

THE ASSASSINS

By Rami Yelda

Merriam Webster Collegiate Dictionary's definition of **as.sas.sin** is: [ML *assassinus*, fr. Ar *hashashin*, pl. of *hashash* one addicted to hashish] **1** *cap* : one of a secret orders of Muslims that at the time of the Crusades terrorized Christians and other enemies by secret murder committed under the influence of hashish. **2** : MURDERER : *esp* : one who murders a politically important person either by hire or from fanatical motives. A person who commits murder.

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On the night of April 28, 1192, during the Third Crusade, Marquise Conrad de Monferrat, the commander of the Latin Kingdom of Jerusalem, was found in his bed, stabbed to death with a gold-hilted dagger. The *assassinus* who had committed the crime was a Muhammedan (as Muslims were called in those days) who, disguised as a Christian monk, had infiltrated the inner quarters of the castle to carry out his deadly mission.

The murder of the Marquise was the first but not the last encounter of the Crusaders with the Assassins. These Muhammedan zealots, better known in Persia as *fedayeen* (singular: *fedayee*-- holy warriors, ready to sacrifice their lives for their Elders and Allah), belonged to an obscure Muslim sect called *Ismaili* who with their death-defying ways had already caused panic in the Islamic lands.

The Ismaili faith is a branch of Shi'ism. Ismailis, like Shi'as, have always been (and still are) in the margins of the Sunni dominated Islamic world. In the 8th century AD, Ismailis split with the main body of Shi'ism. Ismailis had accepted Ismail (Imam Ja'far's son) as the seventh Imam and the true offspring of Prophet Mohammad through his daughter Fatima. It is for this reason, and to differentiate them from the Twelvers, Ismailis are called, "Seveners."

Ismaili teachings are shrouded in Islamic mysticism. They believe things have an interior (*batini*) meaning. The hidden doctrines are revealed only to initiates. Its devout members are expected to participate in a mission called *da'wa*. To become a *da'i* (propagator), every *rafiq* (comrade) has to go through nine stages of initiation called *ta'lim*. Those who lead the *ta'lim* are called *sheiks* or *murshids* (guides). In the past, in the lowest ranks of the hierarchy, were the *fedayeen*--the nihilistic devotees who would be subjected to long periods of intense indoctrination, some becoming political assassins. The old Ismaili hierarchy was thus similar to the chivalry orders of Christianity in the Medieval Ages with the *sheikhs*, or *murshids*, acting as the grand masters.

Soon after the split, Ismailis became a secretive fraternity of Islam. With roots in Persia, they traveled throughout the other Muslim lands, preaching and converting many. Thus, before the 11th century, new communities of Ismailis were established in Central Asia, Afghanistan, the

Indian subcontinent, the Caucasus, the Levant (Syria and Lebanon), Yemen, and North Africa

As a secretive and marginal sect, Muslims considered the Ismailis to be heretics (*mulhids*). They were subjected to much discrimination and at times, massacres. Their main enemies were the Abbasid Caliphs (successors of the Prophet), who as representatives of Sunni Islam ruled from Baghdad. New and more vicious adversaries arrived in the 12th century: The nomadic (and heathen) Turkic Seljuks invaded Persia from Central Asia. Soon after settling, the Seljuks converted to Sunni Islam and started feuding with the Ismailis. To avoid confronting the warlike Turks, Ismailis formed a clandestine insurgent state in 1090. Fighting the belligerent Central Asian Turks on land was out of the question. To avoid a showdown, the Ismailis established themselves in 150 impenetrable fortresses in high mountains in eastern Persia (close to Afghanistan), the Levant and even in Yemen.

In the meantime, far from the Middle East and the Seljuk yoke, the Ismaili converts in North Africa, calling themselves Fatimids (descendants of Fatimah, the Prophet's daughter) came to power, and in 972, established their dynasty in Egypt. Fatimids ruled for two hundred years until they were overthrown in 1171.

After the collapse of the Fatimid State in Egypt, it was the turn of the Persian Ismailis to bolster their clandestine communities. To meet the challenge, a genius called Hasan Sabah took over the now disintegrating Ismaili *da'wa*. As a new *murshid*, he would bring the order to its zenith.

Hasan Sabah, a descendant of Yemeni Shi'a immigrants, was born sometime in the eleventh century in the holy city of Qom, 150 miles south of Tehran. In his early childhood, the family moved to Ray, the ancient city on the eastern fringes of Tehran. It was in Ray when Sabah, while studying in a Shi'a seminary, met an Ismaili scholar and converted to the faith. In 1078, he left for Cairo, the center of Ismaili learning at the time. In 1082, after completing his studies, he returned to Persia to start his *da'wa*. He settled in Daylam, a region in the northeast of Qazvin, south of the Caspian Sea and in the jagged peaks of the Alborz mountains. It was in this high and isolated valley, that in 1090, after preaching and converting some of the local villagers, he occupied an abandoned fortress of the former local rulers called Alamut (Bird's Nest, in local language). Alamut was strategically well located to be power base; it was on the crest of a mountain 6,000 feet above sea-level, was well irrigated with cisterns, and could be reached only by a narrow path.

Sabbah lived thirty-five years, until his death in 1124, as a hermit on the rock of Alamut. During those years, he never left the fortress, and according to the Persian chronicles, only twice did he leave the castle in which he lived. In the Ismaili annals, the period starting from the establishment Alamut as the center of the Ismailis until its occupation and destruction by the Mongols in 1256, is called "the Alamut Period."

While in Alamut, Sabah continued with his *da'wa*. It was during these years that he penned

several texts about Ismailis and their doctrines. He established a well stocked library with books provided by the network of Ismailis throughout the Muslim lands. Sabah had realized that terror was an effective political weapon. He opened a madrassah where *fedayeen* from other Ismaili centers in various countries would attend and study the trademarks of terror. To that effect, the *fedayeen* were taught the necessary skills such as martial arts and the proper ways of plunging a poisoned dagger in a victim's chest. Sabah had also established a sophisticated network of Ismaili informants who would supply him with detailed information about his enemies. Once he had decided who his enemy was, he would raise a poisoned dagger with a golden hilt in class and ask for a volunteer for the job. The name of the volunteer and his prey would then be inscribed on the 'roll of honor.' The volunteer, after being meticulously informed about his future victim, would be dispatched to perform his mission. The killer was expected to accept death with dignity and never make any attempt to escape.

Nezam ol-Molk, the powerful Persian Grand Vizier of Seljuks, was, like his overlords, a devout Sunni. In his masterpiece, *Siyasatnameh*, (subject of a previous column in this site) he had belittled the Ismailis by calling them putrid *molheds* and wicked enemies of Islam and the state. In his fortress, Hasan had read Nezam's writings. To silence the prominent Grand Vizier, he dispatched one of his *fedayees* to slay him. On October 16, 1092, while Nezam was in his litter traveling to Baghdad to meet the caliph, he was met by a *fadayee*, who disguised as an itinerant holy man, approached him and stuck the poisoned dagger in his chest. [Sabah, not satisfied with the killing of the Grand Vizier, also had Nezam's two sons, one in Baghdad and the other in Nayshapur (in northeastern Iran), killed.]

Nezam was the first high-ranking official to be struck by Ismaili *fadayeen*. His killing sent shock waves through the Islamic lands. During the ensuing years, scores of men in prominent positions were to fall to the daggers of Ismailis. Among the victims were: two caliphs, princes, generals, governors, jurists, and orthodox Islamic leaders who had condemned the Ismailis. Saladin, too, was the target of two failed attempts on his life. Although not at war with the Crusaders (and sometimes their ally), several of their leaders such as Marquise de Monferrat were also killed. In addition to the killings, Sabah had his ways to intimidate but not kill some of his detractors. Once a *fedayee* had stuck a dagger in the ground beside Sanjar, the Seljuk Sultan's bed with a note next to it signed by Hasan saying: "He who stuck this dagger in the ground could have easily stuck it in thy heart!" To protect themselves from the Ismaili menace, many commanders and officers had started wearing armor and also mail shirts even going to bed.

There has been much speculation about the origin of the name assassins. William of Tyre, writing during the Middle Ages, had said: "Our people, as well as the Saracens (nomadic people living between Syria and Arabia), call them *Assassini*, and I have not been able to find out the origin of this name." The Crusaders had for some reason affiliated the Ismaili *fedayeen* with hashish and had started calling them *hashashin*, which was later modified to *assassinus*. To them, the *Assassinus* were a bunch of dope-heads who were manipulated by a reclusive old *sheikh*, called "the Old man of the Mountain." Marco Polo, before leaving for his long voyage to China, had learned about the Assassins and their legendary gardens and its fair-skinned damsels.

Polo visited Persia in 1271 (after the destruction of Alamut in 1257). In his narrative, dictated years later after his return to Italy, he had added garnish the Crusaders' false legends about the Assassins.

In the many Persian historical annals about the Ismailis written by Isamilis or their enemies, there are no references to hashish. Sabah, being an ascetic Muslim, not only had forbidden the entry of women to Alamut, he had also banned the use of any mind-altering substances such as wine. In fact, he had one of his sons executed for drinking. The *fedayeens*' motivation to die can only be attributed to the charismatic and hypnotic influence of their cult leaders like Sabah and his successors who manipulated them to the extremes--suicide included. As the origin of the name Assassins, the probable reason may be that Ismailis were considered to be fundamentalist (*assassi*, in Arabic), hence the name.

"The Alamut Period" as well as the clandestine Ismaili state's power that had started in 1090, would come to an end in 1257. Two years earlier, Hulagu, the grandson of Ghingiz, occupied Persia from Mongolia. Starting from the eastern provinces, he systematically subdued and slaughtered the Ismaili communities and destroyed their fortresses. In 1257 after a long siege, Alamut--the epicenter of the faith for 166 years--was overtaken. Rukn ad-Din, its governor, was arrested, its rich treasury and splendid library, together with Sabah's copious writings, were torched and the fortress destroyed. Hulagu continued his campaign against the Ismailis; his troops destroyed 100 (of their 150) fortresses. "The world was cleared of them" was what the Persian historian Joveini wrote in his eye-witness account of the sieges. (Alamut was abandoned after the siege. The Safavid restored and used it to serve as a prison for their high-valued detainees. Some of its walls and rooms still stand on top of the rock).

After the Mongol conquest, Ismailis lived for several centuries in dispersed communities in Persia, Central Asia, Syria and the Indian subcontinent. At that time, Persia used to be a predominantly Sunni state. During the Safavids rule in the 16th century, the citizens were ordered to convert to Shi'ism. Since that time Shi'ism has been the official faith of the country. After the conversion, Ismailis were reduced to an even smaller sect and were overshadowed by the now more powerful Shi'a majority. A small community of Nizari Ismailis continued to survive in the central region of Persia called Mahalat. (Other branches of Ismailis are the Mustaali in Yemen, the Druze in Lebanon, Syria and Israel, and the Bohara in India). In 1830, during the Qajar rule, the shah granted the honorary hereditary title of Aga Khan to Hasan Ali Shah, the 46th Ismaili Imam. (It is by the title of Aga Khan that he and his descendants will be known). In 1840, the Aga Khan I participated in a failed coup against the Shah and was asked that he and his followers leave the country. The Aga Khan left Iran in 1848 and settled in Bombay (today's Mumbai.) Aga Khan II, died in 1885. His successor, Aga Khan III, because of his many philanthropic contributions was knighted by the British Government and was called Sir Sultan Mohammed Shah Aga Khan. His son, Aly Khan, a hard-drinking playboy (Rita Hayworth was his second wife), was bypassed from the Imamate by his father. This did not cause much turmoil since soon after that, while driving in an inebriated state, he got involved in an accident and died. In 1954, Karim, the grandson, was installed as the new Imam in Karachi and became Aga Khan IV and

the 49th Imam. [Although Ismailism was started in Iran, there are no Ismailis left there now.]

Prince Karim Agha Khan, always reverentially referred to as, "His Highness" and also *Hazar Imam* "Present Imam" by Ismailis, is the spiritual leader of the second largest Shi'a community (after the Twelver) and is much adored - almost as a god - by his followers. Karim Agha Khan is American (Harvard) educated and is now based in London. He has been active in managing the Aga Khan Development Network which is funded by generous religious dues (*zakat*) from his followers and also by prudent investments. Many social, educational, agricultural, business, housing and healthcare institutions have been built in 25 countries where the majority of Ismailis, estimated to be from 15 to 30 million, live. The countries benefitting the most are: India, Pakistan, Central Asia and east African states such as, Tanzania, Kenya, Uganda, Rwanda, Burundi, Madagascar and Zaire. The Aga Khan Development Network has also been active in North America and Australia.

Ismailis are a peaceful people in general; they are not a belligerent bunch and are not a threat to anyone, the U.S. included. What Ismailis are interested in are jubilees. This year is the Golden Jubilee of Karim AK who was installed (some Ismailis like to say "crowned") as the Living Imam, on July 11, 1957. This year, there have been and will continue to be more fund raising receptions by Ismailis in the 48 countries that they reside in. Plans are to generate funds to the already \$12 billion Foundation. It is in these receptions that donations and pledges are made and funds sent to the AK Foundation.

After a stormy and violent beginning in the Middle Ages, the Ismailis, now holding a low profile, have transformed into peaceful communities, and are comprised of law-abiding citizens in countries they reside in. Their religious practices such as prayer are different than those of the main body of Muslims. Also, to them, seeing the Aga Khan is tantamount to doing the hajj. Those referring to the 'kind and tolerant' Islam do not realize they are citing the Ismailis as the role models of Muslims. It is a pity that the rest of Muslims, Shi'as included, consider the Ismailis apostates.

{Writer's note: in the 16th century, the Safavid had transformed the Alamut fortress into a prison for their high-valued prisoners. I am now surmising: If the Safavids were around, they would have locked Robert Levinson and the two captured Israeli soldiers there. Alamut is isolated and a far more secure place than the regime's favorite Evin. (In Iran, everyone knows about Evin and all the other prisons; I doubt many Iranians know much about Alamut.)

Furthermore, if UBL is not in Alamut yet, in the future, once the noose gets tight and if he is not killed by his personal guards (who are ordered to finish him), and if he makes it out from his cave in Waziristan alive, he will be flown by a helicopter to Alamut. }