Marc Van Grondelle’s *The Ismailis in the Colonial Era* is an attempt to understand the relationship between the Ismaili Imamate and the British Empire. He focuses on the reign of the 48th Ismaili Imam, Sultan Muhammad Shah, Aga Khan III (1877–1957), and to lesser extent, the current Imam, Karim al-Husayni, Aga Khan IV (b. 1936). His ten chapter work is promising, in that it attempts to use newly available material from the British government to explain the development of the community. Unfortunately, the text does not deliver on this promise, and suffers from several methodological and content flaws.

In the first chapter, Van Grondelle asserts he will show how the Nizari Ismaili community became a “staunch ally of Britain.” (1) Unfortunately, this claim shows the weak theoretical framing of the argument. Using the material he has at hand, he can only reasonably describe the relationship between the Ismaili Imam and the British government. He states that he did not have access to documents from within the community (3), so he is no position to determine the actual relationship of the community to Britain. While certain chains of causality can be extrapolated from the relationship of the Aga Khan with the British to his community, the totality of the community cannot be described by that one relationship. He also complains of not having good historical material on the community from which to work from. Unfortunately, his bibliography does not show any engagement with the material published by the Institute of Ismaili Studies, or scholars of Ismailism. He does cite Farhad Daftary’s monumental work on the Ismailis, but considers it uncritical (6–7), which is an odd assertion considering the role it has played in Ismaili studies since its publication.

From these weak beginnings, the work continues to make broad assertions conflating the relationship of the Aga Khan and the workings of the community. It also shows a general weakness in understanding how religious institutions work in general.

In the second chapter of the book, about the history of the Ismailis, there is a lengthy discussion as to why the Ismailis should not be called a
“cult,” even though they fit one definition of a “cult.” It is an odd digression in a book supposedly about recent history, and does not really engage with the debates with the Study of Religion about the use of the term. Had the author chosen to develop the idea further, he may have found himself on firmer ground, arguing the actions of the Aga Khan do in fact represent the actions of the totality of the community.

This lack of engagement with Religious Studies theory is again on display in Chapter 3, about the initial engagements with the Aga Khans, where the author struggles to understand how to frame the religious fluid identities of the Ismailis in the early part of the 19th century (25). Dominique Sila-Khan has written extensively about this issue, but he does not seem to utilize her work, even though it is listed in the bibliography. He then enters into a historical and political analysis, but still makes odd assertions. For example, in discussing the Aga Khan III’s education, he states that British were involved in getting him enrolled at Eton, and then at Cambridge (25). However, he states he has no evidence for this at all, and does not put into the context of South Asian elites often sending their children to English private schools in this time period. The author is pushing a point that has no basis in the data he has.

In Chapter 4, about the World War I, Van Grondelle does follow an interesting arc that as the Aga Khan III matures, there is a relationship that develops where the British desire to see him become the voice of Muslims. However, the author fails to see the claims to legitimacy that the Aga Khan is exercising through British instruments, realizing theological authority over the Muslim community. While Muslims generally did not recognize him as their “Imam,” this is an important period in the establishment of a theologically sound claim in the modern period. Michel Boivin, another author missing from the list of references, has some provocative thoughts on this issue. In discussing the the Khilafat Movement, Van Grondelle sees only the advantage to the British in the Aga Khan’s declaration, not the advantage to the Ismaili Imamate’s claim to leadership, thereby under-analyzing the significance of the moment. (38)

One of the strongest sections of the book is Chapter 5, on the interwar period. Here, the author is strongly persuasive that the relationship between the Aga Khan and the British government resulted in activities amongst the Ismaili community that benefited the British. Specifically, he argues that the Ismailis, as a transnational community, could gather information more quickly and reliably than the British themselves. The
community also functioned as a “cut-out” that protected the British from diplomatic repercussions of cross-border activity. Unfortunately, by the end of the chapter, the author has turned to an almost tabloid-like fascination with the question of succession (57) that reads as a gossip magazine.

Chapter 6, on World War II, opens with a strong use of sources. On one hand, the Aga Khan is telling his subjects to remain loyal to Britain, on the other, he is telling them to obey the laws of the land in which they reside. How the Ismaili community in Vichy France or Syria deal with these opposing edicts is an area that Van Grondelle correctly identifies as needing more research. (62) This strength continues on to Chapter 7, on the succession politics of Aga Khan. Whereas the work is Chapter 5 was hearsay, Van Grondelle shows clearly the official machinations of both the British and the Ismailis in the question of succession and granting of titles. He does make is sound as though there are Nizari Ismailis in Iraq (78), although modern Syria is probably what is meant by the communique.

The remaining chapters deal with fairly recent history, and as such, while the source documents are interesting, they do not shed much new light on the work of the Aga Khan IV or his relationship with the British government.

While this book holds much promise in terms of its goals, it fails to realize them. A specialist in the field might find benefit in going through the source material, as an entry point to further data gathering. However, the book itself is analytically weak, and suffers from structural problems, including conflating the individual of the Ismaili Imam with the community as a whole, and lacking serious engagement with the broad swathe of academic material on the Ismaili community.