

His Highness the Aga Khan: Reminiscences of over Six Decades

By Seyyed Hossein Nasr

In the Name of God, The Most Merciful, The Most Compassionate

I am grateful to be given this opportunity to write a few words about reminiscences concerning His Highness Prince Karim Aga Khan on the occasion of his Diamond Jubilee.



I have known him personally for over six decades and have met him in places as far apart as Cambridge, Massachusetts, in the USA, Aiglemont, Gouvieux, in France, and Tehran in my home country of Iran. The trajectory of the meeting of the lines of his noble family and mine goes back to even before Prince Karim and I met in the mid-1950s at Harvard. When Pakistan became independent, my uncle, Seyyed Ali Nasr, became Iran's first ambassador to the newly founded nation and soon became close friends with His Highness Sir Sultan Mohamed Shah, Aga

Khan III, Prince Karim's grandfather, to the extent that later when Sir Sultan Mohamed Shah and the Begum would come to Iran, they would visit the Nasr family home in Tehran.

When I went to Harvard in 1954, I founded the Harvard Islamic Society, the first Islamic Society to be established in an American University. Among its seven original members was the late Prince Sadruddin Aga Khan, Prince Karim's uncle with whom I became good friends. Shortly thereafter, when as a teaching fellow at Harvard I was giving a lecture on Islam, I met the young Prince Karim who was then a student in my class. We became close friends and he would occasionally even visit our home where my mother, who was then residing in the Boston area, would cook Persian food for him which he appreciated like most other things Persian.

It was in this period that during a university holiday he was called away to Europe to visit his grandfather, Sir Sultan Mohamed Shah, during his last illness, and on his passing on July 11, 1957, Prince Karim was, according to the hereditary customs of the Shi'a Imami Ismaili Muslims, appointed by the Last Will of the late Imam to succeed to the title of 'Aga Khan' and to be Imam and Pir of his community. He was 20 at the time. When the young Prince Karim, now Imam and Aga Khan IV, returned to Cambridge, we continued our discussions but on a deeper level about Islam, its art and philosophy, Twelver Shi'ism and its relation to Ismailism and the whole question of *imāmah* or the Imamate in addition to many other related subjects. I would often speak to him about the fact that Ismailism was and remains a part of the totality of Shi'ism and therefore of Islam, and I was very glad to see that soon he added the name Shi'a to the official name of the branch of Ismailism of which he was now the *hādīr* Imam.

When I returned to Iran in 1958 my relation with His Highness continued. He wanted to have a new generation of Ismaili intellectual leaders trained and, to that end, he sent several very gifted Ismaili students to Tehran University where I was teaching and they completed their doctorate under my care. His keen interest in the Islamic intellectual tradition combined with devotion to Islamic art and architecture was and is unique among major Islamic leaders.

The early Sixties were the hey-day of Arab nationalism, both Nasserism and the Ba'th movement, the latter led ideologically by Christian Arabs

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