

SOCIAL UTOPIA IN TENTH CENTURY ISLAM
THE QARMATIAN EXPERIMENT

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Fadi A. Fahes
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To my mentor, the rebel, Dr. Amina Ghosn (1950–2017).

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ABSTRACT

This thesis explores the root causes of the Qarmatian revolution as one of the several anti-Caliphate uprisings during the ninth and the tenth centuries. The study compares the Qarmatian movement against two contemporary insurgencies.

The Qarmatian movement, an offshoot of Shi'a Ismā'īli Islam, is an experiment in pre-modern socialist grassroots statehood. The Qarmatians established, in the Islamic heartland, the only communist society before the twentieth century that endured for more than a generation.

The study explores the philosophical and scientific foundations of Qarmatian ideology. Those foundations enabled the movement to scrutinize two centuries of Islamic legacy under the lens of logic and common sense, and to subject inherited dogmas to reform.

This thesis argues that the Qarmatian movement differed from the earlier ninth-century Babakian and Zanj revolts in that it had clear objectives of promoting, instituting, and maintaining a state that embodied the avant-garde principles of that movement.

CHAPTER 1

TRANSFORMATION OF ISLAMIC SOCIETIES
(632 CE–899 CE)

In the ninth century, there were multiple ideological, political, ethnic, scientific, philosophical, and religious upsurges at work in the Abbasid¹ realm. Those forces paved the way for the Babakian and Zanj uprisings. Both uprisings were quickly crushed. The Qarmatian revolution followed. It erupted in Southern Iraq and the eastern region of the Arabian Peninsula and its aspects are the main topic of this study. The in-depth analysis demonstrates that Qarmatians experimented with breaking religious and social taboos to achieve social goals. Initially, over an extended period, the movement's chiefs gradually built unwavering conviction among their followers. They built their community strength, undetected, before resorting to armed conflict. The Qarmatian revolution has important implications for the way ideology can induce transformation in a society during turbulent times. Thus, it has implications for change and improvement in contemporary Islamic societies.

Political & Socio-Economic Factors

By 705 CE, the desert Arabs, who before the seventh century had not “stepped within the threshold of civilization,” moved off their desert peninsula and conquered great civilizations in Egypt, Mesopotamia, Persia, Syria, North Africa, and Spain (Hitti 49). They ruled numerous ethnicities and religious groups. Expansion came at a price; many of the conquered societies had deep-rooted and more advanced

¹ Abbasid Dynasty: is the second of the two great dynasties of the Muslim Empire of the Caliphate. It overthrew the Umayyad caliphate in 750 CE and reigned as the 'Abbāsid caliphate until destroyed by the Mongol invasion in 1258 CE (*Encyclopaedia Britannica*).

civilizations than their North Arabian rulers; friction ensued. There were also the partisan conflicts Arabs brought with them. Those conflicts surfaced in the early days of the post-Muhammadian² epoch. Cultural, agrarian, and economic dynamics that once prevailed in tribal Arabia and during the early Islamic polity of Madinah³ had changed considerably. Rulers failed to address a widespread social and economic model of inequity in multiple regions of their realm. This triggered an upsurge of political activism.

Expansion

Fifty years after Muhammad's death, the Muslim state ruled diverse ethnicities, religions, and civilizations spanning from Spain to Persia: By 641 CE, Muslims controlled Syria, Palestine, and Egypt. They had already defeated the Persian Empire and were preparing to complete the occupation of its territories. In 650 CE, they conquered Cyprus and North Africa. They also established their rule in Iran, Afghanistan, and parts of the Sind.⁴ In 705 CE, they established a Muslim kingdom in Spain. The multiple ethnicities, religions, and peoples under the Muslim rule contributed directly to the societal and cultural transformations that followed.

Succession

The succession rift started just a few hours after Muhammad's death. Muslim leaders suddenly had to agree on the shape of government, and on the successor of the Prophet. "In Arabia, where the blood-tie was sacred, it was thought that the chief's special qualities passed down the line of his descendants. Some Muslims believed that

² Muhammad (570-632 CE): is the founder of Islam and the proclaimer of the Qur'ān (*Encyclopaedia Britannica*).

³ Al-Madīnah al-Munawwarah ("Enlightened City"): Capital city of early Islam until 657 CE.

⁴ Modern-day Pakistan.

‘Alī ibn Abī Ṭālib had inherited something of Muhammad’s charisma” (Armstrong ch.1). Despite that, Abu Bakr (r. 632–634 CE) became the first of the four Rāshidūn⁵ Caliphs, the era that spanned from 632 to 660 CE. The second Caliph was Umar Ibn al-Khattab (r. 634–644 CE), succeeded by Uthmān ibn ‘Affān (r. 644–656 CE). Twenty-four years later, following the murder of Uthmān ibn ‘Affān, ‘Alī ibn Abī Ṭālib became the Caliph (r. 656–660 CE). In 657 CE, ‘Alī decided to move the capital city from Madīnah to Kūfah in central Mesopotamia.⁶

No sooner did ‘Alī assume his role than he faced politically motivated *fitnah* (rebellion). In the Battle of the Camel (656 CE), ‘Ā’ishah, the prophet’s wife led an uprising against ‘Alī under the pretext that he had not avenged Uthmān’s murder. A further breakdown of ‘Alī’s authority happened in 657 CE following the Battle of Siffin. Mu‘āwiyah Ibn Abi Sufiyan deposed ‘Alī in arbitration and proclaimed himself Caliph. A member of the *Kharijite*,⁷ the group that seceded in 657 CE in opposition to both ‘Alī and Mu‘āwiyah, killed ‘Alī in 660 CE (Armstrong ch.1). Mu‘āwiyah became the first Caliph of the Umayyad dynasty that spanned over nine decades (661–750 CE). A deeper divide was in the making. Mu‘āwiyah chose Damascus as the seat of the Caliphate.

By 661 CE, less than three decades after Muhammad’s death, three groups dominated the political scene: ‘Alī’s partisans favoring succession in his line called the *Shi’a*,⁸ Mu‘āwiyah’s supporters (the ruling party), and the *Kharijites*.

⁵ Rāshidūn (“Rightly Guided”): is the first four caliphs of the Islamic community (*Encyclopaedia Britannica*).

⁶ The Kufa region of the Sassanid Empire was conquered in 638 CE.

⁷ Khārijīte (*Khawārij* “those that seceded”): the earliest Islamic sect. It traces its beginning to a religio-political controversy over the Caliphate (*Encyclopaedia Britannica*).

⁸ *Shi’a* (*shī’at ‘Alī*, “party of ‘Alī”): also transliterated adjective Shī’ite or Shī’ī (*Encyclopaedia Britannica*).

Religious Conversion and Mawali Influence

Muslims ruled over various ethnicities and religious groups. In agreement with the Qur'ān,⁹ *Dhimmis*¹⁰ were entitled to retain their religious autonomy and privileges. Another factor came into play, namely new converts. In the early years following the conquest, conversion to Islam was not particularly encouraged. That began to change with the reign of the devout eighth Umayyad Caliph, Umar Ibn 'Abd al-Aziz (r. 717–20 CE). As the segregation lines between the settlers and the native inhabitants broke down, part of the population converted to Islam because they were eager to join this dynamic new faith (Armstrong ch.1). Others undoubtedly switched because they wished to evade paying the *Jizya*.¹¹

Mawali was the term to describe non-Arabs who converted to Islam. They were clients of the Arab tribes who had settled in the garrisons of occupied territories. The *Mawali* resented the privileges of Muslim Arabs. The *Mawali* objected to their second-class status. They protested chauvinism, and they questioned how equitable or Islamic it was to ostracize them (Armstrong ch.2).

Bernard Lewis, in the *Apocalyptic Vision of Islamic History*, speaks of the rise of Messianic hopes among *Mawalis* and *Dhimmis*. They comprised Christian, Jewish, and Zoroastrian peoples who fell under the rule of the “new and alien religion.” Their savior would “end the sufferings of the faithful and the dominion of their opponents, and establish the kingdom of God upon earth” (308).

⁹ Qur'ān (“Recitation”): also transliterated Quran and Koran, the sacred scripture of Islam (*Encyclopaedia Britannica*).

¹⁰ *Dhimmis* (*ahl al-dhimmah*: “People of the pact/custody,” sing. *Dhimmi*): Some limit the term to the people of the book comprising Jews, Christians, and Zoroastrians who lived under Islamic rule. It broadly means non-Muslims who live under Islamic rule. In exchange for paying *Jizya*, *Dhimmis* live under the custody of Muslims. *Dhimmis* lives, wealth, and honor are protected (*Encyclopaedia Britannica*).

¹¹ *Jizya*: Poll Tax enforceable on non-Muslims.

Various Shi'a religious groups, benefiting from the fluidity of religious boundaries of that period and the influx of *Mawali*, introduced indigenous non-Muslim religious teachings and practices. After 685 CE, the Shi'a partisanship of 'Alī and his descendants, even in their stronghold region of Kūfah, took on a definite *Mawali* coloration (Tucker 2–4).

In turn, the newly converted *Mawali* soon affected Islam itself. The *Mawali* were unhappy with the political domination of Arabs, and the new converts “grafted” their old traditions on their new faith. Thus arose the belief in a “*Mahdi* ... a divinely guided one [who would] fill the earth with justice and equity as it is now filled with tyranny and oppression” (Lewis, “Apocalyptic” 308). The notion of the *Mahdi* would prove crucial in the Ismā'īli and Qarmatian vocation.

The Shi'a groups accepted that the descendants of 'Alī were “a line of divinely ordained successors” (Rexroth 172). *Imams*¹² acquired the character of direct emanations of the deity. For some Persians, this line descended from the Sassanian kings through *Harar*, the daughter of Yazdigird III, the last Emperor of the Sassanid¹³ dynasty. She was the wife of Imam Husain and the mother of 'Alī Zayn al-'Abidin (Shi'a fourth *Imam*). This hereditary line combined “the mystic divine incarnation of the Persian King of Kings ... the incarnation of *Ahura Mazda*,¹⁴ and the divinely sanctioned *Imam*, all together as an emanation of the deity” (172). This is one of the several explanations for the Iranian people's fervor to support Shi'a dissident movements.

¹² Imam (“Leader”).

¹³ Sassanids (or Sasanians): The ancient Iranian dynasty whose rule spanned between 224–651 CE.

¹⁴ Ahura Mazda: Supreme god in ancient Iranian religion, especially Zoroastrianism.

Taxation

Byzantine and Sassanid territories suffered from heavy taxes before the Islamic conquest. Harsh taxation arguably hurried the collapse of the Sassanid rule against the advancing Muslim armies (Al-Aziz 60). Consecutive Muslim rulers did not develop a tax system of their own. In Persia, for example, the new rulers preserved the fiscal and monetary systems that the Sassanids implemented in the late Sassanids period (Sarkozy 709).

The additional element in Islamic taxation was linked to the difference in taxation for proponents (Muslim population) and *Dhimmis* of the occupied territory. Some cities surrendered peacefully to Muslim conquerors on negotiated tax terms; *Jizya* and *Khiraj*¹⁵ were set following the income of individuals. However, in certain Iranian regions where surrender treaties did not include taxation terms, cumbersome and haphazard taxation prevailed (Al-Aziz 63).

Even where surrender terms existed, the Umayyad rulers gradually disavowed their commitments. They increased taxes on cities and individuals. They introduced new taxes on festivals, crafts, and professions on proponent and *Dhimmi* populations alike. Tax collection, apart from *Jizya* and *Khiraj*, was arbitrary and punitive (Aljawzi 57). Ibn Salam (d. 838 CE), the author of one of the earliest Islamic books in finance, *Al-Amwal*, spoke of the preposterous transgression of levying *Jizya* on converts to Islam, a practice that continued until 718 CE (Al-Aziz 110). Beyond financial burdens, Aljawzi (58) explained that the process of paying the tax was a humiliating undertaking. He alluded to the significant rate of religious conversion in Iraq and Persia to evade these burdens. Nowhere was this more evident than in Egypt. Such

¹⁵ Khiraj (“Tribute”): Islamic Tax on agricultural land and produce.

was the speed of conversion to Islam that the state coffers ran empty in the absence of the *Jizya* income. To avoid a financial meltdown, the Umayyads resorted to taxing Muslim converts, which aroused massive hatred against the rulers. Even in the best of circumstances, *Mawali*s still paid more than their Arab Muslim counterparts did (Al-Aziz 91).

Umayyad scorn of non-Arab communities drove dissidence among the latter. Dissidents called for equality, and a fairer taxation system, especially for Persians who had heavily promoted the Abbasid cause. Tactlessly, even the Abbasid dynasty that succeeded the Umayyads in 750 CE failed to keep their promise to ease economic burdens of the Iranian multitudes. Heavy taxes, vassalage, and political relegation charged the peasant majority of ethnic Iranian subjects (Al-Aziz 103).

Serfdom and Slavery

Sarkozy believed that the preservation of the Sassanid tax system preserved the landowner's class in Persian territories, consequently the hereditary social divide. In Iraq, Waines is of the opinion that at some point in the ninth century, a large part of the *Sawad*¹⁶ was uninhabited either because of a shift in the Euphrates, or from widespread flooding (711). The topology of the region required high maintenance and was labor intensive. In the outcome, the Umayyad and early Abbasid governments were unable to restore the rural economy to Sassanid levels. The area faced a decline in cultivated land and agricultural production. As the situation aggravated, inhabitants abandoned agricultural settlements, and the region faced grain shortages and soaring prices (289–292).

¹⁶ *Sawad* ("Black Land"): Agricultural areas in Southern Iraq.

In an attempt to salvage agricultural terrain the Abbasid Caliphs, especially Al-Amīn¹⁷ and Al-Ma'mun,¹⁸ introduced another foreign element into the recalcitrant zone of Southern Iraq. They brought in tens of thousands of black African slaves, primarily to work in agriculture (Muhammad 30). Their successor, Al-Mu'tasim,¹⁹ was half Turkish from his mother's side. He relied heavily on the Turkish element. He drove away the Persians upon whom Abbasids traditionally depended. Turks grew in number and power while the Caliph's authority weakened. They took over leading positions in the army. Over and above, Turks controlled the state's financial resources and acquired vast estates. That forced more slaves into farming (26).

Treatment of slaves, which otherwise was reasonable until the second Abbasid era, took a turn for the worse (Muhammad 30). Land taxes increased. Tax collectors had to bring in a certain amount of tax, and they resorted to brutal ways to do that. The feudal system that prevailed in the *Sawad* of Iraq at the time became comparable to that prevalent in medieval Europe. Peasants were tied to the estate; that meant that the peasants and their offspring turned into slaves under the ownership of whoever owned the grounds. The serfs had to survive severe pressure to reclaim the land, in addition to the oppressive tax system in the *Sawad* (27–29).

Cultural Movement

At a cultural level, the period saw the rise of *Fiqh*²⁰ and historiography. It also saw the translation of Greek philosophy.

¹⁷ Al-Amīn (787–813 CE): The sixth Abbasid Caliph (r. 809–813 CE).

¹⁸ Al-Ma'mun (786–833 CE): The seventh Abbasid Caliph (r. 813–833).

¹⁹ Al-Mutasim (794–842 CE): The eighth Abbasid Caliph (r. 833–842 CE).

²⁰ *Fiqh* ("Islamic Jurisprudence" or "Expert Knowledge"): Derivative *faqih*, Jurist.

Jurisprudence and Historiography. Muslim scholars faced major internal transformation. When Muhammad was alive, Qur'ānic verses revealed to Muhammad followed public and current events and brought “divine guidance and illumination to politics.” Muhammad’s successors, however, were not prophets. They had to rely on their human insights. Not only that, but the society itself was much larger and more complex than the little community of Madīnah was (Armstrong ch.1). The pre-Islamic Arab society was a predominantly oral society, and “orality’s highest register was apparently occupied by poetry, particularly the ode” (Robinson 8). “But in shape and significance, history for pre-Islamic Arabs differed markedly from history as understood by the annalists or chronographers working within a written medium” (10).

The Qur'ān contained little legislation. Muslim *faqih*s were in a dilemma. Laws at hand were intended for a simpler society. *Faqih*s needed to test precise legal norms. The intention was to achieve the Qur'ānic commands and to build a just society that surrenders to the will of God. Scholars had to look back to the period of the Prophet and the Rāshidūn Caliphs for answers to contemporary problems. It is out of this quandary that Islamic historiography emerged. The Qur'ān was set down in writing within a generation of the Prophet’s death. The *Sunna*,²¹ taking the form of oral *ḥadīth*,²² was written down later, starting in the second third of the eighth century (87).

²¹ *Sunna* (“Teachings”): records of Prophet Muhammad.

²² *Ḥadīth* (“News” or “Story”): The record of the traditions or sayings of the Prophet Muhammad revered and received as a major source of religious law and moral guidance, second only to the authority of the Qur'ān (*Encyclopaedia Britannica*).

Facing the squabbles of succession and civil wars, scholars turned to history to justify their opposition to their leaders. They also turned to history to determine the true characters of the Caliph. “From a very early stage, the behavior and policies of a ruler acquired the religious significance that had profound reverberations with the asceticism, mysticism, sacred jurisprudence, and early theological speculation of the Muslim world.” Muslims intensely debated political leadership of the *Ummah*²³ following civil wars. That played a significant role at a formative stage of the Islamic development. There were questions about what it meant to be a Muslim. There were debates on the actual meaning of the Qur’ānic call of the *Tawhid* (i.e. Unification) of the whole of human life (Armstrong ch.2). Learning the Prophet’s *ḥadīths* played a decisive role in fostering critical and historical thinking, “for *ḥadīth* learning called not only for the collection of prophetic accounts, but the careful evaluation of their authenticity” (Robinson 44).²⁴ Therefore, it is accurate to state that many Islamic historians were primarily jurists by intent. It was from the transmission of the *ḥadīths* that they derived their skills as historians (174).

Translation. Through their conquests, Muslim rulers became the custodians of civilizations they controlled; they became guardians of ancient Greek culture in an era when Europeans took to burning heathen scrolls (Hayes 2). Over the course of two centuries, Arab rulers commissioned massive translation efforts through their non-Arab, and non-Muslim subjects. “A world vision joined a historical system and was

²³ *Ummah* (“Community” or “Nation”).

²⁴ The evaluation was done through *isnād* (the chain of chronological transmission of the oral account *Khabar*) which would endow professional authority on the transmission of the narrative (Robinson 93). In addition to the *source*, the process involved looking for the number of reporters during each stage of the *isnād*, the manner in which *ḥadīth* is relayed, and the reliability of the reporters.

thereby able to produce concomitantly power, wealth, and culture, which produced an ingenious synthesis of Arab, Roman and Persian legacies” (Rajaei 55).

The Arabic language developed from a local tribal dialect into an international language of knowledge. It gave ordinary people of that time centralized access to the scholarly knowledge of multiple cultures the Arabs had conquered or interacted with (Covington 4). Most importantly, Arabic became a medium for scientific and cultural interaction for diverse civilizations and peoples (Burke 22) and “a pliant medium for expressing scientific thought and conveying philosophic ideas” (Hitti 316). Translation focused on scientific, medical, and philosophical works. Philosophical texts were paraphrased. They included commentaries for Arabic students, including simplified adaptations of the works of Plato and Aristotle. Greek philosophy and intellectual ideas strongly influenced a circle of educated elites, including philosophers (*Enc. of Islam* 695). Philosophers bore witness to the socio-religious, ethnic, and cultural turmoil that marked the epoch. Intellectual elites played a fundamental role in the Ismā‘īli and Qarmatian paroxysm.

CHAPTER 2

AGE OF INSURRECTION

Nearly all revolts against the Caliphate authority adopted an Islamic religious ideology (Armstrong ch. 2). In parallel, all counter-revolutions that called for reform, or for change, took on an extreme religious backlash. The claim of ‘Alī and his descendants to the Caliphate had a direct effect on succession conflicts and dissidence movements discussed in this thesis. The clash over succession created irreparable damage to the unity of Muslim societies. Political and ethnic struggle ultimately took a sectarian shape. Remarkably, the rift continued through the Umayyad and Abbasid dynasties, and through the twenty-first century.

The Sunni-Shi’a Divide

Parties differed on their view of a given leader’s qualities. Certain groups put up with their current rulers as long as peace and stability prevailed. Others groups maintained that the ruler should be the most pious Muslim regardless of his lineage. In contrast, Shi’a believed the leader should be a direct descendant of the Prophet’s daughter Fatima, and of his son-in-law ‘Alī.

Succession conflicts were exacerbated when Mu‘āwiyah appointed his son Yazid as his successor (680–683 CE). By doing this, Mu‘āwiyah departed from Arab traditions that had distrusted kingship. He also departed from the Islamic tradition of choosing the Commander of the Faithful, *Amīr al-mu’minīn*. Lifestyle-related matters transcended religiopolitical fault lines. The rulers’ luxurious lifestyle was nothing similar to the tribal chief-rule style that Arabs were accustomed to before Islam,

during the Prophet's lifetime, or under the Rāshidūn Caliphs (632–660 CE). This lifestyle came in sharp contrast to the widespread poverty of the public. In that sense, depending on which group one belonged to, the legitimacy or the piety of the ruling dynasty was disputed.

Al-Husain, 'Alī's second son, and Shi'a's third *Imam*, refused to recognize Yazid as the ruler. Some of the Shi'a population of Kūfah invited him to come and lead the revolt against the Umayyads, so Al-Husain set off from Madīnah to Iraq. He was accompanied by a small band of his followers and their families. The Umayyad army slaughtered Al-Husain and his companions in Karbala. According to Armstrong, the Karbala massacre proved to the Shi'a the "impossibility of integrating the religious imperative in the harsh world of politics, which seemed murderously antagonistic to it. The Muslim *Ummah* was irreparably departing from [Islam's] true pristine values. This occurred despite the Umayyad claim they were ruling by the teachings of the Qur'ān" (Armstrong ch. 2).

The anti-Umayyad struggle solidified mainstream opposition elements. Foreign rudiments profoundly transformed fellowship and the creeds of the Shi'a mainstream movements, especially in Iran (Al-Aziz 103). Antagonism grew stronger to the extent that in 750 CE the Abbasids toppled the Umayyad dynasty. The Abbasid line descended from Prophet Muhammad's uncle, Al'Abbas, and the Abbasids relied heavily on the Shi'a-Persian support to advance their cause. After eighty-nine years of Umayyad rule, Shi'a proponents believed they had triumphed. Throughout their struggle, the Shi'a aimed at establishing a theocracy whereby the ruler combined the temporal and religious reins (Ghalib 49). They thought they could finally reinstate the rightful and righteous *Imams* to the helm of the *Ummah*. However, to the

disillusionment of the Shi'a, Abbasids opted for an *Amīr al-mu'minīn* from the Al'Abbas clan. In other words, he would not be an *Imam* who by default held both political and the religious authorities. Abbasids realized that by installing an *Imam* (from *Ahl Al Bayt*, i.e., the descendants of the Prophet) as an *Amīr al-mu'minīn*, they would have to concede their power. Frustrated, the Shi'a turned against Abbasid rulers. They sought various means to overthrow them, including frequent revolts. A method employed by some of Shi'a groups (Ismā'īlis and Qarmatians included) was the use of *da'wa* (outreach) organizations to seek support for their cause (Jiwa 51).

Intra-Shi'a Schism

The Shi'a continued as a unified group with a political agenda until 765 CE when Ja'far al-Sadiq, the sixth Shi'a *Imam*, died. Ismail Ibn Ja'far was the *Imam* designate. Ismā'īl died before his father, and a rift occurred among Shi'a supporters. Partisans split into six groups.²⁵ Three of al-Sadiq's surviving sons simultaneously claimed his succession. None of them could convincingly prove to have been the beneficiary of a second *nass* [pronouncement] (Daftary, "Short History" ch.2). Two of the six groups maintained the *Imamate* of al-Sadiq's eldest son, and original heir-designate, Ismā'īl bin Ja'far. The first group denied the death of Ismā'īl and

²⁵ The majority of al-Sadiq's partisans accepted his eldest son 'Abdallah, the full-brother of Ismā'īl, as their new *Imam*. When 'Abd Allah died without sons, about seventy days after his father, the bulk of his supporters went over to his other son, Musa bin Ja'afar. A second smaller group refused to believe in al-Sadiq's death and awaited his reappearance as the *Mahdi*. A third group was comprised of partisans who recognized Muhammad b. Ja'afar as the *Imam*. He died in 818 CE. A fourth group acknowledged Musa bin Ja'afar (Al-Kazim) as his father's successor. He was later counted as the seventh *Imam* of the Twelver *Shi'a* group. A Fifth group (pro-*Ismā'īl*) supported the claim of Ismā'īl bin Ja'far. According to their beliefs, *Imam* Ja'far Al-Sadiq as an *Imam* could only speak the truth, and that he had not revoked Ismā'īl's succession rights to the *Imamate*. They denied the death of Ismā'īl's during his father's lifetime, maintained that he was the true *Imam* after al-Sadiq. They further believed that Ismā'īl remained alive and that he would eventually return as the *Mahdi*. The Sixth group, also pro-*Ismā'īl*, affirmed Ismā'īl's death during the lifetime of al-Sadiq, and they recognized Muhammad Ibn Ismā'īl as their *Imam*. A faction maintained the *Mahdiship* of Muhammed Ibn Ismā'īl (Daftary, "Earliest Ismā'īlis" 220-230).

proclaimed that he was the *Mahdi* in hiding (Daftary, “Earliest Ismā‘īlis” 219). The second group conceded that Ismā‘īl had died, and believed the *Imamate* had passed to Isma‘il’s son Muhammad (d. after 795 CE). This particular belief became the cornerstone in the development of Shi’a Ismā‘īli dissidence movements.

The Ismā‘īlis started spreading their *da’is*²⁶ around the Islamic world in the late eighth century to preach their principles of opposition to the Abbasid rule. They found a strong foothold in North Africa among a group that called itself the Fatimids. The group proclaimed descent from Prophet Muhammad’s daughter Fatima. They established a Shi’a Ismā‘īli state in North Africa in 909 CE. They eventually took over Egypt in 969 CE. Their objective was “not to establish another regional sovereignty but to supersede the Abbasids and to found a new Caliphate in their place,” and they proclaimed themselves the custodians of the faith both by “descent and by divine choice” (*Encyclopaedia Britannica*). Consequently, the bulk of Shi’a faithful in Iraq ultimately transferred their allegiance to the Fatimid dynasty. However, a smaller group of Ismā‘īli Shi’a continued to await the return of Ismā‘īl’s son, Muhammad. It is out of the latter group that the Qarmatians stemmed (Daftary, “Earliest Ismā‘īlis” 220).

Prevalent Discontent

The economic gap widened between advantaged classes on the one hand and the poor masses on the other. It triggered social disintegration. People in rural areas, suffering from exploitation by property owners, ministers, and senior state employees, started to organize themselves. Discontent soared in urban and rural areas against

²⁶ *Da’is* (“Callers” or “Preachers”): singular *da’i*, derived from *Da’wa*, the Call, Invitation, or Outreach.

princes, rulers and ultimately against the Caliph. The power of the Caliph dwindled and was completely at the mercy of military chiefs.

Aljawzi believed that preoccupation with expansion, and the influx of wealth from conquered nations, distracted Arab rulers' attention from contemplating social issues that were the true advantage of Islam (55). He noted that moving capitals from Mecca and Madīnah to civilized urban centers contributed to the rise of socialist movements. Aljawzi maintained that the prerequisites for the rise of such movements, economically and culturally, were readily available among non-Arab and non-Muslim peoples (56). This theory is plausible because the Umayyad Caliphate, since its onset, faced intransigence by of the inhabitants of Iraq—Arabs and *Mawali*s, mostly in Basra and Kūfah.

The economic and social grievances, in consort with religious and assimilation problems of non-Arabs, compounded social stratification and polarization (Tucker 4). Furthermore, the coalition of Shi'a partisans and the *Mawali*s proved lethal to the Umayyad dynasty: The Abbasid clan capitalized on the Shi'a's pervasive desire to see a member of Muhammad's family on the throne on the one hand, and harnessed the *Mawali* grievances in the Eastern fringe provinces on the other (4–8). These efforts came to fruition in 750 CE, when the Abbasids successfully toppled the Umayyad dynasty.

However, the Abbasid Caliphs inaugurated a society that stimulated more insurrections (Armstrong ch.2). "It is enough to read a few pages from [famous contemporary historians] Al-Balatheri, Al-Yaqoubi, Al-Tabari and Ibn Al-Attheer to sense the grave, widespread discontent at the end of the eighth century, and of numerous attempts where people resorted to arms to put an end to their rulers'

injustice” (Aljawzi 75). Abbasids faced open revolts and clandestine opposition movements of religious, philosophical, social, and political nature.

Revolutions

Towards the end of the eighth century, there were multiple ideological, political, ethnic, scientific, philosophical, and religious forces at work in the Abbasid realm. The ninth century saw three major revolts. The Babakian revolt was a utopian-nationalistic struggle. It spanned almost two decades (816–838 CE) in Northwestern Iran. The second was the al-Zanj African slaves’ rebellion (869–883 CE) in Iraq. The third and the most successful was the Qarmatian revolution of 899 CE.

The contiguity in locale, timing, and the ethnic, economic, social, and political dynamics of these rebellions is intriguing: three major agitations occurred in the span of one century within a radius of 600 miles from the Caliphate capital. The primary analysis will examine common causes of the three revolts. A deeper analysis will explain how ideology, secretive proselytization, leadership, and instruments contributed to the success and the survival of the Qarmatians, but not the other two rebellions.

Al-Ghazali (theologian and historian of the eleventh and twelfth century) cited multiple names for *bāṭini* (esoteric) movements, including “Qarmatian, Ismā‘īli, Khorramid, and Babakian” (Al-Ghazali 11). The declared political goals of these movements were to end the Sunni Islamic Caliphate (Umayyad then Abbasid) and to get a descendant of ‘Alī ibn Abī Ṭālib to power. While the Babakian and Zanj revolutions shared a calamitous fate, they had different objectives, particularly concerning humanitarian credos that guided the first, and the violent vengeance of the

second. On the other hand, the Babakian and the Qarmatian movements shared many doctrines.

Babakian Revolt (816–838 CE)

The Babakian revolution (also referred to as *Khorramid*) was a peasant revolution against feudal injustice. The revolution was influenced by reformist canons that spread in Iran in the late fifth century known as Mazdakism. Mazdak²⁷ preached that all men are born equal, but suffer from the unequal distribution of wealth and women; “The source of all evil was due to the malevolent action of the devils, Envy, Wrath, and Greed, who had destroyed the fundamental equality and community of man. The movement’s disciples held all things in common including, according to their enemies, women. ... The greatest of mortal sins were those of possessiveness and violence, and the greatest virtues were those of the community of love” (Rexroth 169). Mazdak’s followers procured from the rich and donated it to the needy. They had no private property, and their children did not know their fathers because Mazdak proscribed ownership and marriage (Marshall 86).

The Sassanids virtually wiped out the followers of Mazdak (executed circa 528 CE) (187). However, the creed survived as a clandestine movement and inspired the Babakian revolt, which started in Northwestern Iran and present-day Azerbaijan. The movement persisted for almost two decades (816–838 CE). It quickly spread among peasants and lower classes in Qum, Hamadan, Nahawand, the Caspian, and Isfahan. Those areas are in the Western and Central regions of modern-day Iran (Al-Aziz 169). It attracted impoverished Iranian peasants, slaves, the city’s poor, and small merchants. Al-Aziz mentions the participation of Kurds, Armenians and

²⁷ Mazdak began his work circa 488 CE in Persia. He was executed circa 528 CE (Tarporewala).

discontented Arabian tribes in the rebellion (174). Rebels demanded communal ownership of agrarian land, improved taxation, women's rights, and social status.

Babak, the leader of the uprising, used rugged terrain to his advantage. He exploited the preoccupation of the Abbasid army in crushing peasant agitations in Egypt and Iraq, and the army's engagement in military campaigns against the Byzantines. The Abbasids viewed the Babakian revolt as a brutal heretical immoral sedition. They regarded Babak as a "fornicating, criminal, heretic bastard." This was the usual brand of all rebels opposing the Abbasid rule. The tarnished image was contrary to Babak's religious and political stance (308). The Babakian revolt ended after the execution of its leader in 838 CE.

The Babakian revolt had deep utopian roots and an egalitarian social model. However, it lacked strategic, economic, and logistical capabilities to proliferate and to survive. The Mazdakian principles were no match for an open war game with centralized states and strong armies. No doubt, the Babakian revolt left a dent in the hegemony of the Abbasid Caliphate, but it was never an existential peril. Abbasid propaganda succeeded in controlling potential spread or compassion with the Babakian ideas during the uprising. It was only a matter of time until the Abbasid army put an end to that revolt.

Aljawzi believed that one of the main reasons that led to the failure of the Babakian movement was the limited scope of the calling, which targeted mainly the Iranian population. The movement overlooked spreading its convictions more among the Arabs who were in power, or among Turks and Berbers, who at the time represented the core strength of Islam and its organized army (Aljawzi 118). The movement was successful in a different form; it spun into hidden pockets throughout

the Abbasid realm (310). Marshall accepted that some Mazdakian principles found expression through the ensuing esoteric Ismā‘īli movement and the Brethren of Purity *Ikhwan al-Safa* in the tenth century CE. They compiled their thoughts in an encyclopedia of learning comprising fifty-two epistles called *Rasail Ikhwan al-Safa* (*Epistles of the Brethren of Purity*). The epistles are discussed at length in Chapter 3. On that particular matter, Aljawzi conceded that the Babakian revolt was the precursor to the Qarmatian revolution (222). It is a reasonable assumption given the strong socialist parallels with the Qarmatians. Those principles transpired to the Qarmatians who succeeded in establishing the first Islamic socialist society in Bahrain (87).

Zanj Uprising (869–883 CE)

The swampy area of al-Ahwaz in Iraq was fertile ground for dissident movements. Moreover, slave numbers had surged significantly under the rule of Caliph al-Mamun. It was home for the Zanj²⁸ rebellion and the wellspring of the subsequent Qarmatian insurgency. The movement was comprised primarily of black slaves captured in Eastern Africa and sold in the slave markets of Baghdad and Basra. The Zanj led a fourteen-year revolt in Southern Iraq.

Suad Mustafa Muhammad wrote of other more contained peasant rebellions and insurrections within the Abbasid realm that could have been “the taproot of the Zanj revolt” (27). Even though the Zanj rebellion started small, it evolved into a massive army when “slaves, Bedouins and serfs all joined with the rebels, who at their height supposedly numbered over 500,000. These revolutionaries even amassed a navy and controlled as many as six fortified cities in modern-day Iraq” (Andrews).

²⁸ *Zanj*: Arabic term that describes East African Blacks (*Encyclopaedia Britannica*).

Conveniently, the Zanj leader, ‘Alī bin Muhammad identified himself to be a descendant of ‘Alī and Fatima (Muhammad 4). Even though he promised freedom, justice, and wealth, it remains that the Zanj rebellion was a little more than a class uprising. It was by no means a universal liberation movement against slavery, feudalism, or injustice. Unlike other movements that sought change, the Zanj movement lacked doctrinal and intellectual depth. Zanj leaders were the first to give up the rebellion’s ideas and started owning slaves themselves. Al-Douri believed that while it may be true that the leader of the Zanj wanted to impose certain social transformation, he was not after the abolition of slavery. While he freed slaves when the opportunity arose, he also enslaved Muslim captives (94).

Al-Tabari,²⁹ who wrote extensively about that movement, spoke of Arabs who initially joined the Zanj movement (Al-Tabari 126). In fact, at its onset, the Zanj movement mobilized different non-slave strata because of its call “for the application of the principles of Islam—justice, tolerance, and equality” million (Muhammad 38). However, those numbers dwindled as the revolt turned bloody. The Zanj were merciless against all cities that fought against them. Most striking was the plundering of Basra, the massacre of its men and enslavement of its women and children. Historical references place the number of deaths during the Zanj revolt at 1.5 to 2 million (Muhammad 39). These figures indicate a staggering human toll. On the other hand, it became evident that the Zanj simply wanted to attain their own freedom and to improve their economic situation, but had no program for social reform (Al-Douri 95).

²⁹ Al-Tabari (838–923 CE): is a renowned Persian historian & scholar.

The Zanj rebellion eventually abated. It enfeebled, but did not terminate, the slavery system and the slave trade (Dalo 353). It also paved the way for further unrest in the *Sawad* under the Qarmatians. The fortunes of the Qarmatians were linked with those of the Zanj (Waines 303). Not only that, both movements brushed shoulders. Historical sources mention that at the peak of Zanj rebellion, Hamdan Qarmat (whose followers became known as the Qarmatians) explored forging an alliance with the leader of the Zanj, ‘Alī bin Muhammad (Daftary, “Qarmatians” 3). Some sources mention that the leader of Zanj offered 100,000 swordsmen to support the Qarmatians. This pact was not sealed, even though this association might have been advantageous. Hamdan Qarmat reportedly spent the better part of the day debating with the Zanj leader, who promised support. However, Hamdan Qarmat slipped away when ‘Alī bin Muhammad went to prayer (Ghalib 136; Muhammad 31). The significance of this tale is that, in the middle of the rebellion, ‘Alī bin Muhammad continued to observe Islamic religious rituals. Abbasids did not consider Zanj rebels as religious apostates. Another nuance was that the Abbasids did not classify it as an “anti-religious” movement (unlike the Babakian and Qarmatian movements) (Al-Douri 95). It may also be noteworthy that the doctrinal gap between the two groups aborted a chance of a coalition between the two rebel groups that might have changed the outcome of the battle.

The Zanj movement possessed what the Babakian insurgency lacked with regard to headcount, brutality, proximity to strategic locations and to the economic lifeline of the Abbasid Caliphate. Even though the rebellion was near fatal to the Caliphate, the absence of guiding principles resulted in the Zanj movement going into history as a mobster disturbance.

Qarmatian Uprising (899 CE)

Ismā‘īlis appeared on the historical stage during that period as a dynamic organization conducting *da’wa* activity, and with an energetic central leadership operating “secretly at first” from the Ahvaz in Kuzistan and then from Salamiyya in Syria (Daftary, “Carmatians” 2). The movement’s ideology spread among peasants and low-income city dwellers. On the other hand, the title Qarmatian described the adherents of the Ismā‘īli branch of Islam during the ninth century converted by Hamdan Qarmat. Qarmat was the chief leader of the Ismā‘īli *da’wa* in *Sawad* al-Kūfah, the Iraqi city of Kūfah’s countryside (1). Qarmat appointed *da’is* in Iraq, Persia, Yemen, Syria, and North Africa (Carmatians). Those masses were eventually able to organize and to engage the Abbasid Caliphate armies.

On a tactical level, Qarmatians benefited from two events. The first was the preoccupation of the orthodox Sunni Abbasid Caliphate with the Zanj insurrection. The second was the founding of the Fatimid Ismā‘īli Caliphate in North Africa, and its spread towards Egypt (between 909–972 CE). The Fatimid Caliphate represented strong political opposition to the Abbasid Caliphate, and albeit not for long, a potential ally of the Qarmatians. The Ismā‘īli-Qarmatian disunion occurred when the bulk of Shi’a and Ismā‘īli faithful in Iraq transferred their allegiance to the newfound Fatimid Caliphate.

In that context, we can set 899 CE as the official starting point for Qarmatians as an independent faction. In that year the Fatimid *Imam* ‘Abd’Allah al-Mahdi claimed the *Imamate*. Most Ismā‘īlis accepted the *Imam*, but not the Qarmatians. Qarmat’s followers lived in scattered pockets in different parts of the Muslim world (Daftary, “Carmatians” 5). Relations between the Qarmatians of Bahrain and the

Fatimids took a turn for the worse after the Fatimid conquest of Egypt in 969 CE and the Fatimid invasion of Syria in 970 CE (11). The separation intensified as the Fatimid dynasty in North Africa and Egypt moved away from the rebellious nature of early Ismā'īlism and leaned towards the prevailing social and religious norms of the Islam communities that they ruled.

On the ground, Qarmatians had already established their presence among the communities in Iraq and northwestern areas of the Persian Gulf as part of the Ismā'īli evangelization. Qarmatians “organized subversion in Yemen, Syria, and even Baghdad itself.” In 900 CE, Qarmatians defeated the Abbasid army in Basra, and were effectively in control of “Bahrain, sometimes Basra, and many other towns between Mesopotamia and Arabia, cutting the pilgrim routes to Mecca, and usually the sea connections of Baghdad” (Rexroth 175).

However, Qarmatians failed to control other areas of the Abbasid Caliphate, such as Central Iraq and Syria (Ali). Daftary cited the medieval historian, Al-Tabari, on the eruption of various Qarmatians revolts in Iraq and Syria as of 899 CE. Even though the Qarmatians met one severe defeat near Salamiyya in Syria by the Abbasid Army, the Qarmatian factions resumed their attacks on Damascus and several other towns in 906 CE. They attacked Kūfah in Iraq. They also raided pilgrim caravans returning from Mecca. The Qarmatian factions waged what Daftary described as the Syro-Mesopotamian Qarmatian revolts and terrorist activities until 907 CE when the Abbasid army eventually defeated them (6). They established a short-lived rule in Yemen in 903 CE. Nonetheless, the ruler Ibn al-Fazl abolished the *Shari'a*³⁰ and proclaimed to be the *Mahdi*. This put Ibn al-Fazl on a conflicting path with other

³⁰ *Shari'a* (“Religious Law”).

Qarmatian *dai's* in Yemen who remained loyal to their cause. The inner Qarmatian conflict in Yemen put an end to statehood attempts in that region by 917 CE (7). In Iraq, another Qarmatian faction was militarily defeated in 928 CE; the movement was not capable of upholding long-lasting control over larger territory.

Despite several military setbacks, the Qarmatians maintained support pockets in various Fatimid ruled regions. Multiple sources referred to the Qarmatian incursions into Syria and Palestine, and taking hold of Damascus in 971 CE. In the same year, a Qarmatian Army led by Hasan 'Asam marched to Cairo, the seat of the Fatimid Caliphate, but turned back to Bahrain without taking hold of the city. After the establishment of their state in Bahrain, these Qarmatian incursions might have been attempts to expand their territory, or to supply the state treasury with the tribute from seized regions.

All the same, the Qarmatians' state in Bahrain and the Eastern Arabian Peninsula was the only Qarmatian territory that survived "as an independent republic for decades and as an extraordinary historical experience for its time and place and its revolutionary content" (Mrouah 28). There are no available sources that tackle the survival of the Qarmatians of Bahrain after 988 CE. However, "they must have had some power to have been able to protect their regime from final collapse until sometime in the following century" (Hussain 260). As the objective of this study is to understand the utopian aspects of the Qarmatian virtuous city model, the focus in the remaining part of the thesis will be on the Qarmatian state in Bahrain and their founding ideology.

CHAPTER 3

THE QARMATIAN IDEOLOGY

Islamic esoteric movements pursued the achievement of justice and happiness at the individual level. Some sought to construct the paradigms of a socialist Islamic society. Those movements exerted methodical and political efforts to rid Muslim societies of inequality and dominance. Their principles attracted the masses including peasants, laborers, and artisans (Ghalib 9). Those principles influenced Islamic literature and philosophy. Ghalib stated, “with confidence,” that esoteric philosophies paved the path for the spread of liberal notions within the Islamic world. People, who were in the past apprehensive of voicing less belligerent ideas, were encouraged to advocate for their aspirations to overcome the turbulence and corruption of their era. They saw an opportunity to transform narrow political, social, and religious lives into an open idealistic society that preserves the individual’s freedom, dignity, and happiness (53).

The Qarmatian faction of the Ismā‘īli esoteric movement led “the largest ... revolt which threatened the very existence of Islamic civilization, and which at its height, succeeded in establishing [in Bahrain and the eastern Arabian peninsula] a schismatic anti-Caliphate which was at least the equal in power and prosperity of the Orthodox Caliphate of Baghdad” (Lewis, “The Origins” 1). That movement also locked horns with the Fatimid Caliphate and threatened many local dynasties (Daftary, “Carmatians” 12).

Qarmatian Social Ideology

Qarmatians represent an advanced social phenomenon to that of the broader Ismā'īli philosophy. Qarmatians boasted religious, philosophical, social, and political dimensions intended to liberate people's minds from religious dogmas and fables. They called for the establishment of a new system of governance where everyone enjoyed real equality and social justice. Membership of their grassroots movement was selective and achievable only after meeting certain conditions. They combined the intensity of their creed with strong military influence. Rexroth described the Qarmatians as “the first clear examples of a communal mutual-benefit society living on the plunder of other communities” (175). They coupled this doctrine with a strong commitment to social justice (Tucker 116).

Qarmatians granted the benefits of their citizenship exclusively to their followers. Nasir Khusrow³¹ portrayed tolerance and an absence of fanaticism amongst the Qarmatians during the eleventh century. Contrariwise, Petrushevsky explained that the Qarmatians were extremely fanatical and intolerant in the ninth and tenth centuries, especially when Sunnis were involved (Petrushevsky 247). “Qarmatians were the most radical of the Ismā'īlis, repudiating most of the rites of Orthodox Islam and holding the worship of the Ka'ba to be idolatry” (241). For that reason perhaps, Qarmatians were almost exclusively associated with the pillaging and sacking of Mecca on 12 January 930 CE, a day of pilgrimage. During that day, they sacked part of the town, killed thousands of pilgrims, led thousands of others into slavery, and cut

³¹ Nasir Khusrow (1004–1088 CE): is a Persian poet, philosopher, Isma'ili scholar, traveler, and a writer in Persian literature.

pilgrimage routes for almost a decade. Historians remember them for breaking the black stone into two and carrying it off the Ka'ba to their capital (Sabbagh 18).

In reprisal, Qarmatian socio-political and religious heritage was redacted and demonized. Most historical reports of Qarmatian doctrines come from inimical external sources. Therefore, in an attempt to demarcate the strategic and ideological circumstances that led to the success of the Qarmatian uprising, it is important to touch upon the Qarmatian success strategy and the philosophical and political manifestations of their thought.

Qarmatian Political Ideology

The motto of the Qarmatian rebellion was the Qur'ānic verse “We wanted to confer favor upon those who were oppressed in the land and make them leaders and make them inheritors” (*Qur'ān* 28.5). Even though the movement had a religious tint, it was in essence, a socialist endeavor.

The open Shi'a revolts of the first two Islamic centuries turned into a secretive underground movement that spread undetected, and undisturbed, among the Abbasid societies. They “kept their principles and beliefs secret for fear of being misunderstood by those who were not mystically inclined (such as the '*Ulama*, the scholars or the learned ones, who doubted the religious validity of the esoteric groups) as well as their political oppressors” (Thomas 95). They were known as *bāṭini* groups and sects. They would distinguish between the *Bāṭin* (the inner, or the hidden) and the *Zāher* (the outer, or the visible) of the Qur'ān and the Islamic *Shari'a*. They would apply *ta'wil*, or the elucidation of the inner or esoteric meaning, from the literal or apparent meaning of a text, observance, or religious instruction.

Shakib Saleh related the rise of different Shi'a groups to the failure of the Shi'a leadership in their struggle against the Umayyad and Abbasid Sunni Caliphates: "The lack of success demanded a new, more revolutionary approach in attitude and method" (Saleh 35). In that context, the Ismā'īli-turned-Qarmatian movement began as an inner-Shi'a protest against the failure to achieve the religiopolitical objectives of the Shi'a. This rupture resulted in a self-aware and dynamic group. This group took upon itself to spread the ideas. They also strove to attain strategic control, through fervent cohorts, of critical areas around the Abbasid Caliphate. Disadvantaged tribes in Southern Iraq and Syria, as well as the working classes and artisans of the Abbasid cities, secretly propagated the Qarmatian calling (Ghalib 9).

Extreme Shi'a movements, by the eighth century, mixed Islamic beliefs, inherited Oriental mysticism, and Occidental philosophies. *Bāṭini* Shi'as attributed to the descendants of *Imam* 'Alī ibn Abī Ṭālib, and his wife Fatima, qualities of reverence, Messianic, and even divine qualities. "They considered their *Imams* to be religious leaders ... anointed and divinely inspired and as such infallible ... the idea of *al-Mahdi*, or the rightly guided one, was consistently expressed in Shi'a theological conceptualization" (Thomas 95). The *Mahdi* and the other *Imams* before his appearance were to be of a supernatural nature, to be knowledgeable about the inner secrets of the universe, and to have spiritual insights (Tucker 116). Through the *Mahdi*, Ismā'īlis and subsequently Qarmatians came to expect "total, imminent, and collective salvation in this world" (Tucker xvii). Their history displayed strong evidence of millenarian political, social, and religious impulses at work (110). In

effect, Shi'a added a sixth pillar to the five pillars of Islam: The *Wilaya*³² of the *Imams*.

In summary, the Ismā'īli call, the precursor to the Qarmatian movement, arose out of prevalent crises and gloom. Heavy taxation, neglect of irrigation and agriculture, ethnic discrimination, and natural catastrophes triggered this sense of desperation. The reaction of the different Shi'a-Ismā'īli groups varied: In the case of the Twelver Shi'a group, there was a complete removal from political life, unobtrusively awaiting the return of the concealed *Imam* (Malbouisson 17). Qarmatians also awaited the redeemer who would restore justice and punish the wicked, but in contrast to the Twelver Shi'a s who denied legitimacy to any government in the absence of the hidden *Mahdi* (Thomas 95), Qarmatians were willing to fight for that cause, and in preparation for its advent, were prepared to start a worldly, communal, and egalitarian model. They would eliminate, or at least reduce, social inequality (Tucker 117). They would also build a sustainable model, learning from the mistakes of their precursors. Al-Khalifa stated that the Qarmatians initially adopted a middle ground, acting as the intermediary between the people and the *Imam*. They “spoke on behalf of the *Imam*, and called people on his behalf” (119). However, that soon changed; Qarmatians called for reliance on sciences. They believed in the freedom of choice as far as religious practices such as prayer and fasting were concerned. They eventually transitioned from a traditional imamate-based system into a participatory and a consultative system. Abstention turned into activism to establish a state, to issue new laws, and to declare that government was

³² *Wilaya* (“Guardianship”): in Shi'a terminology, the leadership of Imams over the people.

based on consultation and that the Caliphate was by choice, not by birth (Al-Khalifa 119). Such was the model on which the Qarmatians based their state in Bahrain.

Formative Influencers to Qarmatian Ideology

Karl Marx wrote in 1842 that “philosophers do not spring up like mushrooms out of the ground; they are products of their time, of their nation, whose most subtle, valuable and invisible juices flow in the ideas of philosophy” (qtd. in West 27). Over two millennia before that, Plato and Aristotle emphasized that society and government developed “as two sides of the same coin: take away the one and you took away the other” (Crone 6).

The broader Ismā‘īli movement was an ideological current that had intellectual and political branches. At face value, Qarmatianism was a militant, worldlier, branch of Ismā‘īlism (Ali). However, that might not be a fair description. Daftary described the religious Qarmatian beliefs as “messianic, revolutionary ... with strong antinomian tendencies.” He cited various sources that spoke of the Qarmatian “cyclical view of hiero-history, according to which the religious history of mankind proceeded through seven prophetic eras of various durations” (Daftary, “Qarmatians” 4).

Petrushevsky maintained that Qarmatians had connections with the Brethren of Purity and that they influenced such thinkers as Al-Farabi (870–950 CE) and Ibn Sina³³ (980–1037 CE) (247). Therefore, in the absence of direct sources, it is significant that we tackle those two subjects in an attempt to understand the Qarmatian utopian and social reformative model. The complexity of Al-Farabi’s

³³ Latinized Avicenna.

philosophy and the Brethren of Purity's epistles serve as an indicator that the Qarmatian ideology might actually have more profound philosophical foundations than originally thought.

Al-Farabi's Virtuous Polity

Greek philosophy influenced the social and government model of the Qarmatian society. By the ninth and tenth century, most of the philosophical works were translated into Arabic from Syriac. It remained that "much of the Islamic world looked upon the works of philosophical thinkers as futile because of their inability to relate these ancient works to the most fundamental Islamic principles" (Germann). Al-Farabi recovered "the classical political tradition of Aristotle and Plato. [He] placed it within the context of Islamic religious principles," and was the pioneer of attempting "to unite political philosophy with Islam" (Hines 2). He also sought to achieve political equilibrium to control the chaos that marred his times. He tried to put it all into an Islamic context. Al-Farabi's work was a synthesis of the Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics*, of Plato's *Politeia*, and Aristotle's *Politica*. His social and religious philosophy was an adaptation of Greek ethical and political thought to the needs and demands of the Islamic world of the tenth century (Germann).

To that effect, Al-Farabi's classic book *Ara' Ahl Al-Madinah al-Fadilah* (the virtuous city) explored the ideals of a political community that produces the greatest good for all its citizens (69). It was "based on the familiar premise that it was natural for human beings to live in association with others. The goal of human existence was *sa'ada* (happiness). Happiness was achievable through living in a virtuous city, a virtuous nation, or a virtuous world" (70). In his book, Al-Farabi defined this polity as one led by learned and excellent men, and one in which the inhabitants co-operated in

striving for ultimate happiness. Human beings were connected by a chain of authority, based on their degree of knowledge and understanding. The duties of that polity's *al-ra'is al-awwal* (supreme leader) were to promote the attainment of happiness by his community (74).

Rasail Ikhwan al-Safa

There is much debate on the real author of the *Epistles of the Brethren of Purity*. Some went as far to attribute those epistles to *Imam Ja'far Al-Sadiq* or his son, *Ismā'īl*. Others ascribed it to an unknown descendant or descendants of 'Alī ibn Abī Tālib or to prominent scholars. Marshall believed that some of *Mazdak's* teachings “found expression in the *Ismā'īli* movement in general and in particular in the influential cultural organization known as *Ikhwan al-Safa*” (Marshall 86). In the epistles, the relationship was clear between the philosophical principles of the *Brethren of Purity* and the organization and principles of the *Ismā'īlis*, and most likely, the *Qarmatians* in particular.

The *Brethren of Purity* blended traditional knowledge in a manner that reflected the progress and diversity of culture in the Muslim world of the ninth and tenth centuries, and the effect of the translation of ancient philosophical and scientific heritage of Greece and the Mediterranean world. Most relevant to this study were that the philosophical approaches and concepts in those epistles have many commonalities with the views of the pre-Fatimid *Ismā'īli Shi'a* thinkers of that period. *Hamdani* affirmed *Ismā'īli* origin of these epistles in his paper “An Early Fatimid Source on the Time and Authorship of the *Rasa'il Ikhwan-us Safa*” (*Hamdani* 68). *Hitti* corroborated this. He associated the group's Baghdad branch, religiopolitical philosophies. “With ultra-Shi'ite, probably [*Ismā'īli*], views and were opposed to the

existing political order, which they evidently aimed to overthrow by undermining the popular intellectual system and religious beliefs” (Hitti 73). Madelung drove this further, and he described certain aspects of the *Rasai’l* as work by the Qarmatians (Hamdani 69).

The Brethren warned of those who took the veil of Shi’ism to hide their vice. They warned of those who knew not the Qur’ān, prayer, *Jihad* (struggle), or *Zakat*³⁴ as “pretenders” (Ikhwan 146). The epistle also criticized eccentric practices like visiting graves and praying to *Imams*. The epistles criticized those who claimed that the awaited *Imam* is hiding in fear. They stressed that he was among them, but that the public repudiated him (147). In a segment addressing the Shi’a, the Brethren stated that what was common between the Shi’a and the Brethren was the love for “the Prophet, his household, and the *Wilayat* of *Imam* ‘Alī, the *Amir al-Mu’minīn*, and the finest of guardians. This resonated with the Qarmatian principles of active engagement of the society, and their opposition to visiting tombs, which they considered as a form of idolatry” (195).

Bandali Aljawzi quoted De Goeje on a proclamation a Qarmatian purportedly enunciated upon the conquest of Mecca (930 CE): “You donkeys, you kneel in front of stones, you circle them and dance to honor them. You wipe your faces with them and the scholars that you follow teach you nothing better! These fables can only be wiped with the sword” (Aljawzi 184).

Individual, social, and religious goals intersected in the Brethren’s vision. “Their writings reflect a vibrant philosophical orientation, strong familiarity with the major sciences, religious and intellectual traditions, and a critical stance toward what

³⁴ *Zakat* (“Alms”): One of the five pillars of Islam, obligatory alms on wealth.

they perceived to be the cultural and political stagnation of the time. The Brethren based their agenda of reform on three suppositions. The first called for:

[A] synthesis, appropriate to a new time and circumstances [that] would harmonize Qur'ānic and Muslim values and ideals with the best that all other religious-philosophical systems had to offer. The goal of that synthesis was the material and spiritual advancement of human beings here and in the hereafter. Followers would attain moral, intellectual growth, and spiritual development through sound teaching and learning. The last postulation maintained that the acquisition of knowledge was accomplished in a society built around a common set of civic values and behavior. (*Enc. of Islam* 348)

Aljazwi believed that the authors of the *Epistles of the Brethren of Purity* were the first unequivocally Qarmatian undertaking for spreading Ismā'īli doctrines (Aljazwi 221).

The fact that the authors of the epistles were unknown conformed to the Ismā'īli efforts to form a secretive anti-establishment movement that aimed to undermine the established political, social, and religious archetype. It was also evident that those epistles served as the foundation (or conceivably, a manifestation) of the Ismā'īli-Qarmatian values towards the creation of a happy, conscious, and prosperous society (Fakhoury 225).

Qarmatian Society

After expanding on the origins of the Qarmatian movement, it is essential to shed light on the distinctive characteristics of the Qarmatian society. For that reason, this section will outline the Qarmatian social and egalitarian achievements in

government, social, economic, financial, and gender-related issues. It will outline key aspects that characterize that movement as one of the first socialist utopias in world history. It will specifically focus on the Qarmatian state in Bahrain. As a matter of fact, the Qarmatians of Bahrain were described by medieval Sunni authors “as the most heretical group, bent on destroying Islam from within ...[yet] the Qarmatians of Bahrain have also been praised for their political organization and social order, possessing unique features among the Muslim states of the time” (Daftary, “Qarmatians” 12). They established “a republic that had its own ideology and its social, economic, and political platform. It was a state ... not based on religion. In fact, it was very close to the modern form of a secular state” (Alamuddin 20).

Qarmatian System of Government

In anticipation of the appearance of the *Mahdi* the Qarmatians of Bahrain, unlike other Shi'a groups, did not establish any Imams of their own (Hollister 217). De Goeje observed that without Imams, the *Iqdaniya*³⁵ Council essentially ruled Bahrain, and that “the leader held his power with the consent of the council” (Hollister 220).

The Qarmatian system of government in Bahrain featured collective leadership of a Chief and seven (later, six and sometimes twelve) consultative *viziers*, or council members known as the *Iqdaniya* Council (Hollister 219). The council was comprised of the highest officials of the state and representatives of the influential families in Bahrain. The first head of the council was Abu Sa'id Jannabi. The

³⁵ *Iqdaniyah* (Derived from Arabic term 'akd, meaning contract or pact): Roughly translates to the council of pact, or the council of decision/convention.

descendants of Abu Sa'id Jannabi also served in later councils. The community had easy access to the ruling council (Daftary, "Qarmatians" 13).

The Iqdaniyya's role was fundamental in taking major decisions on governmental and official decisions concerning the *ummah*. "These eminences were the local clan chiefs, who, through local political consensus, tried to achieve decisions concerning social welfare, internal and foreign political choices, and military pronouncements" (Nesbitt et al. 117). The members of the *Iqdaniyya* council insisted on maintaining political consensus, and insisted that the ruler was obliged to consider the council's opinion. Leadership remained in Al-Jannabi's line, but lineage alone did not guarantee automatic succession. In fact, "when the eldest son of the [Head of the Council] Abu Tahir [Janabi] demanded the opportunity to rule the emirate in succession to his father, the request was perceived as a disrespectful move against the *Iqdaniyya* and [he] was probably kidnapped and murdered" (118).

The dictionary traces the word Republic to the late sixteenth century, where it was derived "from French *république*, from Latin *respublica*, from *res* 'entity, concern' + *publicus* 'of the people, public'" ("Republic"). A Republic is also broadly defined as a form of government in which a state is ruled by representatives of the citizen body (*Encyclopaedia Britannica*). The Qarmatian state in Bahrain was not a democratic republic in the twentieth and twenty-first century archetype, but it had more traits of a Republic than of any other form of government. To begin with, Qarmatian citizens actually opted to live and take part in their commonwealth, and to uphold its ideology. Secondly, their leaders did not hold ultimate power in their hand. While the council members were not elected, they were nonetheless representatives of the various peoples and tribes of the Qarmatian state. Citizens had easy access to the

council members. The council was responsible for the decisions regarding welfare of the society, for social ordinance, economic empowerment of the citizens, and for military activities. In that context, their form of government was closer to a republic than a theocracy that the tenth century Caliphate represented.

Social and Economic Model

The Qarmatian movement, founded on Ismā'īli Shiite *bāṭini* doctrines, was able to engage and integrate various forms of economic, social, and religious sentiments. The organizational structure was the movement's most noticeable characteristic. It distinguished the movement from other esoteric cults, enabling it to thrive and to seize control of the eastern regions of the Arabian Peninsula (Mrouah 275).

Al-Ghazali,³⁶ in his book *Fdaah 'h Albatiniya (The Scandals of Bāṭinism)*, explained that the Batini da'is disputed the Sultans and the 'Ulama of the time, by appealing to the convictions of their followers, and softly promising their listeners the salvation attained by the blessings of the descendants of the prophet, the Ahl Al Bayt (Al-Ghazali 24). Al-Ghazali noted that the "shrewd and intelligent da'is" (22) would appeal to our addressees by reminding them of the injustice and humiliation that their ancestors endured, until they saw the ugliness of the shar'ia laws communicated to them (19). They would use similar techniques depending on their audience's allegiance (23). In this, the Qarmatians came out as the champions of peace prosperity, and religious reformation that the Abbasids promised but never fulfilled.

Ghalib portrayed the modus operandi of the Qarmatian missionaries, which they also implemented in the Qarmatian state. Missionaries selected, in every village,

³⁶ Al-Ghazali (1058-1111 CE): a Persian Sunni theologian, jurist, philosopher, and mystic.

a dependable follower. They entrusted him with the money, cattle, jewelry, and property of the village. In turn, he provided clothes, food, and money to the needy so that no one was left poor. “Every Qarmatian did his best in his fieldwork, and earned his bread ... and hence became worthy of his position. A woman earned money from weaving; a boy earned his wages out of capturing birds” (Ghalib 7).

The social principles of the Qarmatians were firstly social equality, modeled after Islamic teachings and philosophical principals. Secondly, the Qarmatians spread their notions of communal goodwill, regardless of race, social class, or religion. Thirdly, Qarmatians expropriated and redistributed land ownership to those in need, at no cost. Furthermore, they instituted gender equality in rights and obligations (Ghalib 170).

With their state declared, the Qarmatian attempted to establish a system of social justice. They undertook experiments of communal ownership of property and pooling resources. They promoted a utopian society, with equality between sexes, races, ethnicities, and classes of the “believers.” Qarmatians abolished individual property, aimed to unite the working classes, and strove to establish absolute socialism. They put an end to feudalism, provided financial incentives to farmers to encourage them to exploit the land, and encouraged industry. Moreover, Qarmatians took control of foreign trade and targeted self-sufficiency (Al-Douri 96). In the early days, Hamdan Qarmat imposed various types of taxes on their supporters. In addition to various taxes on persons,³⁷ men and women voluntarily contributed *khums*,³⁸ (20%)

³⁷ Those taxes had several names: the al-Fitra comprised one Dirham on every person (man, woman, and child); the al-Hijra was one dinar per financially capable adult, otherwise, other financially capable members volunteered to settle it; the al-Bilgha was an optional seven dinars for those who wanted to carry favor within the movement, allocated to the hidden Imam (Ali).

of what they earned out of agricultural produce and trade profits. The money went into a common fund known as *al-Ilfa* (affinity coffer), whereby all the collected taxes belonged to the entire community. That money was redistributed in the community based on need. They also used this money to attract more followers, giving them a taste of the new age of salvation and prosperity (Dalo 357). In effect, no Qarmatian owned more than his or her sword (Ghalib 7). Since there was no compulsory method to enforce *khums*, the highest tax on earnings and savings, it is closer to being a voluntary payment. It is evident from various sources that discuss the Qarmatian socialist tax and proprietorship scheme that the communal social spirit surpassed the individuals' outlook to proprietorship and personal wealth. Everything belonged to the community, and it was the individual's obligation to defend that society's wealth, welfare, and sustainability. However, De Goeje stressed that the payment of the fifth was not "the only act of devotion expected from the believers; Their chief duty was to lead a life of purity and brotherly love" (qtd. in Hollister 219).

The economic prosperity of the Qarmatian state permitted the financing of the major military disbursements and countless series of raiding campaigns and military adventures in distant lands. The ruling council allotted the revenues of those campaigns, such as booty, taxes on ships passing through the Persian Gulf and the

³⁸ *Encyclopaedia Britannica* explains *khums* ("one-fifth") among Shi'ites. In addition to *Zakat*, Shi'a require payment of an additional one-fifth tax on income that exceeds the person's expenses over a period of one year. The intention was to spend it for the benefit of the Hidden *Imam* and his deputies in addition to orphans, the poor, and travelers (*Encyclopaedia Britannica*). Al-Sistani, a twenty-first-century Shi'a scholar explained that *khums* money was (and still does in Shi'a communities) collected from earnings on trade, industry or other means that exceeded the annual expenses of the person and his/her family, whereby *khums* was due from the surplus. That also applied to wealth that was acquired without having worked for it (such as gifts). Same applied to inheritance from someone who did not apply *khums*. *Khums* was also applicable to savings and profits.

Island of Owl, in addition to protection fees paid by the pilgrim caravans to different groups in the society. Those were allotted by the governing council based on fixed ratios, after setting the fifth aside for the *Mahdi* (Daftary, “Carmatians” 14). The tax surplus was redistributed among the community. A famous tenth-century chronicler, Ibn Hawqal who traveled extensively between 943 and 969 CE, estimated the Qarmatian state’s proceeds at one million two hundred thousand dinars annually, of which only thirty thousand dinars were collected as land tax. This would be a small amount compared to the abundance of fertile land in Bahrain and Oman. On top of war booty that we know was distributed within the community, and taking into account that the Qarmatian state-funded agricultural and industrial production, education, and other services, it is clear that the Qarmatian people lived in economic welfare (Dalo 387).

Demonized as the Qarmatians were, their state’s concern for the “welfare of the community and the resulting social order in Bahrain evoked the admiration of the non-Qarmatian observers who visited eastern Arabia before the downfall of the Qarmatian state” (Daftary, “Carmatians” 13). In the entirety of Islamic history, with the exception of the Qarmatian state and the short-lived Islamic statehood in Madīnah (assuming the Qur’ān served as a socio-religious anthology), there were no other attempts to establish a utopian society.

The Persian Ismā‘īli traveler Nasir Khusrow visited al-Hasa in 1051 CE. Khusrow mentioned that thirty-thousand Ethiopian “slaves” cultivated the grain estates of that region. The term “slave” might not be an accurate depiction of the status of those workers. On this subject, some sources mention that the state paid the laborers’ wages (Dalo 385). Adunis cited sources that the Qarmatians abolished land

serfdom as part of their broad agricultural reform plan (Adunis 71). Dalo also stressed that the Zanj rebellion enfeebled the slavery system and the slave trade, although it did not completely end them (353). This leads us to conclude that the black African workers might not have been slaves per se since they received wages. It might be correct to classify them as agricultural labor or to suppose that the Qarmatians treated their slaves in a more humane manner.

Khusrow spoke of a society where the inhabitants paid no taxes; possibly, because of the surplus tax payback to the citizens, or possibly that the poor were not required to pay taxes. Khusrow observed how the Qarmatian state established an agricultural bank: poor people or those in debt were granted interest-free loans until they could put their affairs in order. Artisans arriving in al-Hasa received loans to start their business. The state paid for repairs of private properties and mills and grain was ground free-of-charge in the state mills. Laws forbade charging interest to protect the people from extortion by moneylenders. The state controlled foreign exports, and it minted lead money to prevent wealth from escaping abroad (qtd. in Ghalib 172; Daftary, “Qarmatians” 14).

Qarmatian Religious Model

There are conflicting accounts from various sources that accused the Qarmatians of staunch materialism, and of denying religious principles altogether (Al-Douri 97). Al-Ghazali, the most prominent of Muslim religious scholars, accused the Qarmatians of relinquishing religious observances and rituals. On the other hand, Qarmatians viewed themselves as social and religious reformers. Another scholar of the time quoted a Qarmatian vicar, titled al-Ahwazi, to have described his mission to a town: “I was ordered to quench the thirst of this village, to enrich its people, to save

them, and to grant them authority over the wealth of their masters” (Al-Douri 97). This was an interpretation of the Qur’ānic verse “We wanted to confer favor upon those who were oppressed in the land and make them leaders and make them inheritors” (*Qur’ān* 28:5), which the Qarmatians used as their maxim. They were after saving, empowering, and enriching the people.

Petrushevsky confirmed the liberal attitude of Qarmatians to external practices, ritualistic prohibitions, and *Fiqh*. He endorsed that it was “even more free-thinking than the Fatimid Ismā‘īlis; for whereas the latter thought ritual and *Fiqh* to be binding on the lower grades, even those among the Qarmatians were allowed to neglect all the observances” (Petrushevsky 247). Nasir Khusrow observed that there were no congregational mosques for Friday prayer in the city (qtd. in Petrushevsky 247). Religious practices such as praying, fasting, and other rites had been abolished (or at least were not enforced) in the community. The inhabitants did not heed religious interdictions, although they did not drink wine because they believed themselves to be in the era of the Prophet Muhammad and Islam. Other sources attributed that to social ordinance rather than religious conformity. Even so, beyond the first few turbulent decades of the creation of the Qarmatian republic when anti-Sunni sentiment soared, the Qarmatians did not prevent Sunnis and mercantile people of other religions from professing their faith and praying in their own fashion. Khusrow explained that the Qarmatians allowed a Persian Sunni merchant to build a mosque where pilgrims who reached Al-Hasa prayed (Daftary, “Qarmatians” 12–14).

Qarmatian Gender Model

The Qarmatian approach to gender appears to have been progressive and emancipatory. Islam “evolved from an initial phase of tolerance to the gradual marginalization of women and their enclosure in the dark world of a theologically illegitimate patriarchy” (Majid). This debilitating climate was shattered through a revolutionary interpretation of Islam and the restoration of “early Sufi and Qarmatian thought,” long eclipsed by a conservative, male-dominated clerical Islam (Majid).

Dalo emphasized that the Qarmatian society liberated women from their humiliating socio-economic status. He stated that society equated women and men’s rights in terms of social rights and their human dignity. This approach also restored their status as respectable mothers, virtuous educators, productive workers, and courageous and progressive activists (Dalo 389).

Al-Khalifa noted that polygamy was not prevalent (if at all existent) in the Qarmatian society. She remarked that Abu Said’s sons were all from one mother and that he requested that his sons take only one wife “to increase their happiness in this world and to maintain the strength of their bodies” (357). De Goeje believed that monogamy seems to have been the rule (qtd. in Hollister 217).

In the Qarmatian state, women occupied a privileged, or possibly an equal, status. They were partners in the social and political system and received education along with their male counterparts. They worked, took part in military activities, and helped propagate the Qarmatian calling. Historical sources refer to women’s active engagement in the propagation of the *da’wa* whereby “exceptionally intelligent, right lineage, and of a good reputation girls and boys” were sent to the center of the call in Salmiya (Syria), to join the preaching school (Dalo 170). Ghaleb cited other

references to women supervising *da'wa* schools for girls in Bahrain (296), numerous women engaging in academic debates along with their male counterparts (269), and women fighting alongside men in battles (Dalo 389). On the political stage, a significant reference to the high status of women in the Ismā'īli (correspondingly Qarmatian) custom is the status of al-Sayyidah Arwā³⁹ (Lady Arwā or Queen Arwā), the Fatimid sovereign over Yemen in the eleventh century who was awarded the highest religious title reserved for the greatest of scholars, *Hujja*⁴⁰ (269).

There were various speculations by modern analysts that Qarmatians did not require women to cover up (qtd. in Hollister 217), and that they permitted mingling of men and women in society. Breaking these taboos plausibly explained the severe backlash from misogynist post-Qarmatian historians. They accused Qarmatian women of promiscuity, fornication, and immorality. On the Qarmatian philosophy to liberate women, Al-Khalifa believed that “the Qarmatians called for the liberation of [the] woman, to unequivocally equate her with men. They upheld that men and women comprised the “social person,” and were both bound to perform their religious obligations (256). Naturally, the religious duty that Al-Khalifa alluded to went beyond the conventional religious rites. The religious duty to Qarmatian individuals involved the creation of a happier and fairer earthly society.

³⁹ Arwa: also referred to as the first Queen of Islam ruled Yemen between 1067 CE until her death in 1138 CE.

⁴⁰ Hujja (More exclusively Shi'a scholarly title meaning “proof of God to humanity”).

CHAPTER 4

CONCLUSION

Upsurges against the Abbasids had socioeconomic and ideological foundations. The Zanj rebellion, with a strong socio-economic base and fellowship, broke down due to the absence of clear objectives beyond the initial outburst. Ismāʿīli leaders must have realized that the common denominator for the failed Zanj uprising was the lack of strategy, not the lack of intention or zeal. Ismāʿīlis carefully analyzed the affairs of the Abbasid Caliphate. They understood that in order to repeal the Abbasid Caliphate and its social structure, their calling had to spread among various social, ethnic and religious sections of the Abbasid society. They brought under their banner “parties, religions and different factions despite the disparity in those factions’ dogmatic, social propensities and goals” (Aljawzi 119). They avoided the mistake of the Babakians who limited their call to the Persian peoples. Ismāʿīlis spread their conviction among Arabs, Turks, and Berbers. They also targeted people in power and individuals with military jurisdiction (118).

Another mistake the Ismāʿīlis learned from was that, notwithstanding the limited proselytization of the Babakian ideology, Babakians never targeted the core of the Abbasid power: religion. Babakians supposed that it was enough to present an alternative egalitarian model. They untenably thought that this was sufficient to secure fellowship and to attain sustainability of their movement (Aljawzi 119). Ismāʿīlis recognized that for any movement to succeed, it had to take on, preferably undetected, the very foundation of the Abbasid Caliphate’s theocracy: the Islamic religion.

Attacking the state religion is a task that is easier said than done. Openly attacking, or flagrantly criticizing, the prevalent form of Islam risked instant obliteration. There would be no shortage of enemies in that regard. Therefore, Ismā‘īlis resorted to an enigmatic dissemination of ideas. This slowly cracked the halo of fear and the sanctity of applied Islamic practices. It allowed the scrutiny of those beliefs, subjected two centuries of Islamic legacy to critique, and placed the belief system under the lens of logic and common sense.

Qarmatians at one point reached a conclusion that Ismā‘īli preaching and discourse was not enough. They took up arms to fight “the enemies of justice” (Ali). Kamal Ali remarked that the spread of the notion of the *Mahdi*, who would come to save the earth from the injustice of rulers, accelerated the success of the Qarmatian militant uprising. In turn, the symbolism of the Qarmatians carrying the Black Stone from the Ka’ba to their new capital was meant to convey something as radical as the end of the era of Islam (Daftary, “Qarmatians” 9).

The Qarmatian republic lasted for nearly two centuries. It eventually dwindled into oblivion and its constituents dispersed or melted back into surrounding societies. Perhaps the Qarmatian movement made many enemies. Some of the erroneous strategic moves possibly alienated the unconverted populations of that time and potentially obstructed the expansion of Qarmatian beliefs. This is most probably the case, as historical references speak of open animosity and warfare between the Fatimids and the Qarmatians. Both parties could have changed the course of the region’s history had they not gone on separate paths.

The Qarmatian experiment was avant-garde in the sense that it came as a response to contemporary challenges and grievances. It evolved out of the schools of

thought of the time and had a clear target of achieving a utopian society. That movement brought into the world what no other school of thought had been able to do since the tenth century: an adaptive revision of Islamic *mode de vie*, a resort to the core of the religious call, and last but not least, adaptation of the divine and the worldly. That movement, at least as far as its followers and citizens were concerned, arose out of the desire to attain happiness, justice, and welfare. They did not use religion to subdue the masses, nor did they use it to confer legitimacy to the ruling class.

In our present day and time, religious extremism has won over some many of the discontented masses in Islamic countries. A similar pseudo-Qarmatian experiment might be the only hope for the transition of xenophobic, change-resistant, and untrusting Islamic societies. Societies need to phase out from firm adherence to the superficial layers of religiosity and tradition. They should be able to readapt and reinterpret, or even relinquish, religious principles to accommodate the needs of communities today. Western forms of secularism failed miserably in most Islamic countries because of being perceived as an outside threat rather than a natural evolution. Therefore, change has to come from religion, progressively, and at multiple levels, with a clear plan in sight. Such change has to be indigenously grown and cultivated. It should not appear as a cut with the past, but as a transition into broader horizons.

A subsequent study can further expand on analyzing the elements of change that exist in today's Islamic societies as grounds for fundamental societal transformation. At first look, the grounds for social transformation, such as poverty, political injustice, discontent, fanaticism, and persecution are as rampant today as they

were twelve centuries ago. On the other hand, there are clear role models of advanced twenty-first-century societies in which justice, the rule of law, and respect for human rights prevail. Mass media has made this accessible and visible for anyone who has a laptop, a smart phone, or a television set. There is an unprecedented opportunity to scrutinize historic Islamic reform movements, such as the Qarmatian experiment. There exist ways that transcend the *da'is* clandestine endeavors. Social media, smart mobile devices, and affordable internet access permits millions of people around the world, and in particular in the Islamic world, to communicate, to conscribe, and to mobilize. The self-proclaimed ISIL (Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant, also known as ISIS), and the self-proclaimed terrorist Jihadi groups capitalized on the power of social media to disseminate notions and even to recruit conscripts who launched fanatic attacks against civilians around the world. Those terrorist groups imposed on their followers (or potential prey) a bloody interpretation of a violent Islam. If such logic-defying endeavors were achieved over the internet, there is no reason why logic and the promise of a better world cannot be propagated using mass media and social networks to allow Islamic societies to snap out of the vicious cycle of apprehension and defeat. Islamic societies should consider deriving lessons and role models from history. They may need to reconnect with the positive aspects of the Qarmatian experimentation with the Islamic religion and social utopia.

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APPENDICES

APPENDIX A:
CHRONOLOGY

Georgia n (CE)	Hijri (AH)	Events
610	12 BH	Prophet Muhammad receives first revelation. Birth of Islam in Mecca
622	0	The Hijra– Prophet Muhammad and his followers migrate to Medina
632	11	Death of Prophet Muhammad
632	11	Abū Bakr al-Ṣiddīq becomes First Rāshidūn Caliph
634	13	Umar Ibn al-Khattab becomes Second Rāshidūn Caliph
634	13	Muslims occupy Damascus and expand in Syria and Iraq
639	18	Muslims control Egypt
642	21	Persian empire conquered after the Battle of Nahawand
643	22	Expansion into North Africa
644	23	Uthmān ibn ‘Affān becomes Third Rāshidūn Caliph
656	35	‘Alī ibn Abī Ṭālib becomes Fourth Rāshidūn Caliph
656	36	Battle of the Camel
657	36	‘Alī decided to move the capital city from Madīnah to Kūfah in Iraq
657	37	Battle of Siffin
660	40	Mu‘āwiyah became the first Caliph of the Umayyad dynasty (661–750 CE)
680	60	Yazid ibn Mu‘āwiyah assumes power (680–683 CE)
680	61	Al-Husain ibn ‘Alī killed in Karbala
711	92	Muslim armies expand in the Iberian peninsula
750	132	Abbasid dynasty (750-1258 CE) topples Umayyad dynasty
765	148	Ja’far al-Sadiq, the sixth Shi’a Imam, dies
813	198	Al-Ma’mun - Seventh Abbasid Caliph assumes power (r. 813–833). Golden intellectual age
816	201	Babakian uprising
833	218	Al-Mutasim - Eighth Abbasid Caliph (r. 833–842 CE). Strong Turkish influence
838	223	Babak Executed
869	270	Al-Zanj Revolt
899	286	Qarmatian Revolt
909	289	Fatimids establish their rule in North Africa
930	317	Qarmatians sack Mecca
969	358	Fatimids control Egypt. Cairo established.
970	359	Fatimids control Syria
1051	~443	Nasir Khusrow visits Eastern Arabian Peninsula

APPENDIX B:

GLOSSARY

Term	Arabic	Description
Abbasid Dynasty	العباسيون	Second of the two great dynasties of the Muslim Caliphate. Ruled between 750–1258 CE. Based in Baghdad.
Abū Bakr al-Ṣiddīq	أبو بكر الصديق	Prophet Muhammad's closest companion and first of the Rāshidūn Caliphs.
Ahl Al-Bayt	أهل البيت	Literally: People of the House. Descendants of the Prophet, through his daughter Fatima and his son in law 'Alī ibn Abī Ṭālib.
'Ā'ishah Bint Abī Bakr	عائشة	Abū Bakr's daughter and Muhammad's wife.
al-Fārābī, Abū Naṣr	الفارابي	Preeminent philosophers of medieval Islam (870–950 CE).
al-Hasa	الاحساء	Al-Aḥsā', oasis and region in eastern Arabian Peninsula.
'Alī ibn Abī Ṭālib	علي بن ابي طالب	Cousin and son-in-law of Muhammad, the Prophet of Islam, and fourth of the Rāshidūn caliphs.
Al-Tabari	الطبري	Persian Muslim scholar, author of compendiums of early Islamic history and Qur'ānic interpretations (839–923 CE).
Amīr al-mu'minīn	أمير المؤمنين	Commander of the faithful.
Babakian	البابكية	Named after Babak, who led a revolt against the 'Abbāsids.
Baghdad	بغداد	Capital of the Abbasid Caliphate.
Bāṭini	باطني	Esoteric
Byzantine	بيزنطي	Byzantine Empire, the eastern half of the Roman Empire
Cairo	القاهرة	Seat of the Fatimid Caliphate, in Egypt.
Caliph	ال خليفة	Khalīfah, meaning deputy or successor
Damascus	دمشق	Seat of the Umayyad Caliphate
Dhimmi	ذمي	Arabic ahl al-dhimmah: "People of the pact/custody," sing. <i>Dhimmi</i> . Means non-Muslims who live under Islamic rule.
Faqih	فقيه	Islamic Jurist
Fatima	فاطمة	Daughter of Prophet Muhammad, wife of 'Alī ibn Abī

Ṭālib

Fāṭimid Dynasty	الفاطميون	Political and religious dynasty (Shi'a) that controlled North Africa and the Middle East (909–1171 CE)
Fiqh	فقه	(Islamic Jurisprudence. Literally: Expert Knowledge. Derivative: faqih, Jurist).
Ḥadīth	الحديث	Records of the traditions or sayings of Muhammad, revered a major source of religious law and moral guidance.
Imām	الإمام	Arabic term of Leader/Commander.
Ismaili	اسماعيلي	A branch of Shi'a Islam that appeared after 765 CE, declaring allegiance to Imam Ismail Ibn Ja'far.
Isnād	اسناد	The chain of chronological transmission of the oral account
Iqdaniya Council	مجلس العقدانية	The ruling council of the Qarmatian State in Bahrain.
Jizya	جزية	Historical per capita tax imposed on non-Muslims living under Muslim rule.
Khārijite	الخوارج	Khawārij, the earliest Islāmic sect, which traces its beginning to a religio-political controversy over the Caliphate
Kūfah	الكوفة	Medieval city of Iraq that was a centre of Arab culture and learning from the eighth to the tenth century. It was founded as a garrison by the Muslims in 638 C.E.
Mahdī	المهدي	Al-Mahdī (“Right-Guided One”).
Mawali	الموالي	Non-Arabs who converted to Islam.
Mecca	مكة	Holiest of Muslim cities, birthplace of Muhammad, the founder of Islam.
Madīnah	المدينة	Madīnah al-Munawwarah “enlightened city”: Capital city of early Islam until 657 CE.
Mu'āwiyah	معاوية	Mu'āwiyah ibn Abī Sufyān, early Islamic leader and founder of the Umayyad dynasty of caliphs.
Muhammad	محمد	Founder of Islam and the proclaimer of the Qur'ān (570–632 CE).
Uthmān ibn 'Affān	عثمان بن عفان	Third Rāshidūn Caliph to rule after Prophet Muhammad.

Qarmatians	القرامطة	Member of the Shī'ite Muslim sect known as the Ismā'ilites. The Qarmatians flourished in Iraq, Yemen, and especially Bahrain during the ninth to eleventh centuries
Rāshidūn, Caliphs	الخلفاء الراشدون	First four caliphs of the Islamic community (632–661 CE).
Sawad	سواد	Agricultural lands in southern Iraq.
Shi'a	الشعية	Followers of 'Alī ibn Abī Ṭālib
Siffin, Battle of	صفين	First Muslim Civil War in 657 CE.
Sunnah	السنة	Teachings and deeds of Prophet Muhammad.
Tawhid	التوحيد	Unification. Belief in one God.
Ta'wil	التأويل	Interpretation of the inner or esoteric meaning
Umayyad Caliphate	أموي	First ruling dynasty in Islam between 661–750 CE.
Ummah	الأمة	Muslim nation.
Ummar ibn Al Khatab	عمر بن الخطاب	Second rāshidūn Caliph to rule after Prophet Muhammad.
Wilaya of Imam	ولاية الإمام	In Shi'a terminology, guardianship, or leadership of Imams over the people.
Zanj	الزنج	Black African Slaves living in the Abbasid Caliphate.