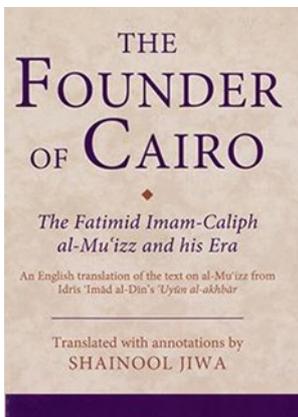




READING GUIDE



The Founder of Cairo: The Fatimid Imam-Caliph al-Mu'izz and his Era

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Even as Europe fragmented after the fall of Rome, another success story emerged in Egypt. I have a special interest in this story; it concerns my ancestors, the Fatimid Caliphs, who founded the city of Cairo 1000 years ago. They were themselves Shia in an overwhelmingly dominant Sunni culture, and for nearly two centuries they led a strong pluralistic society, welcoming a variety of Islamic interpretations as well as people of Christian, Jewish and other backgrounds.

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His Highness the Aga Khan: The LaFontaine-Baldwin Lecture (Toronto, Canada), 15 October 2010



GUIDING QUESTIONS

- 1 What inspiration can be drawn from the life and times of the Fatimid Imam-caliph al-Mu‘izz?
- 2 How can this period of history serve to help with a better understanding of the ways in which different Muslim communities can live and work together?
- 3 In what ways do Imam-caliph al-Mu‘izz’s policies illustrate ideals of just governance and religious tolerance for other faith communities such as Christians and Jews who lived in the Fatimid Empire?
- 4 What resonances can be discerned in the teachings of Imam-caliph al-Mu‘izz and the current Imam of the Ismailis, Prince Karim

INTRODUCTION

In 909 CE, the Ismailis succeeded in establishing a state in North Africa and Imam al-Mahdi became the first caliph of the Fatimid dynasty.

The dynasty was named after Fatima, the Prophet’s daughter and Imam ‘Ali’s wife, through whom the Shi‘i Ismaili imams traced their ancestry. The early North African phase of the Fatimid dynasty consisted of the rule of four Imam-caliphs: al-Mahdi (d. 934CE), al-Qa’im (d. 946 CE), al-Mansur (d. 953 CE) and al-Mu‘izz (d. 975 CE).

These Imam-caliphs succeeded in consolidating their rule in North Africa despite several rebellions and challenges from rival powers, including the Abbasids, the Umayyads of Spain, and the Byzantines, the Christian empire centred in Constantinople. In 969 CE, during Imam-caliph al-Mu‘izz’s reign, the Fatimids expanded from North Africa into Egypt, founding the city of Cairo as their new capital, ushering in the new era which transformed the Fatimids from a regional power into a successful empire, which would be characterised by its intellectual and cultural achievements, as well as its spirit of tolerance.



Figure 1: Al-Azhar Park, Cairo, Egypt

“Al-Mu‘izz [li-Din Allah] entered Cairo accompanied by all those who had gone [earlier] to receive him, along with all his sons, brothers, paternal uncles and the rest of the sons of al-Mahdi. The coffins of his ancestors, al-Mahdi, al-Qa’im and al-Mansur, were also brought with him. His entry into Cairo and his arrival at his palace took place on Tuesday, 7 Ramaḍan 362 [11 June 973]. Thus, Egypt, after having been the seat of the amirate, became the seat of the caliphate.” (p. 1)

THE FATIMID FRAMEWORK

During his lifetime, Prophet Muhammad was the temporal and spiritual leader of the believers. According to Shi‘i belief, following the death of Prophet Muhammad, while the line of prophets ceased, the authority for guiding the community’s interpretation of their faith continued through a line of designated Imams from the progeny of the Prophet, who are entrusted with continuing the *ta’wil* and *ta’lim* of Allah’s final message. Considering themselves to be the lineal descendants of the Prophet and designated successors to his spiritual and temporal authority, the Fatimids declared themselves as the Imam-caliphs

of the Muslim world in 909 CE. In doing so, they directly challenged the authority of the Abbasid caliphs who had been reigning over much of the Muslim world since 750 CE. Amongst the distinctive features of Fatimid rule was the model of inclusive governance which they developed to reign over their vast, religiously and ethnically diverse empire, which included Sunni, Shi‘i and Khariji Muslims as well as Christians and Jews.

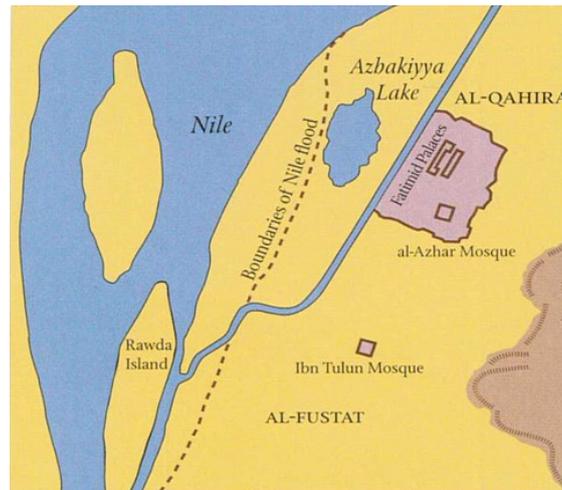


Figure 2: Map of Fatimid Cairo

Abu Tamim Ma'add succeeded to the Fatimid caliphate as the fourth Imam-caliph at the age of 21 in the year 953 CE. He took on the title al-Mu'izz li-Din Allah, 'the one who strengthens the religion of God'. In a poem marking this momentous occasion, the famous Andalusian poet Ibn Hani al-Andalusi composed the following verses:

"Whoso seeks guidance in a caliph other than al-Mu'izz [shall know that] verily guidance in [any] other than him is but misguidance.

He [is the one] to whose merit the Qur'an bears witness, [something] confirmed by the Torah and the Gospels.

It is possible to describe him except that likeness and images do not apply [to him]" (p. 11)

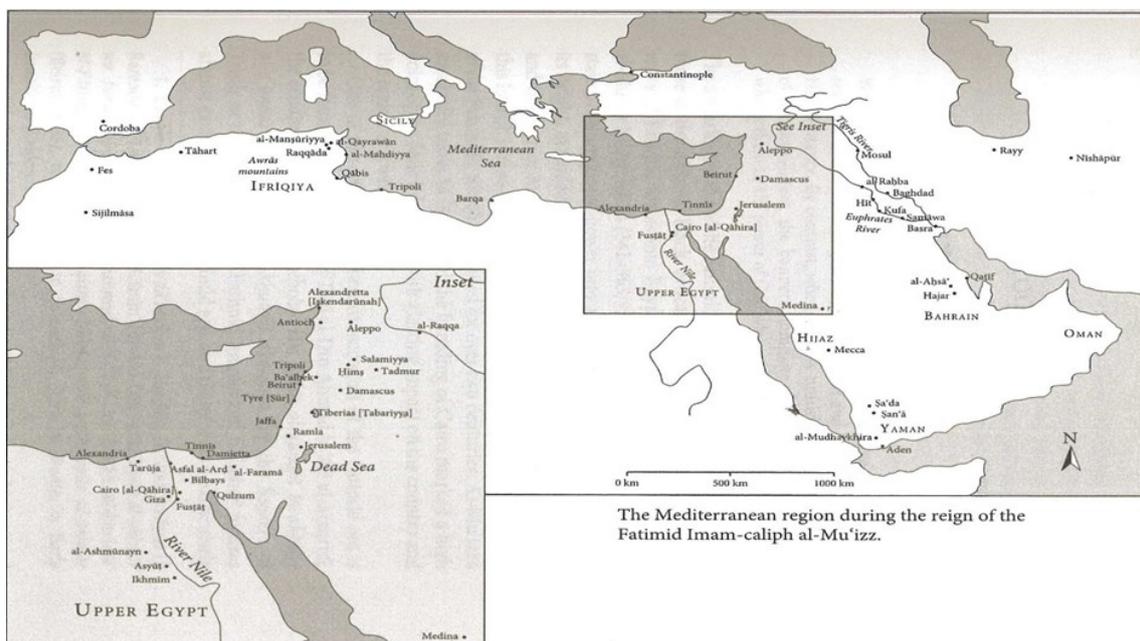


Figure 3: The Mediterranean region during the reign of the Fatimid Imam-caliph al-Mu'izz



Idris ‘Imad al-Din begins his chapter on Imam-caliph al-Mu‘izz by establishing the theological proofs for his Imamate, linking it to the appointment of Hazrat Ali and the succession of the Imams in his progeny. Drawing upon first-hand accounts taken from al-Qadi al-Nu‘man, Idris positions the Imam-caliph within the Shi‘i Ismaili framework of divinely-inspired leadership.

Through his leadership, Imam-caliph al-Mu‘izz sought to institute just governance in the Fatimid Empire. In doing so, he drew upon the learning derived from his predecessors’ experiences. The Fatimid state in North Africa witnessed a number of internal and external challenges under the rule of the first three Fatimid Imam-caliphs, as they attempted to legitimise and consolidate their authority over the Mediterranean region. Having secured a major victory against the Kharijite rebel Abu Yazid (d. 947 CE), who had reduced Fatimid power to the gates of their capital al-Mahdiyya, Imam-caliph al-Mansur instituted a major milestone for a more inclusive model of governance. He appointed a Sunni Maliki governor over the city of Qayrawan, which was a bastion of Sunni scholarship at the time. As Dr Jiwa notes, “Al-Mansur’s explicit recognition of a Sunni *madhhab* as a ‘legitimate religious and legal

community’ has been labelled a ‘momentous development in Islamic government’.” (p. 14). Whilst recognising different faith traditions, the Fatimid Imam-caliphs also upheld the public performance of Shi‘i rituals, and Ismaili law was developed to serve as the state law.

***Ahl al-kitab*, literally means ‘People of the Book,’ also referred to as *ahl al-dhimma* (people under protection), a Qur’anic term used to designate Jews and Christians as believers in a revealed book. In the Qur’an, the term also refers to Sabians and whoever believes in God and the Last Day. The People of the Book held special legal status under Muslim rule. Being granted protection, in lieu of a poll tax, they were allowed to have their own religious authorities and follow their own religious laws.**

When the Fatimids conquered Egypt in 969 CE, Imam-caliph al-Mu‘izz drew upon his dynasty’s experience of having ruled in North Africa for over 60 years. The guarantee of safety (*aman*) which his general, Qa’id Jawhar al-Siqilli issued to the Egyptians reflects principles of inclusive governance which became the hallmark of their subsequent two-century rule in Egypt:

“I guarantee you God’s complete, universal safety, eternal and continuous, inclusive and perfect, renewed and confirmed through the passage of days and recurrence through the years....” (p. 212).



Figure 4: Inside the Al-Azhar Mosque

The *aman* sanctioned all Muslims, Sunni and Shia, to follow their own legal school (*madhhab*) and underwrite its practice:

“...Islam consists of one sunna and shari‘a followed [by all]. They are: [the right] to follow your madhhab (creed) or any other Muslim madhhab; to perform your obligations according to religious scholarship, to gather for them in your mosques and places of congregation; and to remain steadfast in the beliefs of the worthy ancestors from the Companions of the Prophet, may God be pleased with them, and of those who succeeded them....” (p. 212).

The *aman* document acknowledged the diversity of faiths and traditions within the *umma* and beyond. In the document, Imam-caliph al-Mu‘izz expressed his commitment to allow the people of Egypt to follow their own traditions, whether they were part of the Muslim *umma* or belonged to the *ahl al-kitab* (People of the Book), that is Christians and Jews. This inclusive attitude was significant given that prior to the Fatimid arrival in Egypt the country had suffered from incidents of sectarian conflicts between Sunni and Shi‘i communities.



Al-Qadi al-Nu‘man was born around 903 CE into a learned family in Qayrawan, in North Africa. He entered into the service of the Ismaili Imam-caliph ‘Abd Allah al-Mahdi and served the first four Fatimid Imam-caliphs in different capacities. Al-Nu‘man was a prolific author and wrote over forty books ranging from numerous legal compendia to collection of Hadiths and works on esoteric Ismaili doctrines.

The institution of the Fatimid Ismaili *da‘wa*, through their network of *da‘is*, sought to actively propagate the cause of the Fatimid Ismaili Imam.

The Ismaili *da‘wa* was seen as a ‘calling to the truth’ (*dawat al-haqq*) and the *da‘is* were presented as “model teachers and exemplars” (p. 21), who were calling people to recognise the Ismaili Imam as the legitimate descendant of the Prophet and the sole authority to interpret God’s message for their age.

Under Imam-caliph al-Mu‘izz, the Ismaili *da‘wa* flourished across many regions of the Muslim world, including in Sind and Multan in the Indian Sub-continent, as well as in parts of present-day Iran, Iraq, and Syria, as well as in Mecca and Medina in present-day Saudi Arabia.

Additionally, knowledge and learning was promoted in the Fatimid realms from the inception of their rule. The *majalis al-hikma* (sessions of wisdom) were held for various groups of people in the Fatimid palace as well as in the designated mosques, for local believers as well as visitors to the city, and exclusive sessions were also held for women. Idris provides an eye-witness account of one such *majlis* in the words of al-Qadi al-Nu‘man:

“When the Commander of the Faithful, al-Mu‘izz li-Din Allah, opened the gate of mercy for the believers and turned his attention to his followers by his benefaction and grace, he gave me books on esoteric knowledge (‘ilm al-baṭin) and instructed me to read out from them in a session every Friday at the palace which during his lifetime was much frequented. People thronged to it and the place became crowded.” (pp. 24-5).

REPRESENTATIONS OF IMAM-CALIPH AL-MU‘IZZ: AL-MAQRIZI AND IDRIS

Two of the major reference points from which information on the Fatimids may be derived are the author of *‘Uyun al-akhbar wa funun al-athar* (Sound sources and trustworthy traditions), Idris ‘Imad al-Din, and the author of *Itti‘āz al-hunafa’*, the Sunni Mamluk historian, Taqi al-Din Ahmad b. ‘Ali al-Maqrizi (d. 1442 .E). Both of them lived at the same time, but in different regions. Whilst both authors



may have had different motivations for writing on the Fatimids, a brief survey of their lives and writings provides an insight into the approaches they adopted in their analysis of Imam-caliph al-Mu‘izz and his reign.

Al-Maqrizi was known as an erudite scholar and specialist in many fields of study, but he is most famous for his works of history. His *Itti‘āz al-hunafa’* merits special attention as it is a multi-volume work dedicated solely to the Fatimids. His keen interest in the Fatimids has been attributed to a variety of reasons. Firstly, as a proud Egyptian, al-Maqrizi would have been drawn to the Fatimids as the first Muslim Imam-caliphs who made Egypt the heart of their empire, and founded Cairo, al-Maqrizi’s birth-city. Previously, the Idris ‘Imad al-Din, on the other hand, had a much closer interest in the Fatimids due to his position as the *da‘ī al-muṭlaq* or ‘chief *da‘i*’ with absolute authority of the Yemeni Tayyibi Ismaili community. During the period in which he was *da‘ī al-muṭlaq*, Yemen was undergoing turbulent times with various conflicts taking place between different dynasties, and rulers. Idris navigated through these challenges with great political acumen and was considered to be “an intrepid general and a honed statesman.” (p. 31)

Idris also achieved acclaim for his prolific scholarship on Ismaili history and doctrines. Dr Jiwa appropriately sums up the contribution which Idris’ *‘Uyun al-akhbar* has made to modern-day scholar-

Tayyibi Isma‘ilis are a branch of the Shi‘a Isma‘ilis, who, following the death of the 18th Fatimid Imam-caliph al-Mustansir (d. 1094 CE), held that it was his young infant son Tayyib who was appointed as the next Imam, and not his eldest son Nizar. The Tayyibis believe that the infant imam al-Tayyib went into concealment and, since then, the Musta‘li Imam in his line has continued in concealment. The concealed Imams are represented by the *da‘i al-muṭlaq*, who holds supreme authority to provide leadership to the various Tayyibi communities.

ship on the Fatimids and their period of rule, describing it as providing, “the most comprehensive medieval account of Ismaili history from its inception to the author’s own era. Idris’ portrayal of al-Mu‘izz and his reign is noteworthy as it is the most extensive extant account of this imam-caliph, which also happens to have been written from within the Ismaili *da‘wa* tradition.” (p. 2).

Umayyads (661-750 CE) had ruled from Damascus as their base, followed by the Abbasids (750 – 1258 CE), who reigned from Baghdad. Secondly, he may have also had a familial relationship with the dynasty. As Dr Jiwa explains, “Though he was a [Sunni] Shafi‘i jurist, al-Maqrizi traced his ancestry to the Fatimids, considering himself a scion of the sixth Fatimid Imam-caliph al-Hakim bi-Amr Allah.” (p. 26) As a result he would have felt a strong sense of attachment and affinity towards the Fatimid Imam-caliphs and their Empire.



IMAM-CALIPH AL-MU‘IZZ THROUGH THE LENS OF THE ‘UYŪN

Idris begins his discussion on the reign of Imam-caliph al-Mu‘izz through a theological framework, as noted above, seeking to establish his imamate through stories regarding his superior qualities, his inherited knowledge from his forefathers and his knowledge of prophetic wisdom. “The primary purpose of Idris’ narrative is thus to affirm the continuing succession to the imamate. Consequently, presenting its recipient as possessing the requisite attributes and qualities forms the initial focus of his exposition on al-Mu‘izz.” (p. 36) Having established Imam-caliph al-Mu‘izz as the supreme, legitimate Imam, Idris then provides a detailed account of the events which led to the founding of Cairo as the Fatimid capital in Egypt.

While chronicling the developments in the reign of Imam-caliph al-Mu‘izz, Idris infuses the narrative with anecdotes that, “highlight al-Mu‘izz’s status as an inheritor of divine wisdom... which exemplifies the exceptional characteristics... expected of an imam” (p. 38). Additionally, he provides insights on key figures of the Ismaili *da‘wa* and those who had a lasting impact in the Ismaili mission.

COMPARATIVE APPROACHES TO THE STUDY OF FATIMID HISTORY

Both Idris and al-Maqrizi had very varied reasons which underpinned their interest in the Fatimids. Whilst Idris’ account of Imam-caliph al-Mu‘izz is rooted in theology with a perspective that legitimises him as the true Imam, al-Maqrizi, who was ‘an intellectual protégé of Ibn Khaldun’ (p. 40), wrote from his own historical vantage point. In the Fatimids, al-Maqrizi saw a dynasty who had developed a successful model of governance and leadership, one that in his view merited to be emulated by successive monarchs, including the Sunni Mamluk rulers under whom al-Maqrizi served as a senior administrator.

Idris’ account of Imam-caliph al-Mu‘izz’s reign, while recounting historical events at length, also aims to inspire the readers with accounts of the life and teachings of Imam-caliph al-Mu‘izz, which reinforce his claim to the imamate. His purpose in writing the *‘Uyun* was to, “Record the historical unfolding of the divine plan that had been designated for the Ismaili imamate... Consequently, while the recording of human engagement is necessary and important, essentially for Idris, it served a larger, symbolic ethos and moralising function.” (p. 44).

In sum, read in tandem, the works of al-Maqrizi and Idris together provide the most comprehensive rendering of the Fatimid era.



CONCLUSION

The Founder of Cairo provides an engaging account of the reign of the 4th Fatimid Imam-caliph al-Mu‘izz li-Din Allah, and will appeal to all those with a keen interest in Fatimid, Shi‘i and Ismaili studies as well as those interested in the history of the Middle East and the Mediterranean region.

“In our excavations and our historical investigations, I constantly have been reminded that we were touching the very foundations of my ancestors, the Fatimids, and the pluralistic history and intellectual profile of this city and this country to which they contributed so profoundly. I am very humbled by the opportunity to return to Cairo, founded over a thousand years ago by the Fatimid Caliph Al-Muizz, to build on that history.”

Speech by His Highness the Aga Khan at the Inauguration of Al-Azhar Park (Cairo, Egypt), 25, March 2005

PASSAGES OF RELEVANCE

THE ROLE, FUNCTION AND STATUS OF THE IMAM

“The words of the imams are like an edifice, some parts of which strengthen and reinforce the others because they perceive with the light of God (*nur Allah*). From it they receive knowledge and through its wisdom they speak; from their ancestors they learn, for they are the proofs of God (*hujjatu’llah*), the Mighty, the Glorious, on earth. As God, the Sublime says, “Offspring one of the other (3:34).” (p. 63).

“God equates submission to the rightly-guided imams with submission to the Messenger, and submission to the Messenger with submission to Him. He said: ‘Obey God, and obey the Messenger, and those charged with authority among you’ (4:59)... The Light, O people, is sustained in us and the gift of your Lord is granted uninterrupted to us. So where are you going? Obey us and you will be rightly-guided. Hold fast on to our rope and you will find the right way.” (pp. 75-76).

“If his [Imam al-Mansur’s] sanctified body is absent from our sight and is transferred to the infinite mercy of God, the spiritual substance is connected and unsevered. All praise is due to God, the Sustainer of all worlds. Your master [Imam al-Mansur] has departed and your imam [al-Mu‘izz] has succeeded.” (p. 84).



“If God had not obligated all of creation to obey us and enjoined it with obedience to Him and His Messenger, and made it a religion through which [people] should worship, and appointed us to establish His religion, we would not have been concerned about who is loyal to us and who is disloyal... He [God] has bestowed on us His favours and benefactions such that we cannot thank Him enough... He has made us the imams of His creation, and He only accepts the obedience of those who obey them... In fact, God has made all His servants needy of us in matters pertaining to the world and of faith” (pp. 148-149).

Questions to Consider

1. What are the basic principles which form the foundation of the institution of the Shi‘i Imam and from where does the authority of the Imam stem?
2. How do the Shi‘i Imams act as a mediatory link between God and His creation?

ETHICAL LEADERSHIP

“[You shall have the right] to follow your *madhhab* (creed) or any other Muslim *madhhab*; to perform your obligations according to religious scholarship, to gather for them in your mosques and places of congregation; and to remain steadfast in the beliefs of the worthy ancestors from the Companions of the Prophet, may God be pleased with them, and of those who succeeded them....

I guarantee you God’s complete, universal safety, eternal and continuous, inclusive and perfect, renewed and confirmed through your families, your livestock, your estates and your quarters, and whatever you possess, be it modest or significant” (p. 16).

Questions to Consider

1. How can the *aman* (guarantee of safety) document issued on behalf of Imam-caliph al-Mu‘izz serve to elucidate the ways in which the Fatimids engaged with other faith traditions in their time?
2. What lessons can be drawn from the Fatimid period of history that are relevant for contemporary times?

IMAM’S QUEST FOR KNOWLEDGE

“It was reported from al-Qadi al Nu‘man that he said: I heard al-Mu‘izz expressing what he felt by saying, 'By God, I find no greater bliss, comfort and yearning than in seeking knowledge. If the people of this lower world were to discover this, they would renounce everything for it. If God in His majesty had not obligated me to attend to the exoteric matters of this world, to establish support for the people and to ensure their welfare, I would have renounced that in pursuit of knowledge and reflected over it. Nonetheless, the responsibility that I have been designated with concerning the matters of this world entails considerable knowledge for those who comprehend, and a proof for those who consider and contemplate.” (p. 107)



“Al-Qadi al Nu‘man narrated a similar report regarding Imam al-Mu‘izz li Din Allah. He said: 'One day while I was accompanying al-Mu‘izz li Din Allah to attend to a matter, something was mentioned concerning knowledge which had been discussed previously. He said:

I came across something similar a few nights ago and I know a work that discusses the issue, so I sent for it. However, the one who was to bring the book did not know its location. So I went in person to the library and opened some trunks. I began searching for that work in the place where I reckoned it should be. That was in the early evening. I leafed through the books. Every time I came across a text and thumbed through it, I saw something I wished to examine. Then another text would pass my hands and the same thing would happen. I continued standing, leafing through one text after another. So engrossed was I in what I was doing that I did not think to sit down. Only when it was midnight did I become aware of my prolonged standing after I felt a sharp pain in my leg. I left, and when I awoke (the next morning) the pain was still afflicting my leg.

I (al Nu‘man) said, 'By God, my master, this is the [true] yearning for knowledge, a longing the likeness of which has not been mentioned of anyone preceding the Commander of the Faithful...'” (p. 107)

Questions to Consider

What value does Imam-caliph al-Mu‘izz ascribe to the quest for knowledge?