

Who is the Aga Khan?

By Richard Engel, NBC News chief foreign correspondent

BAMAKO, Mali – The Aga Khan, now 73 years old, is one of the most active philanthropists in the Islamic world, yet is remarkably unknown.

He is the wealthy leader of a religious group with millions of followers, a Harvard graduate, the grandson of the former president the League of Nations and the stepson of Hollywood bombshell Rita Hayworth; yet when I ask most people if they know who he is, I am usually met with blank stares.

I first thought to interview the Aga Khan in the fall of 2009. I was in a kebab restaurant in Kabul along with Afghans, who, between bites, were looking up somewhat inattentively at a television.

On the screen, Afghan President Hamid Karzai was being sworn in for another term. Like most political events in Afghanistan, the inauguration was highly choreographed. The seating and order of the speakers are highly studied and, at least to those involved, very significant. There were lots of red carpets, big hats, turbans and gold chairs. And prominently seated close to Karzai, was the Aga Khan. I wondered why.

I discovered the Aga Khan and his foundations are among the biggest private donors and employers in all of Afghanistan. His work focuses on cultural development. The mandate is to give both pride and economic empowerment to poor communities by engaging them in the renovation of art, music and architecture. I've since seen his projects in Afghanistan, Egypt and Mali.

I met the Aga Khan in Mali's capital Bamako. He was in Mali to open a park he had funded the renovation of on behalf of the city. Although he has been interviewed for American documentaries and European television stations, he told me this was the first interview he's ever done with an American television network.

Who is the Aga Khan?

The Aga Khan is a title. It belongs to the leader of a Shiite Muslim community. The world's Muslims are generally divided into two basic groups: Sunnis and Shiites.

The reality is that Islam is much more diverse. Among Shiites, there are divisions, factions and theological differences. The Aga Khan is the leader of one branch of Shia Islam and his followers are called Ismailis.

Ismailis, who live in over 25 countries around the world mostly in central and southern Asia, believe that the Aga Khan is the legitimate heir to the Prophet Muhammad. There are an estimated 12-15 million Ismailis worldwide who revere the Aga Khan as their spiritual guide. They donate part of their annual incomes to the Aga Khan's foundations, which he, as leader, re-distributes. Not surprisingly, the Aga Khan's claim of Islamic heritage is contested by non-Ismailis.

The Aga Khan today

The current Aga Khan assumed the role in 1957 when he was 20 years old. He took the title from his grandfather, the late Aga Khan, who was also one of the presidents of the League of Nations. Most Americans, however, remember the current Aga Khan's father, Prince Aly Khan who was married to Hollywood bombshell Rita Hayworth.

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Much of the Aga Khan's time today is focused on his charity, the Aga Khan Development Network. During our interview we spoke about the charity, but I also asked his opinion on the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan and increasing tensions and mistrust of Muslims by some Americans.

Engel: We are meeting in a park you have renovated in Mali. Why Mali?

Aga Khan: Mali is a rather unusual country in Africa because first of all it has an effective cultural hub in northern Mali, which is unusual in sub-Saharan Africa ... and we want to work with that. Secondly, it has a form of pluralism in the interpretation of its faith, which is very welcome in the Islamic world.

Engel: I have seen many development projects around the world, particularly American projects. They tend not to focus on cultural development. They focus on economic development, sanitation and works projects. Why do you focus on culture?

Aga Khan: I discovered through work in the architectural field that the cultural dimension of the Islamic world was an extraordinarily powerful trampoline for development. There is a phenomenon that the populations of these cultural sites are often the poorest in the country for reasons which would take too long to explain. So acting in culture, you're actually developing the quality of life for the poorest people who've been recently urbanized. You're re-establishing value to the culture, you're giving old a new form, new forms of productivity and you're creating a totally new economic, socio-economic environment. In the past it was done with dams for irrigation and agriculture. It was done with roads to sell agricultural goods. It's being done with microcredit. All of that can link to the cultural programs also.

Engel: There's also a role of dignity attached to cultural projects. They don't just make people

richer, they give pride. Is that a goal?

Aga Khan: It's giving value back to the cultures. It's helping generations come together because acculturation is one of the problems we're facing in the Islamic world. The fact that we're able to rebuild pride in this culture – which is not a culture in the past, but must be one of today and tomorrow also – brings a totally different psychological attitude to the process of change.

Engel: What is the role of the Aga Khan today?

Aga Khan: Well, I'm a Shia imam. I am the only hereditary Shia imam within the Shia community of peoples. And an imam in Islam is responsible for the security of people who are referred to him. He is responsible for the interpretation of faith and he is responsible for their quality of life so those three areas are areas, which are my responsibility.

Engel: Mali isn't part of your community. Other countries where you do projects are not part of your community. Why reach out?

Aga Khan: We [Ismailis] are obviously a minority in the Islamic world. I don't think any minority can live divorced from the majority and our interest frankly is to see the countries of the Islamic world move forward in a peaceful and organized way to achieve a better quality of life, but without losing their values. I think that can be best achieved by a series of multiple inputs. Some touch value systems, some touch education, health care and economic sustainability, so that's why the Aga Khan Development Network has tried to create capacity in all of these areas.

Engel: You have served as the Aga Khan for more than five decades now, do you have a mission? Do you have a goal that you want to achieve?

Aga Khan: I think that the nature of the office of the imam, whether it's a Shia imam or a Sunni imam, is to have the capacity to achieve results. When my

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grandfather died in 1957, the Ismaili Imamate did not have the vehicles in the structured manner that it has today to act in these various fields internationally. Today it has that capacity.

Engel: I was surprised, and I think a lot of our viewers will be surprised, by the extent of your activities around the world. Half a billion dollars given out in charity and development every year. It's a huge network.

Aga Khan: It is a very big network. It's grown obviously over the years and it's been driven by recognition of need as time has gone by. We have felt that working in Africa, working in Asia, there were needs that have come up that we did necessarily [have] in 1957.

I will give you an example. If you look at the Islamic world, you will see that its geography is heavily concentrated in the worst seismic parts of our world. Well crisis response and anticipation of these crises wasn't part of our thinking. Now it would be very silly to ignore for another 50 years the fact that the Islamic world has places where there are earthquakes and people die.

Engel: You live a very private life, you don't do very many media interviews. It's a very different public persona than your father. Why have you chosen to stay out of the limelight?

Aga Khan: I have always taken the attitude that it's better that the work should speak rather than the individual and I have wanted the projects to be meaningful to my community and the people around them. I prefer to let the people who work with me do their work, hopefully effectively.

Engel: How would you describe the state of Islam? Do you think your projects help encourage a more moderate discourse and encourage elements who stand up to extremism?

Aga Khan: I think the Islamic world is suffering from

a number of stresses. It's suffering from stresses within the interpretation of the faith. It's suffering from stresses in modern statehood, governance. It's suffering from economic, inherited political stresses, which are today seen as theological stresses, where as they weren't born in theology. They were born in politics. I think it's important to create an environment where these stresses don't become so aggressive that they cause conflict.

Engel: How do you see the conflicts in Afghanistan and Pakistan affecting the Islamic world? Do you see stability in that part of the world?

Aga Khan: I think it will take a long time. I think it's very dangerous to generalize about these situations, but there are some characteristics that are common and one of them is acute poverty. Northwest Pakistan, northern Waziristan, southern Waziristan, most of Afghanistan, these are areas of the world with horrible poverty. So I think the first thing is to try to replace that fear of poverty and the pain that goes with it by some sense of hope in the future, that things don't have to be that way but they can change.

Secondly, what is the process of change? How do you bring stability? I believe very strongly in civil society. What I've seen in the past 50 years is that civil society is the best guarantor of change.

Engel: Do you think the U.S. military approach is going to be successful? Is it playing a positive or negative role?

Aga Khan: I think it can play a positive role, but it's not a single solution. There's no such thing as a single solution. I think there must be to be a process of reduction of conflict and its replacement by the process of development. It's much better that it be done by the police rather than by the military. These are things that have to happen, but they happen too slowly.

Engel: The American global war on terrorism is often seen as a war against Islam on the popu-

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lar level. Do you think the wars that have been launched by U.S. administrations over the last decade or so have done more harm than good?

Aga Khan: I certainly think the invasion of Iraq was a serious mistake. We had crisis situations before that. We had them in Kashmir. We had them in the Middle East. If you look at the origins of those crises, they were political not religious. At the moment, it's the horrible conflicts which are dominating the image of the Islamic world and I can say without one iota of fear that is totally wrong, totally wrong. You had wars in the Christian world, you had wars in the Jewish world. But you don't define them in theological terms anymore, except Northern Ireland.

educational background was a Judeo Christian background. No problem with that, but it didn't adjust to the new world dimension. It must adjust to that new world dimension and that's what's happening now.

Engel: You talked about the invasion of Iraq as being a big mistake. What about Afghanistan?

Aga Khan: Well I think the situation in Afghanistan was very, very uncomfortable indeed. It was born of the Russian invasion of Afghanistan, and that's where the whole thing started. Then, of course, it degraded because there were all sorts of external influences to try to push the Russians out of Afghanistan. At the time, sadly people didn't realize that there was such a fracturing of society in Afghanistan.

Engel: Right now there is tension, and you can feel it on the streets, in the United States, in Western Europe, in relations with Muslim communities. What can be done to improve that and why do you think that tension is there?

Aga Khan: I've always referred to it as a conflict of ignorance and I still believe that's the root of the problem. It's very difficult.

If you look at the history of education in the industrialized world, you go back to the 1960s, there was no presence of Islamic culture. It was amazing. The Muslim world didn't exist. Why? Because your

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