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The Good Son

How a Swiss-born, twice-married socialite became leader of the Muslims and formed the world's largest, borderless welfare state

By Nicholas Schmidle

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IN GULKIN, A VILLAGE NESTLED HIGH in the Karakorum Mountains of northern Pakistan, Ghulam Karim and his team of volunteers had already mixed and poured more than 50 bags of concrete by the middle of the afternoon on a recent summer day. The team consisted of several dozen men, ranging from teenagers to grandfathers. The older ones wore *toppis*, traditional, floppy wool caps. They pulled shoebox-sized stones from one pile and threw them onto another, chitchatting the entire time. Excited and jumpy as they pushed their wheelbarrows back and forth, the younger ones shuttled loads from the sippy pile of wet mix to the patio area under construction. They laughed, joked, and, on more than one occasion, turned the water hose on each other. They were preparing for a party.

Ghulam, a 42-year-old man with civic spirit reminiscent of a Little League baseball coach, stood covered in concrete dust. He wore jeans and dirty white sneakers with an ocean blue, button-up shirt, collar propped and sleeves rolled to his elbows. He fidgeted with the baseball cap resting, slightly crooked, on the back of his head, while his eyes smiled a fraction of a second before his mouth curled up. He exuded confidence and looked me in the eyes, a relatively rare behavior amongst Pakistanis.

Ghulam said the patio was key to the coming festivities, which would include dancing, dramas, and lots of prayer. On July 11, two weeks after my visit, the people of Gulkin celebrated the 50th anniversary of their spiritual leader, His Highness Prince Karim Aga Khan IV, known around the world simply as the Aga Khan. In 1957, Prince Karim was declared *imam* of the Ismaelis, a sect of Shia Muslims with a global following of between 15 and 20 million people. Ninety-nine percent of those living in the Hunza Valley, including everyone in Gulkin, consider the Aga Khan to be the 49th successor to the Prophet Muhammad, and leader of the Muslims.

Karim doesn't fit the image of your typical Islamic leader. He is more comfortable in a tuxedo than any of the traditional robes worn by men throughout the Muslim world, he was born in Switzerland, and he is estranged from his second wife. But his deeds raise a profound question regarding the very nature of religion in the modern world. What is more important — to *look* the part of a prophet, or to *act* the part of one? After spending two weeks traveling around Aga Khan country, I was no closer to believing that Aga Khan was or was not the true successor to the Prophet



Ghulam Karim (right) stands in front of the jamaat khana in Gulkin with Roshan.

Mohammad. But his inspiration to his followers and the impact he has in northern Pakistan is unmistakable.

The Aga Khan has built thousands of hospitals, schools, roads, irrigation channels, and telephone and electric lines. He has also formed non-governmental organizations (NGOs) for his people. The schools, known as "Diamond Jubilee" schools, are funded by an endowment raised by Prince Karim's grandfather in 1946, on the 75th anniversary of his imamate. That year, the grandfather stepped onto a scale, which registered 243 pounds; his followers consequently gifted him with 243 pounds of diamonds. With the proceeds, he established the education endowment. (Karim's 50th anniversary, celebrated in July, was termed the "Golden Jubilee;" he's to be weighed in gold.) In areas where Ismaelis are clustered, such as northern Pakistan, southwestern China, Afghanistan's Wakhan Corridor, and eastern Tajikistan, the Aga Khan Development Network has transformed remote, underdeveloped and illiterate communities into isolated pockets of progressive-minded Muslims, who are more exposed to the rest of the world, and therefore more open-minded, than elsewhere in Pakistan. At a recent dinner party in Islamabad, a female dentist (and non-Ismaeli) said matter-of-factly, "The Aga Khan has built the world's largest, borderless welfare state."

Perhaps more than anything else, the Aga Khan puts a premium on education. While I was in Gulkin, I spoke in English with most of the villagers, whose native language is Burushaski. An hour north on the Karakorum Highway, in another remote Ismaeli village called Passu, locals boasted of a BBC report attributing Passu with a 100 percent literacy rate. Ghulam said that he learned to speak English while living and studying in Karachi for 12 years. His was a common story; several others from Gulkin and Passu attended free, local Aga Khan-sponsored schools into their late teens, and then went to either Islamabad or Karachi for undergraduate and graduate programs. But according to Ghulam, the Ismaeli community's dedication to learning English stemmed from something specific the Aga Khan said. "Our imam gave a *farman* (address) from Lisbon, Portugal, in 1996, in which he said, 'All of my spiritual children should speak, write and think in English.' He said we should learn English like it was our national language," recalled Ghulam. "The syllabus in all the Diamond Jubilee schools changed overnight, with an added emphasis on English."

The principal of the Diamond Jubilee school in Passu, a small man with a stiff neck named Sher Ali, told me, "Our imam is always advising us to be moderate, and to read more and more

English. We are emphasizing English to our students almost more than Quran. Because those who speak English have a very good chance to succeed in the world."

PRINCE KARIM WAS BORN in Geneva in 1936. He spent his childhood in Switzerland and Nairobi, Kenya, and later went to Harvard. In 1957, while Karim was working on his degree in Islamic History, his grandfather, the Aga Khan III, died. For the first time in 1,300 years of Ismaeli Islam, the imamate skipped a generation. In his will, Sir Sultan Mohammed Shah, the Aga Khan III, wrote: "In view of the fundamentally altered conditions in the world in very recent years, due to the great changes which have taken place including the discoveries of atomic science, I am convinced that it is in the best interest of the Shia Muslim Ismailia Community that I should be succeeded by a young man who has been brought up and developed during recent years, and in the midst of the new age, and who brings a new outlook on life to his office as Imam." At 21-years-old, still two years from graduating from Harvard, Karim became the Aga Khan IV.

In addition to millions of "spiritual children," Prince Karim inherited a fortune. Every Ismaeli pays a 10 percent tax to the Aga Khan, known as Mala-e-Imam ("Property of the Imam"). While most of that money is channeled into myriad development projects (including paying teachers' salaries in the Diamond Jubilee schools that are scattered in more than 25 countries around the world), Karim remains a man of immense wealth. One recent estimate pinned his personal fortune at \$2.4 billion, including three personal jets. On his 200-acre estate in the French countryside, Karim breeds world-class thoroughbred horses. Profiles of his top stallions, as well as information about his two stud farms, one in Ireland and the other in France, appear at www.



Schoolgirls scurry inside a classroom just after a bell rings to indicate class is back in session at the Diamond Jubilee school in Passu.



The village of Passu, set in the Karakorum Mountains.

agakhanstuds.com. Karim's first marriage, in 1969, lasted 25 years and gave him three children. In 1988, he remarried and had another child; divorce proceedings with his second wife are underway.

The Aga Khan is an international star. In Pakistan, where the Aga Khan Development Network is active throughout the Northern Areas, Karim is given all the protocol of a visiting head of state. He built the five-star Serena Hotel in Islamabad, where all the top foreign dignitaries stay.

Karim also wrote a constitution and created a flag for Ismaelis. In the early 19th century, the Iranian Shah conferred the title of "His Royal Highness" upon Karim's great-great-grandfather. That designation lasted until just after the Islamic Revolution in Iran. "When Ayatollah Khomeini took over, he took back the 'R' in Prince Karim's name," said Ghulam.

Roshan, a man with blonde hair and bright blue eyes who stood beside Ghulam, added, "Khomeini can take his 'R' and go home!"

I asked Ghulam if he felt at all bitter toward Khomeini for defrocking his beloved leader. He didn't look the least bit bothered. "If Khomeini doesn't want to give this title to our imam, that's fine. We still believe he is the leader of Islam. Prince Karim doesn't want to fight with people like Khomeini. His name or status is not what's important."

The internet is full of message boards and websites, mostly run by orthodox Sunni Muslims, denouncing the Ismaelis as heretics and the Aga Khan as a fraud. On one site, a user posting under the name "Abu Bakr" wrote: "THE AGHA KHANIS DO NOT BELIEVE EITHER IN THE FINALITY OF PROPHETHOOD. IT IS STRANGE THAT WHILE

QADIANIS HAVE BEEN DECLARED A NON-MUSLIM MINORITY ON ACCOUNT OF THEIR DENIAL OF THE FINALITY OF PROPHETHOOD, THE AGHA KHANIS DESPITE THEIR KUFRIC BELIEFS CONTINUE TO BE TREATED AS CONSTITUTIONAL MUSLIMS IN PAKISTAN!" Ghulam Wali, a resident of Passu in his mid-20s, said that his non-Ismaeli classmates at Karachi University used to harass him and tell him he was not a true Muslim. "They used to say, 'How can you call yourself are a Muslim when your imam lives in France?'" he said. "But where our imam lives is not important. These people are being misguided by their own *ulema* (religious leaders)."

Many Ismaeli customs diverge from those observed by Sunnis or mainstream Shias. For instance, Ismaelis don't pray in a mosque. Rather, everyone — men, children *and* women — congregate twice a day at the *jamaat khana* ("gathering house"), which doubles as a local community center, theater, and concert hall. That's where Ghulam and the other volunteers were pouring concrete that afternoon. Moreover, Ismaeli Islam has no mullahs. Because the Aga Khan is present, and thought to be the direct descendant of the Prophet Mohammad, his followers wonder why they would need anyone else to tell them what is or isn't proper, Islamic behavior. The *jamaat khana* is overseen by a *mukhi*, whose job is to collect the obligatory tithe and lead the twice-daily prayer services. For these services, the *mukhi* selects a particular *farman*, or speech given by the Aga Khan, to be read aloud. At the *jamaat khana* in Gulkin, the prayer times — 3:55 a.m. and 7:45 p.m. — were written by Ghulam, the assistant *mukhi* (the *mukhi* was out of town), with magic marker on a whiteboard hanging beside the front door. Ghulam said each service hardly lasts 30 minutes. He said they were busy





The jamaat khana in Gulkin.

people, and had other things to do than spend all day at the jamaat khana.

Even the theosophy supporting Ismaeli Islam differs from the mainstream sects. Most Sunnis and, to some lesser extent, Shias, contend that *this* life, that is, the twisted, corrupt, and poverty-stricken one we experience, is just a testing ground for the *next* one. In this world, therefore, hardship is almost welcomed, for it multiplies the sensation of misery, and in turn, the elation that must come from reaching the next world. Ismaelis, however, take little solace in being poor. Certainly, Prince Karim makes no qualms about enjoying life with his 600 racehorses, vacations in Sardinia, and non-stop, high-brow social schedule. Though the accumulated wealth of his millions of followers can't match his own personal wealth, he has succeeded in bringing the 21st century to previously remote villages like Gulkin. He seems ready to settle for nothing less than a global empire of progressive-minded Muslims, following his message of peace, dialogue, and moderation. No matter how hard I looked and asked around, I couldn't detect any confrontational sentiments from any Ismaeli.

"This is a one-hundred percent secular community," said Sher Ali, the teacher in Passu. "His Highness is offering only religious advice. There is no conflict between the Ismaeli constitution and any government constitution. Regarding politics, he tells us, 'In whatever country you are living, you should obey their rules and regulations.' Whether it is Musharraf, General Zia, or Qazi Hussein Ahmed, we have to cooperate." (In 2004, Ahmed, the head of Jamaat-i-Islami, threatened that if Karim, through the Aga Khan University Education Board, tried to interfere with Pakistan's education system, "I will make his end miserable.")

Ashraf Khan, another teacher who had joined our conversation, added, "General Zia was the most Taliban-minded of all Pakistan's leaders, but he was respectful and a very good friend of His Highness."

I asked Ashraf, whose face had the sunburn and hard lines of a marathon runner's, whether the prospect of the Taliban or religious parties gaining power in Pakistan

worried him. "If an MMA (the coalition of fundamentalist religious parties) government, like one under Qazi Hussein Ahmed or Maulana Fazlur Rahman, who are already making statements against Ismaelis, ever comes to power at the national level, it might be a problem for us."

IBRAHIM, AN EMPLOYEE of the Aga Khan Rural Support Network (AKRSP), is a frail, balding man in his early 40s with an ambitious comb-over hairdo, parted just above his left ear. He had been deputed by the AKRSP office in Gilgit to show me around for a few days, and insisted, over my objections, on ending every sentence with "sir." When he arrived one morning at the Sarai Silk Route Hotel in Passu, riding in a charcoal grey, two-door Toyota Land Cruiser, I was drinking thyme tea and eating a pile of cherries. These cherries were such a perfect balance of tart and sweet that I hardly every stopped eating them during the two weeks I spent in the Northern Areas. The stomach ache from eating too many, I decided, was well worth it.

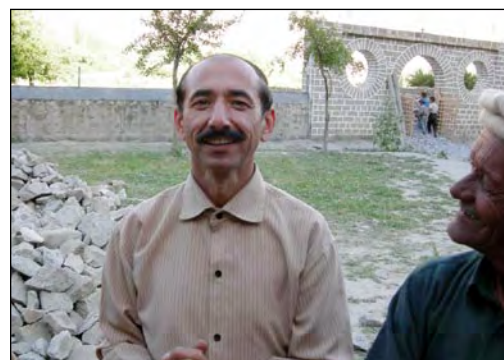
"You know sir, cherries are not native to the Hunza Valley," Ibrahim said a few minutes later, as we sat around a breakfast table, planning our next few days.

"Oh no?"

"No. We brought them sir," he said.

I didn't take Ibrahim as a prankster, but when you've just met someone who is going to drive you around the mountains of northern Pakistan for three days, it is best not to accuse them of fibbing quite so early. Still, I must have looked somewhat incredulous. Later, I found out he was telling the truth.

Shortly after AKRSP was established in 1982, they placed an order for cherry rootstock from France. They planted the rootstock in a nursery in Gilgit, and waited to see what happened. By 1989, the limbs of AKRSP's exotic cherry trees were sagging with fruit waiting to be plucked. Izhar Hunzai, the General Manager of AKRSP in Gilgit, the capital of the Northern Areas, said that people in Islamabad refused to buy them at first. "They said they were undeveloped plums. Many people had never seen cherries before," he told me. "It wasn't only cherries. We brought Golden Delicious apples, Red Delicious apples, New Jersey varieties of cow semen, Angora sheep, new varieties of poplar



Ibrahim standing in front of the jamaat khana in Gulkin.

trees, honey bees, and wheat varieties from Simit, Mexico, the world's premier wheat." According to Hunzai, not a single rupee worth of agriculture grown in the Northern Areas was sold "down country" before AKRSP started; now, 1.7 billion Rupees (around US\$28.4 million) worth of agricultural products from the Northern Areas are sold "down country" — meaning Punjab, North West Frontier Province, Sindh or Baluchistan — every year.

Besides proving a new source of income and nourishment, the crops and trees also prevented landslides from wiping out the villages clinging to the sides of the Karakorum mountains. In the first 15 years of AKRSP's activities, they planted more than 48 million trees and irrigated tens of thousands of acres of previously brown, rocky earth. Hunzai said that cultivatable land in the Northern Areas and Chitral (an adjacent district in the North West Frontier Province populated by some Ismaelis) has doubled since 1982.

Most of the mountainsides throughout the Northern Areas are barren with a layer of boulders that sit precariously like a sandcastle before a rising tide. While driving north to Gilgit from Islamabad, we passed through a downpour lasting only 30 or 40 minutes, but which caused two landslides that blocked the road and stopped traffic for hours. On either side of the Karakorum Highway, from Gilgit to China, the mountains are covered with this boulder-strewn topsoil until you reach either a village, blooming with poplar trees, grass and fruit orchards, or the ubiquitous messages to the Aga Khan saying, "Welcome our Hazar Imam," or "We Love our Hazar Imam." ("Hazar Imam" means "Present Imam.") To make these, Karim's faithful followers repelled down the side of the mountain, and stacking white rocks large enough to be seen from a helicopter a kilometer away, wrote out the paeans.

On a mountainside facing Passu, white rocks spelled out "Welcome to Passu, Our Beloved Hazar Imam, 18 November 1987." Ashraf Khan, the teacher from the Diamond Jubilee school there, was in Passu that November day. "At around 3 p.m. the AKRSP helicopter landed with His Highness. He left the helicopter pad in a car like a Land Cruiser and rode toward the *darbar*." (A *darbar* refers to a place where royalty are received. In Passu, it consisted of two boulders and a concrete stage, no more than four feet tall.) "Ismaeli scouts [youth volunteers dressed in khaki uniforms with a red-and-green-striped scarf tied around their necks] lined the road and the government also sent police for security, but they were not allowed near the *darbar*. Everyone was meditating and fingering prayer beads. Spiritually, we were very calm. In His Highness' presence, we believe that all the difficulties of the world will simply disappear. Some people were crying tears of happiness."

"What did he talk about?"

"What he usually does — our faith, and development in our world," he answered. Ashraf served as assistant mukhi at the time, and was one of the few people allowed

inside the knee-high gate surrounding the stage.

"Did the Aga Khan say anything to you?"

He nodded.

"What did he say?"

Ashraf blushed. "I don't remember."

"You don't remember?"

Another teacher interrupted me and said, smiling, "Whatever His Highness said is something very special for Ashraf. It is a special message. But it is private, between him and His Highness."

Ashraf remembered Karim speaking for about 30 minutes before leaving the stage, motoring back to the helicopter pad, and boarding the aircraft. No one in the audience moved an inch. The craft lifted off and began following the Hunza River, through the canyon, toward Gilgit. "Everyone was still sitting, crying, when His Highness' helicopter disappeared behind a mountain and crossed out of Passu," Ashraf said.

Shortly after that, Passu was finally connected to the national electricity grid. "Every November 18, we are celebrating," said Ashraf. Villagers gather at the *jamaat khana* on the anniversary of Karim's visit, and the *farman* Karim gave that day is read over and over.

"THERE USED TO BE HORRIFYING POVERTY in the Northern Areas and Chitral," Ibrahim said, thinking back to before AKRSP began its operations. "I used to live with the animals, sir. Really, I slept next to the cattle shed." (Later, I went to Ibrahim's village and saw his old house; he did, in fact, used to sleep next to the animals.) "But at that time, the Hunza Valley was not under the control of Pakistan."

For centuries, the Hunza Valley was ruled by a local king. In 1974, former Prime Minister Zulfikar Ali Bhutto abolished the colonial-era agreement that allowed the *Mir*, or king, of Hunza to rule unfettered over the Hunza Valley, in exchange for his proclaimed fealty to the Pakistani government far away in Islamabad. "The *Mir* was a feudal lord who didn't allow anyone get education or pursue businesses," Ibrahim continued. "And worst, the *Mir* didn't allow you to leave. He kept soldiers at all the borders of Hunza, and if you were caught, then..." Ibrahim's voiced trailed off. "But the *Mir* was a representative of His Highness the Aga Khan. And he was in charge of collecting *mala-e-imam*."

Karim's first visit to the Northern Areas came in 1960, three years after he became the Aga Khan. "When he came, the KKH" — or Karakorum Highway — "wasn't started and the Northern Areas were totally landlocked. People had to go to Gilgit or Chitral just to buy food. The Aga

Khan came with Field Marshall Ayub Khan. They flew on a military plane from Gilgit to Nagar, and then they traveled to Hunza on horseback, sir," explained Ibrahim. Hunzai, the general manager of AKRSP, later recalled Karim and Ayub Khan flying into Gilgit, and then taking a jeep, not a horse, over a donkey track all the way to Karimabad, a major town in the Hunza Valley. Regardless of their mode of transport, the visit made a strong impression on Karim, mainly because there was no sign of any development by the Pakistani government. "For sixty years, no government relief has come for us," said a resident of Sost, the last village in Pakistan before travelers clear customs and enter China. "The only people doing anything up here are the NGOs and the Aga Khan Development Network."

At the Aga Khan Health Services clinic in Aliabad, a town adjacent to Karimabad, Dr. Kher-ul-Hayat runs the "only inpatient clinic offering 24-hour, quality care in all of Hunza, Nagar, and Baltistan." (Nagar is a valley neighboring Hunza and Baltistan covers the eastern half of the Northern Areas.) I asked if there weren't any government hospitals providing decent services. Hayat looked exasperated. He replied, "There was one civic hospital in Aliabad in 1928, with one doctor. Eighty years later, there is still just one doctor."

We walked from Hayat's office, through a courtyard planted with rosebushes, into a waiting room where multi-colored charts covered a wall. Hayat guided me through some of the data. One chart, titled "Infant Mortality Rate," resembled the pitch of a double-black-diamond ski slope. In 1987, when the Extended Care Facility opened in Aliabad, the rate in the Hunza and Nagar Valleys was 158 deaths per 1,000 children born. As of 2005, it had dropped to 31. "This is because the struggle and efforts of the local people," Hayat said. He said local residents were educating themselves on the real causes and remedies of disease, instead of relying on outdated customs.

Another chart, titled "Family Planning," grabbed my attention. Throughout Pakistan, even the mention of family planning is a big taboo. Whenever I say that my wife and I don't have children, someone inevitably asks, "Why not?" To them, my answer ("I am young," "I am busy," "Kids are a pain in the ass") comes across as selfish, if not atheistic. "Don't worry, Allah will provide for you," they say. In their minds, not to have children is to doubt Allah's ability to provide food for you and your family, which is, in turn, to doubt Allah. And so, jobless and dirt-poor men and women go on having ten, twelve, and fourteen kids.

"Ismaelis understand the merits of contraception," said Hayat. "Through the help of the Aga Khan Development Network, family size has dropped and literacy rate has jumped." He showed me a chart displaying how many people received which forms of contraception: INJ (Depo shot); IUCD (Intrauterine Contraceptive Device); Condoms; Pills. In 2006, 201 Depo shots were given and 15 condoms were passed out. Though the numbers remain small, the fact that such programs exist — and are

public knowledge — can be considered an accomplishment itself.

Later, as Hayat was telling me where he had studied, including at the Liverpool Tropical School of Medicine and the Aga Khan University in Karachi, I asked him if he always planned to work with the Aga Khan Health Services (AKHS) in his native Northern Areas. "When I started medical school, there wasn't any network of Aga Khan health centers here. Sure, I wondered about the future of our people," he said. "And so I had this in mind when I started my residency at the Aga Khan University in Pediatrics." But Hayat still wasn't convinced.

Then, one day in 1994, while Hayat was working at the Aga Khan Hospital in Karachi, Karim made a surprise visit. "There were four of us from the Northern Areas. His Highness said, 'Get training and then go back to the Northern Areas.'"

"If he had told you to go to China, you would have done that too, right?"

"Definitely, definitely. His Highness is advising people on a need basis. He wants his people to do things that further some humanitarian mission," Hayat explained. "He is not advising us to go to Afghanistan and fight jihad against the Americans. He offers good advice."

WHEN THE AGA KHAN RURAL SUPPORT PROGRAM launched in the early 1980s, it trained its efforts on infrastructure projects like paving roads, building bridges, erecting electricity poles, and, of course, planting cherry trees. But more than 20 years later, many of those projects are completed and the organization has shifted its attention away from labor- and cost-intensive projects to self-sustaining, social- and community-based development. "Initially, there was a serious need for agriculture and infrastructure work," said Izhar Hunzai, the AKRSP head in Gilgit. "Now, we are cutting back on 'hardware' development, and switching to 'software' development, like local governance initiatives." When I was in Gulkin, I asked Ghulam what was the largest AKRSP project currently going on in the village. He thought a moment, took off his baseball cap and scratched his head, and then turned to Roshan, his blonde-haired, blue-eyed friend. Ghulam said something about a canal built "five or ten years ago." "The biggest projects and accomplishments are not the physical projects you can see," said Roshan, "but the mental progress we have made. The size of the project is not important when we have expanded our mental horizons so much."

The Aga Khan Development Network, an umbrella organization that oversees dozens of Aga Khan-sponsored development agencies, including AKRSP, Aga Khan Health Services, and Aga Khan Education Services, states its aim of creating strong, independent societies, and empowered individuals. For example, it never builds an

irrigation channel or a retaining wall unless the locals organize on their own and specifically request project assistance from AKRSP. “We think it’s bad to spoon-feed people,” said Ibrahim, when I asked if AKRSP planted new poplar trees every time the villagers cut them down to use for building a new home. “We planted the trees one time. If we keep coming back, the people will have no incentive to be sustainable.”

As part of its shift to “software” development, AKRSP has facilitated a variety of NGOs like the Karakorum Area Development Organization, or KADO. KADO was formed in 1998, with a mission similar to that of AKRSP’s. Ghulam Ali, KADO’s thirtysomething CEO, told me KADO aims to, “improve the living conditions of the rural population of the Hunza Valley,” albeit with a special focus on women.

KADO has introduced a system of trash collection, whereby neighbors pitch in to have a bin installed in their area, and then pay a nominal monthly charge to have a tractor come through every second or third day to remove their garbage. KADO also brought the internet to the Hunza Valley. Ali said that tourists, especially foreigners, are grateful to have internet access while touring the Northern Areas, but that his real reason for establishing a broadband server was to help local businesses. “This way, trekking guides can coordinate and plan their itineraries with potential visitors, while farmers can check the weather reports and even sell their crops online.”

In July 2006, KADO opened the Gem Cutting and Polishing Center in Karimabad, where women from the Hunza Valley come to learn how to take locally-mined semi-precious stones, and work them into sellable pieces of jewelry. “But the idea doesn’t stop there,” Ali told me. “Besides customizing these stones according to buyers’ tastes, we want to establish a technical institute for mining and product design.”

When I visited the Gem Cutting and Polishing Cen-



Women working at the Gem Cutting and Polishing Center in Karimabad.

ter, a dozen women sat working over replica models of Japanese-designed, gem-cutting machines in a sparkling-clean room, with three walls of mirror, and one a window looking over the lush Hunza Valley. Daulat Bibi, a 30-year-old woman with wavy hair that fell past her shoulders, prominent bangs, and pink fingernails, was cutting a piece of natural quartz into an emerald cut. She only began training in March, but she worked the machine, which was about the size and sound of a small table saw, with ease. Every morning, she walks 30 minutes uphill from her village, practices gem-cutting for six hours, and then returns home. In the evenings, she teaches “night classes” at the jamaat khana. Night classes are the closest thing that Ismaelis have to a madrassa. They are designed for children to come read Quran, discuss the farmans of the Aga Khan, and learn more about the Ismaeli faith. Sher Ali, the headmaster of the Diamond Jubilee school in Passu, said, “They are our own schools for religious education.” He assured me that there was no memorization or brainwashing going on there. “We don’t believe in *hifz* (memorization of Quran). That is the Taliban way of education.”

Daulat said she was getting bored just teaching night classes, so when she heard about the Gem Cutting and Polishing Center opening up, she wanted in. “I am self-motivated and I want to be self-reliant,” she said when I asked why she joined. Daulat had two sisters, one studying in Gilgit and one who is married and living in her village. At 30-years-old, Daulat was reaching an age when it could become difficult to find a suitor. But she didn’t seem worried, and besides, she had things going on right now. She would look for a husband later.

As we talked for ten or fifteen minutes, I sat looking over Daulat’s shoulder, watching her work. A small container suspended a few inches above the machine dripped a steady stream of water onto the blade to keep the quartz lubricated. It’s better for cutting, Daulat said. As she pushed the quartz onto the blade, the water sprayed back in my face. The ink on my notepad bled and ran into itself. Daulat was very friendly and polite. But the entire time I sat there, she never stopped working.

JUST ACROSS A CHURNING RIVER OF GLACIERMELT from the Ismaeli-dominated Hunza Valley is the Nagar Valley, populated mostly by mainstream Shia Muslims. (There are no mountains dividing the two valleys, so they are technically one valley; historically, however, they were separate kingdoms.) Upon entering Nagar, I immediately noticed a change from Hunza: the roads were bumpier, piles of trash lay around, and local people smiled less. When I asked Dr. Hayat at the Aga Khan Health Clinic in Aliabad whether he saw any differences between his patients in Hunza and Nagar, he said there were “definite differences.” “If the infant mortality rate is forty in Hunza, then it is sixty in Nagar,” he explained. “But because of how close the two communities are” — he pointed at Nagar across the river — “people

in Nagar are now giving education to females. And they are on the road to good health.”

Nonetheless, as we entered the village of Minapin, I felt, for a brief second, like I was back in Tehran. Someone had written on the side of a large rock, in white paint, “Marg Bar Amrika,” the Persian translation of “Death to America” and a favorite chant at Iranian rallies. A little further up, in English, I saw “Death to USA” and “Death to Israel,” written in red paint on another rock.

“Fifty percent of the people here love Iran, Iran’s clerics, and Iranian politics,” said Syed Yahya Shah, a 76-year-old political activist from Minapin. “Little, individual people are not emotional, but mobs are always repeating the slogans of Iran. None of them even know where Israel or America is on a map.” Shah is a tall, loose man, with a dangly, grey beard, and dangling arms. The day we met, sitting around a lawn table in an orchard of apple, cherry and apricot trees beside his house, he wore a brown, wool cap, known as a *toppi*, flopped on top of his bald head. Shah descends from a prominent family (“Syed” indicated that his bloodline could be traced to the Prophet Mohammad), and throughout the 1960s, he fought against the tyrannical rule of the Mir of Nagar. In 1970, the Mir had him arrested and thrown in jail. But Shah’s activism planted seeds of discontent among the common people. Two years later, Zulfiqar Ali Bhutto abolished the Mir of Nagar’s regime and set Shah free. He emerged from prison a hero. So when the Aga Khan Development Network decided that it wanted to offer its services in Nagar, they contacted Shah and asked for his help.

Initially, the Aga Khan-sponsored education and health programs were strictly for Ismaelis. The funds for the Diamond Jubilee schools had come from Ismaeli donors, many of whom saw no reason to spend their money on other sects, especially those openly hostile toward the Ismaelis. But in an environment of fragile sectarian relations in Pakistan, Prince Karim didn’t want to aggravate tensions. “He was concerned that these programs were only benefiting one sect — ours,” Ibrahim said. So after his 1987 visit to the Northern Areas (when he stopped in Passu), Karim decided to expand into the neighboring Shia and Sunni areas, who showed their thanks by continuing to call Ismaelis *kafirs*, or infidels, and refusing their aid. (Diamer district, the only majority Sunni district in the Northern Areas, has not accepted any assistance from the Aga Khan Development Network to this day.) In Nagar, Shah said, “The local mullahs resisted. They said the purpose of the Aga Khan aid was missionary work. I told them it wasn’t a missionary project. Personally, I went to all the elders. Some of the mullahs were more stubborn. But I went everywhere with the General Manager of AKRSP back then so locals could see that they weren’t trying to convert.” When the Aga Khan visited Nagar a few years later, Shah was there to welcome him. “I am one of the founders of AKRSP,” he bragged.

“AKRSP is meant to be non-sectarian,” Izhar Hunzai, the general manager, told me in his Gilgit office. He pointed to the wall, where pictures hung of all the prior general managers. Several of them were Sunnis, one was even a Christian.



The Karakorum Highway connects Islamabad, Pakistan, and Kashgar, China.

“The demand for certain services, like women’s education programs, is just higher in the Ismaeli areas.”

“But why would the Aga Khan even want to give aid to people who allege that he and his followers are not true Muslims?”

“Those that say we are not true Muslims don’t know that we Ismaelis created Pakistan,” Hunzai said. “Jinnah was an Ismaeli. This Aga Khan’s grandfather was the first president of the Muslim League. He is the one who got the principle approved from the British for separate Muslim and Hindu states in India. He was also president of the League of Nations.”

“The Aga Khan and his grandfather sound like an earlier incarnation of Bono,” I said.

Hunzai hadn’t thought to compare the U2 lead singer with his exalted spiritual leader, so it took him a second to ponder the comparison. After titling back in his desk chair, he nodded and went on, “You know, when you get to that level, like Bono or His Highness, you are totally free of prejudices.” □

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