



The Institute of Ismaili Studies

Address at the Foundation Stone Ceremony of The Ismaili Centre, Dushanbe

His Highness the Aga Khan

August 30, 2003

Dushanbe, Tajikistan

Your Excellency President Rahmonov,
Your Worship the Mayor of Dushanbe,
Your Excellencies,
Distinguished Guests,

This ceremony represents a milestone in the history of the Ismaili Muslim Community's presence in Central Asia, a presence which dates back to the second century of Islam. For me personally, as the 49th hereditary *imam* of the Ismailis, this is a day of great happiness.

It is also fitting that the foundation ceremony of a landmark cultural and religious centre should coincide with the celebration of the one thousandth anniversary of the birth of Syedna Nasir Khusraw.

Bequeathing a legacy, that to this day enlightens the region's intellectual traditions, Nasir Khusraw was among the premier thinkers whose contributions will be celebrated in the space that we initiate today.

The passage of a millennium has not diminished Nasir Khusraw's relevance nor dulled the lustre of his poetry. It continues to uplift and inspire, reminding us that we are the authors of our own destiny. As he has said, we can be like a poplar tree which chooses to remain barren, or we can let our path be lit by the candle of wisdom, for only 'with intellect, we can seek out all the hows and whys. Without it, we are but trees without fruit.'

Another lesson that we learn from this great philosopher is that, in the ebb and flow of history, 'knowledge is a shield against the blows of time'. It dispels 'the torment of ignorance' and nourishes 'peace to blossom forth in the soul'.

It is this legacy, like the gifts of other thinkers of Central Asia, that this new Centre will seek to serve.

I am grateful for the presence here today of His Excellency President Rahmonov and of other high dignitaries of State, as also His Worship Mayor Ubaidulloev and the civic leadership of the City of Dushanbe. I take this opportunity to acknowledge their vital support and consistent encouragement in the search for this site and the conception of this project.

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I acknowledge with gratitude their steadfast commitment in realising my deep aspiration to establish a centre that will recognise and promote the plurality of traditions and forms of expression to which Central Asia has been a welcoming home and eminent crossroads over the centuries. It is my hope, Your Excellency and Your Worship, that this Centre will play a role in reminding the world of a fact, alas, too often ignored or misunderstood: that Central Asian traditions of spirituality and learning have had a lasting and positive impact on civilisations far beyond their own.

In this light, it is appropriate that the new Ismaili Centre will be sited near thoroughfares named after Ismail Somoni and Rudaki. The Samanid patronage of Rudaki as also of Firdawsi, al-Biruni and Ibn Sina, amongst other giants of learning, is an inheritance of which we have many reminders throughout the city of Dushanbe. Theirs is a legacy that has inspired achievement well beyond their time into the present day, and in whose revitalisation, I hope, the Ismaili Centre in Dushanbe will play a role.

The recent history of this entire region has been one of considerable change and turmoil. Fortunately, wisdom has prevailed, ushering in a period of peace, reconstruction and renewal, rendering even more tolerant, more open and more inclusive, a valued heritage.

It is my earnest hope that the creation of the Ismaili Centre in Dushanbe will contribute to this endeavour. Its design will draw inspiration from the magnificent landscapes of this region, but also from its architecture, construction techniques, materials, and decorative traditions. In seeking to enliven the encounter of the past with the future and foster a mutually rewarding dialogue between tradition and modernity, the Centre will attempt to reflect lessons from structures both monumental and mundane, from spaces both religious and social.

The Centre will seek to provide a place where people will come together to share their creativity and their wisdom. Above all, it will be a place for contemplation, upliftment, and the search for spiritual enlightenment

Beginning in 1984, major Ismaili Centres have been established in London, Vancouver and Lisbon. Others are in advanced planning stages in Toronto and Dubai. It is my hope that, consistent like these others, the Ismaili Centre, Dushanbe will enhance the process of understanding and exchange. Through the facilities which they offer for lectures, presentations, conferences, recitals and exhibitions, alone or in collaboration with other national or international entities, the Ismaili Centres have become important cultural institutions.

These Centres serve to reflect, illustrate and represent the Community's intellectual and spiritual understanding of Islam, its social conscience, its organisation, its forward outlook and its positive attitude towards the societies in which it lives.

I spoke earlier of the process of reconstruction and renewal in this region. Like its neighbours, Tajikistan is in a stage of profound transition which brings in its wake its own challenges and opportunities, calling upon the nation's reserves of patience, courage and foresight. This transition is occurring at a time of economic globalisation and an acceleration



in the growth and spread of new knowledge and technology. Among others, these factors require societies to enhance their capacities to adjust, adapt, innovate and invest.

Even the materially rich countries are rethinking the notion of the State and are emphasising the State's role in helping to free and mobilise the energy and creativity of civil society to meet the challenges of development.

The importance of private initiative has become clearly evident in economic development. In addition, the not-for-profit or non-commercial contribution is increasingly being recognised as indispensable in the face of the phenomenon of market failure, and the limits on what the state can provide by way of social services. A richly diverse yet purposefully united citizenry is capable of making a critical contribution to social development in the struggle against poverty.

It is heartening that, here in Tajikistan, Your Excellency's government is encouraging best practice along these lines. The Ismaili *imat* stands shoulder to shoulder with the Government and people of Tajikistan as they seek to steer a way towards equitable and sustainable national development.

From the provision of emergency humanitarian assistance through the creation of institutional capacity in the fields of health, education, agriculture, microfinance, infrastructure and culture, the agencies of the Aga Khan Development Network have striven steadily to improve the quality of life of this region's populations.

Like its counterparts elsewhere, the Ismaili Centre in Dushanbe will stand for the ethics that uphold the dignity of man as the noblest of creation. It will bring down walls that divide and build bridges that unite. These are the ethics that inspire the work of the Aga Khan Development Network.

It is my prayer that, once it has been built, the Ismaili Centre in Dushanbe will be a place of order, of peace, of hope, of humility and of brotherhood, radiating those thoughts, and attitudes which unite us in the search for a better life.

Thank you.