilis.

Imperial politics created fears of a fifth column. The Ismaʿilis' newfound religious and, by extension, fiscal loyalty to the Aga Khan was, above anything, the problem.

110 Bell 1907, 195-196.
111 DH. TMİK. M., 255/23/24 (29 September 1907), fols. 2-3.
112 Al-Tamimi and Bahjat 1916, 242-245.

The Aga Khan frequently crisscrossed the Indian Ocean and Mediterranean, travelling to visit the Ismaʿilis who lived in the Gulf and East Africa and to maintain good political relations with monarchies across Europe, especially the British. The Aga Khan wrote numerous articles in which his pro-British views were laid bare. He also tried to intervene on several occasions during the trials and tribulations. His interference, however, was undercut by those with the wherewithal to see his involvement as only confirming the charges of treason against the community. But the Aga Khan was a Pan-Islamist, too, especially during his presidency of the All-India Muslim League.[113] This role led to a peculiar partnership between the Aga Khan and the Ottoman Ministry of Foreign Affairs (*Hariciye Nezareti*) with the aim of funding a mosque in London whilst, at the same time in Syria, the Ismaʿilis' money and jewellery had been confiscated and used to build the School of Agriculture.[114] His Pan-Islamic rhetoric notwithstanding, the Aga Khan was a political and religious figure beholden to the British crown.

Authorities in Istanbul took some action against provincial officials and carefully considered the Ismaʿilis' petitions. Although the money, jewellery and land were never recovered, Nazim Bey was transferred to Van and Ismaʿil al-Shihabi was removed from his office in Salamiyya explicitly because of his predations.[115] Despite these attempts to render justice, the Ismaʿilis collectively remained under suspicion until the end of the Empire.

The history of the founding of the School of Agriculture points not to a breakdown of co-operation among different ministries and departments of government but to a bureaucracy that worked ruthlessly to save the Empire from clear and more subtle threats. These anxieties encouraged violence and informed policy. Unhappily for the thousands of Ismaʿilis in Syria, the hope to get some protection through the Aga Khan was a political miscalculation and was what ultimately put them in direct opposition to the state's first priority: imperial survival. The history behind the school's founding is a snapshot of the new relations between the late Ottoman state and its Ismaʿili subjects; relations marked by a confluence of fear and its attendant violence.

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113 The Aga Khan III 1954, *passim*.
114 Ansari 2011, 87-98.
115 DH. ŞFR., 459/99 (31 January 1915).

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