THE ISMAILI IMAMAT AND THE AGA KHAN DEVELOPMENT NETWORK IN THE UNITED KINGDOM
His Highness the Aga Khan is the 49th Imam (spiritual leader) of the Shi’a Ismaili Muslims. The Ismaili Imamat represents the succession of Imams since the time, and in the progeny, of Prophet Muhammad (peace be on him and his progeny). His Highness has been deeply engaged with the development of countries around the world for over 60 years through the work of the institutions he has created to enhance learning, build capacity and improve the quality of life of people around the world.

The Aga Khan has dedicated his efforts over six decades to improving the quality of life of the most vulnerable in society, while emphasising the view of Islam as a thinking, spiritual faith: one that teaches compassion, tolerance, and upholds human dignity.

The Muslim belief in the fusion of faith and world underlines the contemporary endeavour of the Ismaili Imamat to carry forward the social conscience of Islam through the action of the Aga Khan Development Network (AKDN). The Network’s organisations work towards a common goal — to build institutions and programmes that can respond to the challenges of social, economic, and cultural change on an ongoing basis, with a strong emphasis on education.

The title “His Highness” was bestowed by Her Majesty the Queen in 1957 the year of his accession as hereditary leader of the Shi’a Ismaili Muslims. In 2004, he was appointed Knight Commander of the Most Excellent Order of the British Empire. These are acknowledgements of the historic linkages between the Ismaili Imamat and the British Monarchy, and longstanding connections between the Ismaili Community, the institutions of the AKDN and the United Kingdom.

July 2017 marked the start of the Diamond Jubilee, or 60th anniversary, of the Aga Khan’s spiritual leadership of the Ismaili Community. The Ismaili Muslims are a global, multi-ethnic community whose members, comprising a wide diversity of cultures, languages and nationalities, live in Central Asia,
the Middle East, South Asia, sub-Saharan Africa, Europe, and North America. Throughout the history of the Ismaili Imamat, jubilees have been utilised as occasions to create institutions and initiatives to improve the quality of life of the community and those amongst whom they live.

During his Diamond Jubilee visit to the United Kingdom, His Highness will inaugurate the Aga Khan Centre, a place for education, knowledge, cultural exchange and insight into Muslim civilisations. It will serve as the new UK home to a number of global organisations founded by His Highness, including The Institute of Ismaili Studies (IIS), the Aga Khan University Institute for the Study of Muslim Civilisations (AKU-ISMC), and the Aga Khan Foundation (UK). Together the organisations housed at the building work to bridge the gap in understanding about Muslim history and cultures.

The Aga Khan Centre will join the Ismaili Centre in London as an ambassadorial building of the Aga Khan Development Network (AKDN) and the institutions of the Ismaili Imamat in the United Kingdom.

The Ismaili Centre, located in South Kensington in London’s Cultural Quarter, was the first of the global family of Ismaili Centres. The building was inaugurated in 1985 by His Highness, together with the then Prime Minister, Margaret Thatcher. The Ismaili Centre will continue to bring people together around arts, culture, and thoughtful debate as part of its ongoing programmes serving the Ismaili community, its neighbours and friends.
The Aga Khan Development Network (AKDN) is a family of organisations and institutions working to build stronger societies in Africa and Asia by investing in social, economic, and cultural development. Together, they work towards a common goal – to build institutions and programmes that can respond to the challenges of social, economic and cultural change on an ongoing basis. The AKDN works in close partnership with public and private institutions, including governments, international organisations, companies, foundations, and universities.

Active in 30 countries, the AKDN builds quality institutions – clinics, banks, and universities – that anchor communities and provide them with opportunities to unlock their potential. Taking a holistic approach that addresses the many complex factors affecting quality of life, the AKDN invests in people in some of the most vulnerable parts of the world to ensure they have the opportunities, knowledge, and skills they need to be self-reliant.

Communities and societies are stronger when they are built on the vision and collaboration of people from different backgrounds. The work of the AKDN is driven by the belief in a shared humanity and the firm conviction that everyone, no matter where they are born, deserves hope for a better future.

For some statistics on the cumulative impact of the AKDN, watch this short video.
Over centuries, the Ismaili Imams have actively contributed to education, art, culture as well as an array of social and economic endeavours. The Imam is not only concerned with interpreting the faith but takes the lead in improving the security as well as the quality of life of his community and all those amongst whom the community lives. This is realised in part through the work of the institutions of the Ismaili Imamat, including the agencies of the Aga Khan Development Network whose Chairman is His Highness.

The Institutions of the Ismaili Imamat and the AKDN have been active in the UK for some 40 years, through the work of three institutions: The Aga Khan Foundation United Kingdom (AKF UK), The Institute of Ismaili Studies (IIS) and the Aga Khan University Institute for the Study of Muslim Civilisations (AKU-ISMC).

Since 1967, with the support of partners such as the UK’s Department for International Development (DFID), other government partners, individual donors and numerous volunteers, the AKDN has helped to lift millions of people out of poverty.

Photo credit: AKDN / Mansi Midha
Opening in Summer 2018 in the heart of London’s Knowledge Quarter, the Aga Khan Centre will be a place for education, cultural exchange and insight into Muslim civilisations. Designed by Pritzker prize-winning Japanese Architect Fumihiko Maki, the Aga Khan Centre provides a new UK home for a number of organisations founded by His Highness the Aga Khan: The Institute of Ismaili Studies (IIS), the Aga Khan University Institute for the Study of Muslim Civilisations (AKU-ISMC) and the Aga Khan Foundation UK (AKF-UK).

These institutions have been operating in the UK for decades and are part of a mission and mandate to increase knowledge and understanding of Muslim civilisations and help improve the quality of life for people around the world.

Through research and publications, higher education and a public programme of lectures and exhibitions, the organisations located in the Aga Khan Centre will continue to serve as bridges in building understanding about Muslim cultures and societies.

The Aga Khan Centre will help connect the public to global development issues and the Aga Khan Foundation’s work to improve the quality of life for people of all faiths and backgrounds in some of the world’s most disadvantaged communities.

The design of the building and its landscaped spaces reflect values inspired by Islam – openness, dialogue and respect for pluralism. The building is the third by Maki & Associates for His Highness the Aga Khan, joining the Delegation of the Ismaili Imamat, Ottawa and the Aga Khan Museum, Toronto.

The Institute of Ismaili Studies

The Institute of Ismaili Studies (IIS) was established in 1977 to promote scholarship and learning about Muslim societies and to encourage a better understanding of their relationships with other cultures and faiths. Its
In class at the Aga Khan University Institute for the Study of Muslim Civilisations (AKU-ISMC).

Photo credit: AKDN / Jonathan Goldberg

Research, publications and educational programmes promote scholarship in previously marginalised areas of the study of Islam. These include the intellectual and literary heritages of Shia Islam, with an emphasis on Ismaili traditions. IIS’s programmes focus on multiple approaches, expressions and interpretations, giving it a reputation for openness and tolerance.

The Aga Khan University

The Aga Khan University (AKU) established the Institute for the Study of Muslim Civilisations (ISMC) in 2002. AKU-ISMC is a higher education institution with a focus on research, publication, graduate study and outreach. It promotes scholarship that opens up new perspectives on Muslim heritage, modernity, culture, religion and society. AKU-ISMC students conduct innovative research into Muslim civilisations and religious traditions primarily from the perspectives of the social sciences and humanities.

The Aga Khan Foundation

One of the world’s leading international development organisations, AKF works to improve the quality of life for some of the most disadvantaged communities in Africa and Asia. Since 1967, with the support of partners such as the UK’s Department for International Development (DFID), other government partners, individual donors and numerous volunteers, AKF has helped to lift millions of people out of poverty. In its development work, the Aga Khan Foundation is heavily engaged in education - from early childhood years to supporting tertiary programmes.
Many types of Islamic gardens can be found across the globe, from tomb gardens to pleasure gardens, medicinal and botanical gardens. Traditionally, an Islamic garden incorporates symmetry, water and architectural elements: it is an earthly reminder that paradise is a place of rest and reflection. The *chahar bagh* – gardens divided into four parts by water channels or pathways and reflecting the four gardens of Paradise mentioned in the Qur’an – is a common layout. While many Islamic gardens share these features, they vary across different regions in response to local climatic conditions, architectural styles and cultures.

The creation of parks and gardens is an important part of the AKDN’s work in several rapidly urbanising cities in the developing world, including Cairo, Bamako, Kabul and Delhi.

The landscaped spaces of the Aga Khan Centre and adjacent Victoria Hall - a halls of residence providing accommodation for students of the IIS and AKU-ISMC as well as other students in London - reflect this global reach and deep history, with inspiration from North Africa, Spain and the Middle East to Persia and India.

The gardens and terraces across multiple floors offer a series of contemporary, contemplative spaces which have been commissioned specifically to represent the diversity of the Muslim world, while jointly bringing a connected ‘ribbon’ of new green spaces to the developing King’s Cross area.

*The gardens of the student’s residence, London.*
*Photo credit: AKDN / Hufton + Crow*
“The Garden has for many centuries served as a central element in Muslim culture. The Holy Qur’an, itself, portrays the Garden as a central symbol of a spiritual ideal... a place where human creativity and Divine majesty are fused, where the ingenuity of humanity and the beauty of nature are productively connected.”

– His Highness the Aga Khan

The National Park of Mali in Bamako was developed under a public-private partnership between the Government of Mali and the Aga Khan Trust for Culture (AKTC).

Photo credit: AKDN / Christian Richters