

History of Islam

An encyclopedia of Islamic history

The Assassins

Contributed by Prof. Dr. Nazeer Ahmed, PhD

More than a thousand years before modern nations established cloak and dagger intelligence agencies, the art of political assassination was perfected in West Asia. The architect of this art was Hassan al Sabbah, a shadowy character shrouded in exotic mystery about whom as much information has come down to us as misinformation.

The Seljuks tilted the internal balance of power within the Islamic community decidedly in favor of the Sunnis. The victory of Taghril Beg over a combined challenge from the Fatimids and the Buyids (1056-1060) marked the turning point in this struggle. With this victory the Fatimid tide receded towards Cairo. The Abbasid hold on Baghdad was secured. From then on, the Orthodox vision of Islam, with an accent on the Hanafi and Asharite component, was to dominate Muslim history. This is not a surprise considering that the Turks embraced and championed the Hanafi *Fiqh* and the Asharite philosophical outlook.

The Fatimid response to their debacle in Baghdad was a deadly clandestine war directed at the leadership of Sunni Islam. The technique was to use assassination as a political tool. The architect of the Assassin Movement was Hassan al Sabbah. Sabbah, in his early years, was a fellow student with Nizam ul Mulk, who rose to become the most celebrated vizier of the Seljuk period. It is related that Sabbah was spurned in his ambitions to obtain a high position in the Seljuk administration. Whether by conviction or spite, he became a Fatimid and with the consent and connivance of the Fatimid Caliphs in Cairo, turned his pointed dagger at the head of the Sunni establishment.

Hassan al Sabbah retreated to the mountains of northern Syria and established his hideout in the remote mountain areas of Mazanderan. There he set up his headquarters and let loose a reign of terror. The structure of his clandestine movement was pyramidal with Hassan at the apex of the pyramid. He carried the title of Shaykh al Jabal. Next in the hierarchy were the dais who were trained to propagate the movement. Below the *dais* were the *fidayeen*, who were indoctrinated as true believers in the gospel of Hassan and acted as agents of their master. It was they who were charged with the responsibility to carry out the assassinations in the far-flung corners of the Islamic dominions. At the bottom of the rung were the *rafeeqs*, the uninitiated recruits, who were undergoing indoctrination prior to their initiation as *fidayees*.

The term assassin derives from the Arabic word *hashashin* (those who consume hashish) because the *fidayees* used hashish as an intoxicant and while intoxicated, committed their murders. The hashish was mainly imported from India although some was also locally grown. The Hindustani name for hashish is

“ganja”, a product similar to marijuana, still widely cultivated and used in the subcontinent. The assassin movement is also called the *fidayee* movement and its followers are referred to as *fidayeen*. In Turkish it is called the *Nisari* movement. Both designations imply a willingness to die in the cause of a movement. The Arabs called the *fidayeenmulahida* (the impious).

In a valley close to his headquarters, Hassan set up a veritable paradise with fruit orchards, gardens and hundreds of beautiful young women. The recruits would be heavily drugged with hashish and then brought into the valley. When they woke up in the company of beautiful women amidst the gardens, the young men thought they were in heaven. Here they received a heavy dose of indoctrination in the secrets of the assassin movement. Total and complete obedience to the commands of the master was required of the initiated. The graduates would be let loose in the vast dominions of the kings and sultans to exact vengeance for the defeat of the Fatimids at the hands of the Seljuks.

The assassins went for the head of Sunni Islam. Hundreds of notables, viziers and generals fell to the assassins' daggers or the poison cup of the *fidayeen*. Chief among those assassinated was Nizam ul Mulk, the Grand Vizier of the Seljuk Sultan Malik Shah. Nizam ul Mulk was undoubtedly one of the ablest administrators produced by the Muslims. His celebrated book, *Siasat Nama*, written in Farsi, is a masterpiece of the art of administration and politics. It was Nizam ul Mulk who provided a stable anchor to the Seljuk ship. He established universities wherein some of the most capable minds of the age taught. He built hospitals, constructed roads and canals, encouraged agriculture, reinforced the military, rationalized tax collection and fiscal policies, promoted national and international trade with India and China. The Seljuks prospered and Baghdad once again became the premier city of the world. One of the most notable scholars who taught at the Nizamiya College in Baghdad was Imam al Gazzali who changed the course of Islamic history thorough the sheer force of his pen.

The universities were not just great centers of learning. They were also centers for propaganda for the points of view of their patrons. The political rivalry between the Abbasid and the Fatimid Caliphs was reflected in the respective teachings of the universities in Baghdad and Cairo, much as the capitalist and socialist perspectives were reflected in the social sciences taught in the United States and the Soviet Union until recent times. Al Azhar was established in 969 by the Fatimids not only as a great university but also as a center for Fatimid propaganda. The universities in Baghdad served as a counterpoint to those in Cairo. The Nizamiya College in Baghdad was not only a great center for science, grammar and *Fiqh*, it was also a counter-propaganda center for Sunni Islam. For instance, in the writings of al Gazzali (d.1111), we find a simultaneous dialectic against the Fatimid position and against the secular challenge of philosophy.

The assassination of Nizam ul Mulk in 1091 was a major blow to the world of Islam. Not only did it deny the Seljuks the services of a first rank administrator, it hastened the centrifugal forces in the vast Seljuk Empire. Others who fell to the *fidayeen* included the celebrated Emirs Maudud (1127) and Zengi (1146) of Mosul and the Atabek Imaduddin. A hundred years later, Salahuddin Ayyubi himself narrowly escaped the assassin's dagger on two separate occasions. Mohammed Ghori, conqueror of Delhi, was not so fortunate and died at the hands of an assassin near Kabul in 1206.

The Seljuks attacked the assassins time and again but each time the assassins escaped. It was not until 1251 that the Mongols, under Hulagu Khan, finally conquered the assassin territories and drove them from their hideouts. This was no consolation to the Muslim world because the Mongols were on their way to Baghdad to decimate the very heart of Islamic civilization. Notwithstanding the Mongols, the *fidayeen* continued to survive in pockets of northern Syria and Iraq until modern times. After the First World War, with the defeat of the Ottoman Empire, these areas came under British occupation and received British protection.

After the death of Nizam ul Mulk, Seljuk power dissipated. The empire broke up into small principalities. Quarrels broke out between the princes and the emirs resulting in open warfare. It was into this fossilized Muslim body politic that the Crusaders injected their power in 1096.

Comments are closed.

[Blog at WordPress.com.](#)