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CONTRIBUTORS

# Opinion | I covered the Aga Khan for more than 30 years. Here's what made him so remarkable

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(FILES) Chairman of the Aga Khan Development Network, Aga Khan claps during the inauguration ceremony of The Aga Khan Academy in Hyderabad on September 20, 2013. The Aga Khan, imam of the Ismaili Muslims and head of a major development aid foundation, died in Lisbon at the age of 88, his foundation announced on

February 4, 2025. (Photo by Noah SEELAM / AFP) (Photo by NOAH SEELAM-/AFP via Getty Images)
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**By Haroon Siddiqui Special to the Star**
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That the late Aga Khan made prodigious contributions to humanity is well-known. What made him an even more remarkable figure is what is less known about him.

I covered him off and on for more than 30 years and interviewed him thrice, at length. His was a serene voice of moderation in the age of rising bigotry, racism, nationalisms, xenophobia and fundamentalisms — Christian, Muslim, Jewish, Hindu, Buddhist. He spoke elegantly, eloquently, almost always in whispers. His voice was heard loud and clear, even by individuals and groups at loggerheads with each other.

He was perhaps the most admired Muslim in the world. That was a miracle twice over: being respected by both the non-Muslim and Muslim worlds.

That he was a European Muslim was of immeasurable symbolic significance. This man of faith was a gift of the gods to the secular world: he embodied secularism's greatest virtue, peaceful pluralism.

After the 9/11 terrorist attacks, carried out by 19 Muslims, and the ensuing anti-Islam hysteria, he remained proud of his faith, unlike many Muslims who distanced themselves from it, and unlike many autocratic Muslim leaders who made hay in Washington posing as bulwarks against Islamic terrorism.

In a 2005 interview with me, he berated the West for its ignorance of Islam and critiqued the wars on Afghanistan and Iraq, both of which turned out to be among the two greatest follies of our time.

"You can be an educated person in the Judeo-Christian world and know nothing — I mean nothing — about the Islamic world…

"I read that Islam is in conflict with democracy. Yet I must tell you that, as a Muslim, I am a democrat not because of Greek or French thought but primarily because of principles that go back 1,400 years" to the Prophet Muhammad: "wide public consultation in choosing leaders" and "merit and competence in social governance."

He led a tiny minority within the Shiite minority of the world's nearly 2 billion Muslims, an overwhelming majority of whom are Sunnis like me.

Muhammad had no sons, and when he died in 632 A.D., his son-in-law Ali ibn Abi Talib was passed over and became only the fourth caliph. For Shiites — literally, the partisans of Ali — this political skulduggery was a usurpation of the Prophet's lineage.

The Shiites themselves were to split. Some believe there were seven imams, but most believe there were 12. The Seveners are the Ismailis, named after the seventh imam, Ismail. For the Twelvers, their last imam did not die but went into *ghaeba*, a transcendent realm whence he would return one day. In the meantime, they must be guided by ayatollahs. The Ismailis, however, are led by a *Hazar* (present) Imam, a descendent of Ismail. The Aga Khan thus claims a direct lineage to the Prophet.

By contrast, the Sunnis — followers of the *sunna*, the teachings and deeds of the Prophet — believe in a more direct relationship with God, with no intercessors. The Aga Khan astutely bridged the gap with the Sunni world by having his followers observe the commemoration of the anniversary of the Prophet's birth.

To his nearly 15 million followers — a minority everywhere — the Aga Khan provided both spiritual and worldly guidance and, in return, commanded near-total loyalty and dedication. When his representatives around the world once asked him what to gift him, he said, "The gift of your time."

Their volunteerism is the secret sauce of his worldwide nonprofit network of more than 300 institutions that runs schools, universities, hospitals and public-health clinics; that restores monuments, develops parks and encourages sustainable architecture. Projects that keep growing organically, uplifting generations of people.

The Aga Khan knew Pierre Elliott Trudeau from the Paris of the 1960s. "Pierre and I were friends," he told me in a 1991 interview, "and there was an informal understanding that if there was a racial crisis" in East Africa, Canada would help. After Idi Amin's 1972 edict to expel South Asians from Uganda, "I picked up the phone, and Trudeau affirmed then and there that Canada would wish to help. His response was magnificent."

Within days, Canada had accepted 6,000 Asians, including 5,000 Ismailis. Later waves from Kenya, Tanzania and elsewhere swelled their total in Canada to nearly 100,000.

They proved to be self-reliant, educated, organized and entrepreneurial. Prime Minister Jean Chrétien became such an admirer that during the 1990s recession, he told me that what his hometown of Shawinigan needed was "a dozen Ismaili entrepreneurs."

The Aga Khan was a pallbearer at Trudeau's funeral, in 2000, in Montreal.

It was no surprise that Prime Minister Justin Trudeau, whom the Aga Khan had known as a toddler, holidayed at the latter's private island in the Bahamas in 2016, just as his father had done on the Aga Khan's yacht. But the trip spiralled into a "scandal," with the federal ethics commissioner concluding that it could have been seen as a conflict, given that the Aga Khan Foundation had received $38 million from Ottawa.

Left unsaid was the context: The money did not go into the Aga Khan's personal coffers. The Aga Khan invested $45 million for the establishment of the Global Centre for Pluralism in Ottawa and helped restore the old Canadian War Museum.

Federal funds went to his networks worldwide because they met Canada's policy objectives — diversity, democracy, education and development — without corruption and at a fraction of the usual cost.

There has since been the $300 million Aga Khan Museum, an architectural and cultural jewel that did not cost Canada a penny. The museum was also the first major urban development in the Don Mills–Eglinton area since the 1969 opening of the Ontario Science Centre.

The Aga Khan gave far more to Canada than the other way round. He also acted as a goodwill ambassador for Canada worldwide — something money could not buy.



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