

# Isma'ilis - Minority Rights Group

## Isma'ilis

There are thought to be around 15,000 Isma'ilis in Yemen, mainly concentrated in Jabal Haraz, near Manakha, west of Sana'a, but a few live on the Saudi border at Najran oasis, with a larger number inside Saudi Arabia. They are Musta'lis, following the line of al-Musta'li in the succession dispute with his brother Nizar in Fatimid Cairo in 1094. Most belong to the Sulaymani sub-branch, following another succession dispute in 1591; a few others adhere to the Bombay-based Daudi sub-branch.

## History

Isma'ilis form another branch of Shi'a Islam that is distinct from both Twelver and Zaydi faiths. While Isma'ilis divide into various branches and subgroups, in Yemen they mainly belong to the Sulaymaniya and Dawoodiya (commonly known as Bohra) groups. Isma'ilis in Yemen have had a history of persecution dating back to the imamate, which at times prompted their exile within Yemen, mainly to Haraz, and to other parts of the world, including India where most Bohras are found today. As a result of the importance they place on their shrines, Isma'ilis have constantly been accused of polytheism. The secretive nature of their faith is largely a result of the denigration they suffered following the fall of the Fatimid dynasty, and continue to suffer to this day due to prejudices about their belief and practices.

## Current issues

Isma'ilis have reportedly been marginalized, and were excluded from political representation in Yemen, including at the level of the 2013-14 National Dialogue Conference. A significant number have reportedly left the country for India since the outbreak of civil conflict in Yemen.

In July 2015, the Yemen branch of ISIS claimed an attack on a Dawoodi Isma'ili mosque in Sana'a, reportedly accusing Dawoodi Isma'ilis of supporting the Houthis. In a statement that followed the explosion, IS stated that the attack was part of a 'wave of military security operations in revenge for Muslims against the Houthi 'rejectors', and that the explosion targeted a 'temple belonging to the Isma'ili Bohra, who support the polytheist Houthis'. Attacks against Dawoodi Isma'ilis in Aden have also been reported, including threats and accusations made against them of supporting the Houthis, which prompted some of the city's Dawoodi Isma'ilis to leave the country for Djibouti. With the beginning of the war, the Indian government also evacuated thousands of Indians caught in Yemen, including at least 140 Dawoodi Isma'ilis who were in Aden on a pilgrimage, some of whom had family ties in Yemen. Incidents of kidnapping of Isma'ilis have reportedly been on the rise since the conflict started, some in Sana'a and others in Aden. While in a few cases the kidnappers had reportedly requested a ransom, the reasons for some of the kidnappings were unknown.

*Updated January 2018.*



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