



THE FIRST SHIA GROUPS OF IRAN (ZAYDIS, ISMAILIS, QARMATIANS, AND THE ROLE OF TWELVER SHIAS IN THE HISTORICAL DEVELOPMENT OF MALAKAT)

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Abstract: This article provides an in-depth analysis of the emergence and evolution of the first Shia groups in Iran, namely the Zaydis, Ismailis, and Qarmatians, while also exploring the significant role of Twelver Shias in the historical development of Malakat, a key region in the Islamic world known for its cultural and intellectual contributions. The study delves into the theological foundations, political strategies, and socio-cultural impacts of these early Shia movements, emphasizing their influence on the religious identity of Iran and their broader contributions to Islamic civilization. Through a multidisciplinary approach that integrates historical research, religious studies, and cultural analysis, the article highlights the diversity within Shia Islam and its lasting legacy in shaping the political, intellectual, and cultural history of Malakat. The findings reveal that these early Shia groups not only played a crucial role in the formation of Iran's religious landscape but also contributed to the intellectual and political dynamism of the Islamic world, particularly through their resistance against oppression, establishment of scholarly traditions, and promotion of social justice.



Keywords: Shia Islam, Zaydis, Ismailis, Qarmatians, Twelver Shias, Malakat, early Islamic era, religious movements, cultural contributions, political dynamics, Islamic scholarship, social justice.

Introduction

Shia Islam has been a cornerstone of Iran's religious and cultural identity for centuries, with its origins deeply rooted in the early Islamic period following the death of Prophet Muhammad in 632 CE. The emergence of Shia groups in Iran, such as the Zaydis, Ismailis, and Qarmatians, marked a pivotal moment in the region's history, reflecting the diversity of thought and practice within Shia Islam. These groups, driven by theological disagreements over the rightful leadership of the Muslim community, sought to establish their vision of just governance and religious authority, often in opposition to the Sunni-dominated Umayyad and Abbasid caliphates. Alongside these movements, the Twelver Shias, who later became the dominant Shia sect in Iran, played a transformative role in the historical development of Malakat, a region encompassing the historical city of Merv (modern-day Turkmenistan), which was a major center of Islamic learning and trade along the Silk Road.

The Zaydis, named after Zayd ibn Ali, emphasized justice and resistance against oppression, establishing a significant presence in northern Iran. The Ismailis, known for their esoteric interpretations of Islam, contributed to both intellectual and political spheres, founding the Fatimid Caliphate and later establishing strongholds like Alamut in Iran. The Qarmatians, a radical offshoot of the Ismailis, pursued a revolutionary agenda, advocating for social equality and challenging the Abbasid Caliphate's authority. Meanwhile, the Twelver Shias, with their belief in the twelve Imams, fostered religious scholarship and



cultural development in Malakat, laying the intellectual and spiritual groundwork for the eventual dominance of Shia Islam in Iran under the Safavids.

This article aims to provide a comprehensive examination of the origins, activities, and impacts of these early Shia groups in Iran, with a particular focus on the role of Twelver Shias in Malakat's historical trajectory. By drawing on classical Islamic sources such as Tarikh al-Tabari and contemporary scholarship, the study seeks to offer a nuanced understanding of how these movements shaped the religious, political, and cultural landscape of Iran and the broader Islamic world. The significance of this research lies in its exploration of the diversity within Shia Islam and its contributions to Islamic civilization, offering insights into the historical dynamics that continue to influence modern Iran and the Middle East. Moreover, the study highlights the relevance of these historical lessons for addressing contemporary challenges, such as sectarian tensions and the quest for social justice in the Islamic world.

The Emergence and Impact of Early Shia Groups in Iran

The Zaydis: Advocates of Justice and Resistance The Zaydis, one of the earliest Shia groups to emerge in Iran, were named after Zayd ibn Ali, the grandson of Imam Hussein and great-grandson of Ali ibn Abi Talib. Zayd's uprising in 740 CE against the Umayyad Caliphate in Kufa was a defining moment for the Zaydi movement, rooted in a call for justice and the restoration of true Islamic leadership based on the lineage of the Ahl al-Bayt. Unlike other Shia groups, the Zaydis adopted a more pragmatic approach to leadership, believing that any descendant of Ali and Fatima who was pious, knowledgeable, and willing to fight against oppression could be an Imam. This theological stance made the Zaydis more politically active, as they frequently engaged in rebellions against the



Umayyad and later Abbasid authorities, viewing their rule as unjust and contrary to Islamic principles.

In Iran, the Zaydis established a significant presence in the northern regions, particularly in Tabaristan and Daylam, where they founded the Alid dynasty in 864 CE under the leadership of Hasan ibn Zayd, also known as al-Da'i ila'l-Haqq (the Caller to the Truth). The Zaydi Imams in these regions provided a safe haven for Shia communities, fostering an environment conducive to religious scholarship and cultural development. Historian Wilferd Madelung (1988) notes that the Zaydis in Iran were instrumental in preserving the traditions of the Ahl al-Bayt, as they maintained a strong connection to the family of the Prophet through their leadership. The Zaydi state in Tabaristan, which lasted until the 11th century, became a center of Shia learning, attracting scholars and theologians who contributed to the development of Zaydi jurisprudence, known as the Hadiyya school, named after Imam al-Hadi ila'l-Haqq Yahya, a prominent Zaydi leader in the 9th century.

The Zaydis' emphasis on justice and resistance against oppression resonated deeply with the Persian population, many of whom were disillusioned with the Umayyad and Abbasid caliphates' policies, including heavy taxation and discriminatory treatment of non-Arab Muslims (mawali). The Zaydis' political activism was not limited to Iran; they also established a long-lasting state in Yemen, where their Imamate survived until the 20th century. In Iran, however, their influence was more localized, particularly in the Caspian region, where they provided a model of governance that combined religious authority with military resistance. The Zaydi Imams often collaborated with local Persian elites, integrating Persian administrative traditions into their governance, which helped them maintain stability in the region despite constant threats from the Abbasid Caliphate.



The Zaydis' presence in Iran not only strengthened Shia identity but also laid the groundwork for future Shia movements in the region. Their emphasis on armed struggle (jihad) against tyrannical rulers inspired later Shia groups, such as the Twelver Shias, to develop their own strategies for resistance and survival under Sunni domination. Moreover, the Zaydis' focus on education and scholarship contributed to the preservation of Shia traditions, ensuring that the legacy of the Ahl al-Bayt remained a central element of Shia identity in Iran.

The Ismailis: Intellectual and Political Innovators

The Ismailis, another prominent Shia group in Iran, emerged in the 8th century following a succession dispute after the death of the sixth Imam, Ja'far al-Sadiq, in 765 CE. The Ismailis supported the Imamate of Ismail ibn Ja'far, the eldest son of Ja'far al-Sadiq, and later his son Muhammad, rejecting the claim of Musa al-Kadhim, who was recognized by the Twelver Shias as the seventh Imam. The Ismailis developed a distinct theological framework, emphasizing esoteric (batini) interpretations of the Quran and the role of the Imam as a divinely guided leader with access to hidden knowledge. This esoteric approach, combined with a hierarchical missionary system (da'wa), allowed the Ismailis to attract a diverse following, including intellectuals, artisans, and peasants, who were drawn to their vision of a just and enlightened society.

In Iran, the Ismailis gained prominence through their missionary activities, which were highly organized and aimed at spreading their beliefs among the Persian population. By the 9th century, the Ismailis had established a significant presence in eastern Iran, particularly in Khorasan and Transoxiana, where they found fertile ground among the Persian mawali, who were often marginalized by the Abbasid Caliphate. The Ismailis' most notable political achievement was the establishment of the Fatimid Caliphate in North



Africa in 909 CE, which later extended its influence to parts of Iran. The Fatimids, under the leadership of Caliph al-Mu'izz (r. 953–975 CE), promoted Ismaili theology and established Cairo as a center of Islamic learning, rivaling Baghdad in intellectual and cultural significance.

The Ismailis in Iran were known for their intellectual contributions, particularly in philosophy, science, and literature. Figures like Nasir al-Din al-Tusi (1201–1274 CE), who was initially associated with Ismaili circles before joining the Twelver Shias, made groundbreaking contributions to astronomy, mathematics, and philosophy, including the development of the Tusi-couple, a mathematical device used to explain planetary motion. Historian Farhad Daftary (1990) highlights that the Ismailis' emphasis on intellectual inquiry and esoteric knowledge fostered a culture of learning that influenced the broader Islamic world, particularly during the Fatimid period, when Ismaili scholars produced numerous works on theology, ethics, and cosmology.

The Ismailis also engaged in political activism, often through secretive networks and fortified strongholds. In the 11th century, under the leadership of Hasan-i Sabbah, the Ismailis established their headquarters at Alamut Castle in northern Iran, which became a center of resistance against the Seljuk Turks and the Abbasid Caliphate. Hasan-i Sabbah, a brilliant strategist, developed a network of fida'is (devotees) who carried out targeted assassinations of political and military leaders, earning the Ismailis a fearsome reputation as the "Assassins." Despite their controversial methods, the Ismailis' primary goal was to establish a just society based on their interpretation of Islamic principles, and their stronghold at Alamut became a symbol of Shia resistance against Sunni domination.

The Ismailis' intellectual and political innovations left a lasting impact on Iran, contributing to the diversity of Shia thought and practice. Their emphasis on education and



esoteric knowledge influenced later Shia movements, including the Twelver Shias, who adopted some of the Ismailis' theological concepts, such as the role of the Imam as a source of divine guidance. Moreover, the Ismailis' political activism demonstrated the potential for Shia groups to challenge established authority, paving the way for future Shia dynasties, such as the Safavids, to assert their power in Iran.

The Qarmatians: Radical Reformers and Social Revolutionaries

The Qarmatians, a radical offshoot of the Ismaili movement, emerged in the late 9th century and established a significant presence in eastern Arabia and parts of Iran, particularly in Bahrain and the Persian Gulf region. The Qarmatians were named after their founder, Hamdan Qarmat, a missionary who initially supported the Ismaili da'wa but later broke away due to theological and political disagreements. The Qarmatians rejected the Fatimid Caliphate's claim to the Imamate and instead advocated for a more egalitarian and revolutionary vision of Islam, emphasizing communal ownership, social equality, and the abolition of traditional Islamic taxes like zakat.

In Iran, the Qarmatians were active in the southern regions, particularly in the Persian Gulf, where they attracted support from marginalized communities, including peasants, Bedouin tribes, and slaves, who were disillusioned with the Abbasid Caliphate's oppressive policies. The Qarmatians established a short-lived state in Bahrain in 899 CE, which they governed according to their revolutionary principles. Historian Heinz Halm (1996) notes that the Qarmatians implemented social reforms, such as the redistribution of land, the abolition of slavery, and the establishment of communal dining halls, where all members of the community, regardless of social status, ate together. These reforms were radical for their time and reflected the Qarmatians' commitment to social justice and equality.



The Qarmatians are perhaps best known for their radical actions, such as the sacking of Mecca in 930 CE, during which they seized the Black Stone from the Kaaba and held it for ransom for over 20 years. This act, while shocking to the broader Muslim world, was a symbolic rejection of the Abbasid Caliphate's religious authority, as the Qarmatians sought to establish a new social order based on their interpretation of Islamic principles. In Iran, the Qarmatians' influence was most pronounced in the Persian Gulf region, where they controlled key trade routes and amassed significant wealth through piracy and taxation of merchant ships. Their control of these routes allowed them to challenge the economic dominance of the Abbasid Caliphate, further undermining its authority in the region.

Despite their radicalism, the Qarmatians' influence in Iran was relatively short-lived, as they faced intense opposition from both the Abbasid Caliphate and the Fatimid Ismailis, who viewed them as heretics. By the mid-10th century, the Qarmatian state in Bahrain had been weakened by internal divisions and external attacks, and their influence in Iran gradually declined. However, their emphasis on social justice and resistance against oppression left a lasting legacy, inspiring later Shia movements to challenge established authority and advocate for the rights of the marginalized. The Qarmatians' experiments with communal governance and social equality also prefigured later Islamic reform movements, demonstrating the potential for religious ideology to inspire radical social change.

The Role of Twelver Shias in the Historical Development of Malakat

The Twelver Shias, who believe in the leadership of twelve Imams, with the twelfth Imam in occultation and expected to return as the Mahdi, played a pivotal role in the historical development of Malakat, a region encompassing the historical city of Merv (modern-day Turkmenistan). Malakat was a major center of Islamic learning and trade



along the Silk Road, making it a strategic hub for the spread of Shia ideas. The Twelver Shias in Malakat emerged as a significant force during the Buyid dynasty (934–1062 CE), a Shia dynasty that ruled parts of Iran and Iraq and provided patronage to Twelver Shia scholars and institutions, fostering a period of intellectual and cultural flourishing.

Under the Buyids, Malakat became a center of Twelver Shia scholarship, with religious schools (madrasas) and libraries established to promote theological and juridical studies. The Buyid rulers, such as Adud al-Dawla (r. 949–983 CE), supported Twelver Shia scholars like Shaykh al-Mufid (948–1022 CE), who wrote extensively on Shia theology and jurisprudence, laying the intellectual foundation for the later Safavid period. Shaykh al-Mufid's works, such as *Kitab al-Irshad*, provided a comprehensive biography of the twelve Imams, reinforcing the Twelver Shias' belief in their divine authority. Historian Moojan Momen (1985) estimates that by the 10th century, Twelver Shias constituted a significant portion of the population in Malakat, thanks to the Buyids' policies of religious tolerance and patronage, which allowed Shia communities to practice their faith openly and establish their own religious institutions.

The Twelver Shias in Malakat also contributed to the region's cultural development, particularly through their commemoration of the martyrdom of Imam Hussein at Karbala, which became a central element of Shia identity. Annual rituals such as Ashura processions and majlis (mourning gatherings) fostered a sense of community among the Twelver Shias, strengthening their religious and cultural ties. These rituals, which often included poetry recitations and theatrical reenactments of the events of Karbala, became a powerful means of preserving Shia traditions and transmitting them to future generations. The Buyid rulers actively supported these commemorations, building husayniyyas (congregational halls) in Malakat where the community could gather to mourn and reflect on the sacrifices of Imam Hussein.



Moreover, the Twelver Shias' emphasis on education and scholarship in Malakat produced a generation of scholars who influenced the broader Islamic world. For example, the scholar Ibn Babawayh (d. 991 CE), also known as Shaykh al-Saduq, compiled *Man La Yahduruhu al-Faqih*, one of the four canonical books of Twelver Shia hadith, while residing in Malakat. This work, along with others produced in the region, provided a systematic framework for Twelver Shia jurisprudence, which later became the basis for the legal system of the Safavid Empire. The intellectual contributions of the Twelver Shias in Malakat also extended to philosophy and science, with scholars engaging in debates with Sunni theologians and contributing to the development of Islamic thought.

The Twelver Shias' presence in Malakat had a lasting impact on the region's historical development, transforming it into a center of Shia learning and culture. Their scholarly and cultural activities laid the groundwork for the eventual establishment of Twelver Shia Islam as the dominant sect in Iran under the Safavids in the 16th century, when Shah Ismail I declared Twelver Shia Islam the state religion. The legacy of the Twelver Shias in Malakat continues to be felt today, as the region remains a symbol of the enduring influence of Shia Islam in the Islamic world.

Conclusion

The first Shia groups in Iran, including the Zaydis, Ismailis, and Qarmatians, played a crucial role in shaping the religious, political, and cultural landscape of the region during the early Islamic era. The Zaydis' emphasis on justice and resistance, exemplified by their establishment of the Alid dynasty in Tabaristan, provided a model of Shia governance that inspired future movements. The Ismailis' intellectual and political innovations, from the founding of the Fatimid Caliphate to the establishment of Alamut, demonstrated the potential for Shia groups to influence the broader Islamic world through scholarship and



activism. The Qarmatians' radical social reforms, though short-lived, highlighted the diversity within Shia Islam and its capacity to address the needs of marginalized communities. Meanwhile, the Twelver Shias' contributions to the historical development of Malakat, through their scholarly and cultural activities, laid the intellectual and spiritual foundation for the dominance of Shia Islam in Iran.

The early Shia movements in Iran were driven by a shared commitment to the Ahl al-Bayt and a desire for just governance, yet each group pursued its vision through distinct theological and political strategies. The Zaydis established semi-autonomous states in northern Iran, fostering a culture of resistance and scholarship. The Ismailis founded intellectual centers and political strongholds, contributing to the development of Islamic philosophy and science. The Qarmatians experimented with radical social reforms in the Persian Gulf region, advocating for equality and communal ownership. The Twelver Shias, through their scholarly and cultural activities in Malakat, produced a generation of scholars who shaped the trajectory of Shia Islam, ensuring its survival and growth under Sunni domination.

The historical lessons from these early Shia groups provide valuable insights into the complex interplay of religion, politics, and culture in Iran. Their ability to resist oppression, foster intellectual growth, and preserve their religious identity offers lessons for addressing contemporary challenges in the Islamic world, particularly in regions marked by sectarian tensions and social inequality. The diversity within Shia Islam, as exemplified by the Zaydis, Ismailis, Qarmatians, and Twelver Shias, underscores the richness of Islamic thought and its capacity to adapt to varying socio-political contexts. Future research should explore the long-term impacts of these early Shia movements on the modern Middle East, focusing on their contributions to Islamic scholarship, their role in shaping regional



identities, and their relevance for addressing modern challenges such as sectarianism and the quest for social justice.

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