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Isma'ili Shias

Profile

The Ismailis are considered an offshoot of Shia Islam, and the split with the mainstream Shi'ism occurred over the recognition of the Seventh Imam.

The Ismailis of Syria are the Misaris, who were originally found in al-Ladhiqiyah Province. Since the times of the Ottoman Empire, most of them can be found in the south of Salamiyah. A few thousand Ismailis also live in the mountains west of Hamah and several thousand in al-Ladhiqiyah.

Ismailis believe in two imams, the visible and the hidden, with the identity of the hidden imam not known to the community. Ismailis generally follow the religious practice of the Shia Twelvers in prayers, fasts, and Quranic observations.

Most Isma'ilis live in Salamiya, east of Hama, with smaller communities centred around Masyaf and Qadmus in the southern part of the coastal mountain range.

Historical context

The Syrian Isma'ilis established themselves in the coastal mountain range south of the main Alawi areas under direction from Alamut. In the twelfth century they acquired the major fortress of Banyas, and also Qadmus and Masyaf, from where they inspired fear in both Muslim and crusader rulers. They became divided into two main groups, the Hajjawis and Suwaydanis, following a leadership succession dispute.

In the first half of the nineteenth century, the community was decimated by conflict with Alawi tribes, with which there was long-standing rivalry, and by punitive government expeditions. Thereafter, substantial numbers moved to the marginal zone on the desert frontier around Salamiya.

Like the Alawis and Druze, individual Isma'ilis eagerly enrolled in *Les Troupes Speciales* under French rule, and later in the Ba'ath. Although a number of Isma'ilis have continued to enjoy senior posts in government, they have been carefully excluded from substantive power. Isma'ilis in Salamiya have advanced economically much faster than those in Masyaf.

Current issues

For most intents and purposes, the Ismailis are considered as Shia. In state schools, Isma'ili pupils share classes in Islam with Sunnis and Shia alike.

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