

# **The *Hashshāshīn*: “Precursors of Modern Muslim Terrorist Outfits?”**

By

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the requirements for the degree of

**Master of Philosophy**



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## **Dedication**

I dedicate this work to the memory of my father, whom I lost in November, 2014, and  
who was my biggest inspiration and best teacher.

## **Candidate's Declaration**

I hereby declare that this thesis is the result of my individual research, and that it has not been submitted concurrently to any other university for any other degree.

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## **Supervisor's Declaration**

I hereby recommend that the dissertation prepared under my supervision by **Ms. Natasha Shahid** titled: “**The *Ḥashshāshīn*: “Precursors of Modern Muslim Terrorist Outfits?”**” be accepted in partial fulfilment of the requirement for the degree of Master of Philosophy in Asian Studies

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## Contents

<i>Title</i>	<i>Page No.</i>
<b>Acknowledgments</b>	<b>i</b>
<b>Abstract</b>	<b>ii</b>
<b>PART 1: The <i>Hashshāshīn</i></b>	<b>1</b>
Chapter 1: Who were the <i>Hashshāshīn</i> ?	2
Chapter 2: Hassan bin Sabbah: Early days and Time in Egypt	12
Chapter 3: Capture of Alamut and the Formal Formation of the Order	20
Chapter 4: Expansion: the Strongholds of the <i>Hashshāshīn</i> in Iran and Syria and their Architectural Features	32
Chapter 5: The <i>Khudawands</i> of Alamut	62
Chapter 6: Assassination: Targets, Methods and Goals	93
<b>PART 2: Modern “Islamic” Terrorism</b>	<b>119</b>
Chapter 7: Modern “Islamic” Terrorist Groups: Identities and Methods	120
<b>PART 3: Conclusion</b>	<b>134</b>
Conclusion: Answers to Research Questions	135
Bibliography	140

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## Abstract

After the tragedy of 9/11, there was general agreement on the notion that Al-Qaeda was responsible for all the attacks that took place on that fatal day – a responsibility that the group reportedly accepted, too, albeit three years later<sup>1</sup>. Following this attack, the common perception of Muslims around the globe changed for the worse: the style of holding “suicide” attacks against non-Muslims had begun to be touted as somewhat of a hallmark of the Muslim community. Soon enough, a few scholarly theories about this fresh movement emerged, one of which attempted to link modern suicide attacks to those held by the *Hashshāshīn* – popularly known as the Order of the Assassins – in the 12th and 13th centuries in modern-day Iran, Iraq and Syria. Proponents of this theory – such as Sha’ul Shay, who wrote in his *The Shahid* that the Assassins’ assassinations were a “historical example of suicide attacks in the name of Islam”<sup>2</sup> – believe that the *Hashshāshīn* were “Holy Killers” – like modern Muslim terrorists, in their opinion – who assassinated their opponents in the name of Islam. Such scholars also believe in and propagate medieval Christian Crusaders’ accounts about the *Hashshāshīn* which painted the Order’s image as a group of hashish-intoxicated men who killed fearlessly under the influence of drugs. This research work will attempt to test these two theories, with the help of primary sources, and will look to answer the following questions:

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<sup>1</sup> CBC News, *Bin Laden claims responsibility for 9/11*, October 29, 2004, available at: <http://www.cbc.ca/news/world/bin-laden-claims-responsibility-for-9-11-1.513654>

<sup>2</sup> Sha’ul Shay, *The Shahids: Islam and Suicide Attacks*, (New Jersey: Transaction Publishers), 2004, 24.



- 1) Were the *Hashshāshīn* “Holy Killers” who killed in the name of Islam?
- 2) Does primary historiography support the Assassin legends that are endorsed by contemporary scholars?
- 3) Based upon the answers to the abovementioned questions, is it justified to place the roots of modern, presumably Muslim suicide terrorism in the assassinations of the *Hashshāshīn*?

# **PART 1:**

## **The *Hashshāshīn***

## Chapter 1: Who were the *Ḥashshāshīn*?

*“In the meanwhile, the fellows, Refik, and the masters, Dai, inundated the whole of Asia; and one of the latter, Hassan-ben-Sabah Homairi, was the founder of a new branch of the sect [i.e. Ismailism], namely the eastern Ismailites, or Assassins, before whose cradle we now stand.”*

- Joseph Hammer-Purgstall, *The History of the Assassins*<sup>1</sup>

Although the above-given excerpt from Hammer-Purgstall’s famous (or shall we say, notorious) work on the Order introduces them to the reader along religious sectarian lines, the *Ḥashshāshīn* as a group had many identities: religious, military, and intellectual. However, before delving into these, it is important to clarify the etymology of the term, “*Ḥashshāshīn*”, itself.

### Etymology of the word, “*Ḥashshāshīn*”

The term “*Ḥashshāshīn*” most likely derives from the Arabic term “*hashshīshī*”, the plural of which is, “*hashshīshiyya*” meaning *hashish* or hash consumers<sup>2</sup>.

The term “*hashshīshiyya*” itself was used for them for the first time by Fatimid Caliph al-Amir in 1122 AD/516 AH, as a derogatory term for Syrian Nizari Isma’ilis intending to insult them as socially lowly or uncouth<sup>3</sup>. Later, the adjective was also used for Persian Nizari Isma’ilis and was repeated in some Zaydi (Muslim Shi’ite) sources of

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<sup>1</sup> Joseph Hammer-Purgstall, tr. O. C. Wood, *The History of the Assassins*, (London: Smith and Elder, Cornhill), 1835, 41.

<sup>2</sup> Farhad Daftary, *Historical Dictionary of the Ismailis*, (Plymouth: Scarecrow Press), 2012, 24.

<sup>3</sup> Farhad Daftary, *A Short History of the Ismailis*, (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press), 1998, 12.

the time <sup>4</sup>. The Christian Crusaders, who came in contact with the region from the 11<sup>th</sup> to the 13<sup>th</sup> centuries, took the name of the *Hashshāshīn* too literally, and were responsible for spreading the idea that they were actually *hashish*-intoxicated young men<sup>5</sup> who killed at the direction of their grandmaster (*da'i al-du'ah*), an unknown “le vieux de la montagne”, *shaykh al-jabal*, or Old Man of the Mountain<sup>6</sup>. Modern scholar of Isma'ilism, Dr. Farhad Daftary believes that the Christian Crusaders were also responsible for awarding the misnomer of “Assassin” to this group<sup>7</sup>. This view is supported by looking into medieval Muslim historiography, i.e. the primary sources for the history of the period. Both Ibn al-Athir and Ibn Khaldun, for instance, termed the order “*Batini*” from the word “*batin*” used for Isma'ilism's esoteric teachings<sup>89101112</sup>. Therefore, the most genuine term for them would be Nizari Isma'ilis or, slightly derogatively, *Batinis*. However, ease of comprehension compels me to use the terms *Hashshāshīn* and Assassins since these are the most easily understood.

## Religious Identity

A little less straight-forward yet recognized aspect of the *Hashshāshīn*, already presented in part by Hammer-Purgstall in the excerpt quoted at the head of this chapter,

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<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

<sup>5</sup> Daftary, *The Assassin Legends*, vii.

<sup>6</sup> Hitti, *ibid.*, 448.

<sup>7</sup> Farhad Daftary, *The Assassin Legends: Myths of the Isma'ilis*, (London: I.B. Tauris & Co. Ltd.), 1994, vii.

<sup>8</sup> Izz al-Din Ibn al-Athir, tr. D. S. Richards, *The Chronicle of Ibn al-Athir for the Crusading Period from al-Kamil fi'l-Ta'rikh Part 1: The Years 491-541/1097-1146: The Coming of the Franks and the Muslim Response*, (Surrey: Ashgate Publishing Limited), 2010

<sup>9</sup> Ibid., *The Chronicle of Ibn al-Athir for the Crusading Period from al-Kamil fi'l-Ta'rikh, Part 2: The Years 541-589/1146-1193: The Age of Nur al-Din and Saladin*, (Surrey: Ashgate Publishing Limited), 2007

<sup>10</sup> Ibid., *The Chronicle of Ibn al-Athir for the Crusading Period from al-Kamil fi'l-Ta'rikh Part 3: The Years 589-629/1193-1231: The Ayyubids after Saladin and the Mongol Menace* (Surrey: Ashgate Publishing Limited), 2008

<sup>11</sup> Abdur Rehman Ibn-e-Khaldun, tr. Hakeem Ahmed Hussain Allahabadi & Hafiz Syed Rashid Ahmed Arshad, *Tarikh Ibn-e-Khaldoon*, Vol. 7, (Karachi: Nafees Academy), 2003

<sup>12</sup> Ibid., *Tarikh Ibn-e-Khaldun*, Vol. 8, (Karachi: Nafees Academy), 2003.

is that of their identity as a Muslim, Shi'ite sect. That alone is not comprehensive enough, though, since Muslims, generally, and Muslim Shi'ites, alone, particularly, have many sectarian divisions among them, such as Jaffris, Isma'ilis, Zaidis, so on and so forth. Our discussion is concerned with the Isma'ili faction of Shi'ism.

### **Isma'ilism**

Primary sources lead students of Islam to believe in proto-Isma'ilian schools such as the Kaisanis<sup>13</sup> (mentioned by Ata Malik Juvaini in his *Tarikh-i-Jahagusha-e-Juvaini*) who, after the death of Jafar as-Sadiq, joined forces with the freshly formed Isma'ili faction. Sources like Juvaini's *Tarikh* also state that these Kaisanis switched allegiances often, attaching themselves to the Rafidis after the Zaidi-Rafidi schism<sup>14</sup> and later to the Isma'ilis. However, to steer clear of hate-inspired conjecture that often found its way into most Sunni sources writing about Shi'ism, this research would not employ material discussing the morality of the Kaisanis or Rafidis or any other group, but would begin the history of Isma'ilism only after the death of Jafar as-Sadiq and the dispute over the succession of the sixth Imam<sup>1516</sup>.

After the death of Jafar as-Sadiq, the fifth Shi'ite Imam, in AD 765<sup>17</sup> disputes generated among Shi'ites regarding the succession of the sixth Imam. As the tradition of Imamate primogeniture had it, the eldest son of the deceased Imam had the natural right to succeed his father. According to Ata Malik Juvaini, Isma'il was the first son of Jafar

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<sup>13</sup> Ata Malik Juvaini, tr. John Andrew Boyle, *The History of the World-Conqueror*, Vol. II, (Cambridge: Harvard University Press), 1958, 641.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid., 642.

<sup>15</sup> Daftary, *Historical Dictionary of the Ismailis*, 83.

<sup>16</sup> Footnotes in Juvaini's *Tarikh*'s edition used by this researcher state Jafar as-Sadiq as the sixth Imam, which would subsequently mean that Isma'il was the seventh Imam. However, most other sources concur that Isma'il was the sixth Imam.

<sup>17</sup> Farhad Daftary, *The Isma'ilis: Their History and Doctrines*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press), 2007, 2.

as-Sadiq<sup>18</sup> while Farhad Daftary, a modern scholar of Isma'ilism, states that he was the second son<sup>19</sup>. Juvaini further states that Jafar as-Sadiq designated Isma'il as his successor, however, later he began to disapprove of his eldest son due to his habit of excessive drinking<sup>20</sup>. He also states that Isma'il predeceased his father in AD 762-63<sup>21</sup> but Daftary states that the circumstances and time of Isma'il's death has eluded scholars and Shi'ites, themselves, to this day<sup>22</sup>, following this with the notion that Isma'ili tradition believes that he passed away after his father, while most sources state that he died before him. The second son according to Juvaini was Musa, who was the son of a slave girl<sup>23</sup>. According to Ibn Khaldun, after the death of Jafar as-Sadiq, a schism occurred in the Shi'ite school, which resulted in the formation of two major groups: the Athna-Ashariyyah, also known as the Twelvers, and the Isma'ilis, also known as the Seveners<sup>24</sup>. The former group believed that Musa was the true successor of Jafar as-Sadiq since Isma'il had passed away and he was Jafar's eldest surviving son, while the latter supported Isma'il's accession to the Imamate. The reasons given for the Isma'ilis' support of Isma'il are various. Juvaini states that the Isma'ilis insisted upon the notion that Isma'il had not passed away before Jafar as-Sadiq, and, in fact, his death was feigned<sup>25</sup>. Ibn Khaldun, on the other hand, states that Isma'ilis agreed that Isma'il had predeceased his father, yet insisted that the Imamate should have remained in his line<sup>26</sup>. Whatever the reasons of the support of Isma'il may be, the only concrete historical fact that can be retained from this discussion is that the Shi'ite sect of Isma'ilism was born

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<sup>18</sup> Juvaini, *ibid.*

<sup>19</sup> Daftary, *Historical Dictionary*, 83.

<sup>20</sup> Juvani, *ibid.*, 643.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>22</sup> Daftary, *Historical Dictionary*, 84.

<sup>23</sup> Juvaini, *ibid.*, 642

<sup>24</sup> Abdur Rehman Ibn-e-Khaldun, Hakeem Ahmed Hussain Allahabadi & Hafiz Syed Rashid Ahmed Arshad, translation, *Tarikh Ibn-e-Khaldoon*, Vol. 6, (Karachi: Nafees Academy), 2003, 77.

<sup>25</sup> Juvaini, *ibid.*, 643.

<sup>26</sup> Ibn-e-Khaldun, *ibid.*, 78.

after the death of Jafar as-Sadiq in AD 765. This is important, since part of the religious identity of the *Hashshāshīn* had been created with the creation of Isma'ilism – but only that: a part. The identity becomes complete with another schism that occurred within the Isma'ili school in AD 1094<sup>27</sup>.

### **Nizari Isma'ilism**

After over three centuries of unity and political success, initiated by their rebellious faction Qarmatians and culminated in the formation of the Fatimid Caliphate, the Isma'ilis finally began to show signs of integral weakness after the death of caliph-imam al-Mustansir on the 8<sup>th</sup> of Zil Haj 487 A.H. or AD 1094<sup>28</sup>.

Al-Mustansir left behind two sons: Nizar and Abul-Qasim Ahmad<sup>29</sup> (queerly enough, Ibn Khalun mentions *three* sons: Nizar, Ahmed and Abul Qasim<sup>30</sup>, but since Juvaini's is the early source, I have given it preference over Ibn Khaldun's). It appeared that the elder, Nizar, was not on good terms with the powerful vizier of the Caliphate, Abu'l Qasim Shahanshah, who used the title al-Afdal<sup>31</sup>. Ibn Khaldun states that al-Afdal conspired with al-Mustansir's sister to place Abul Qasim upon the throne, asking her to recommend his nominee for the role and in return ensured her that her say would always be held important in the affairs of the state<sup>32</sup>. Juvaini, on the other hand states that al-Mustansir, himself, named Nizar first as his heir-apparent giving him the title al-Mustafa li-Din-Allah, but later changed his decision and named Abul Qasim, instead, granting him the title al-Musta'li billah<sup>33</sup>. Juvaini's *Tarikh*'s translator, John Andrew

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<sup>27</sup> Daftary, *The Isma'ilis: Their History and Doctrines*, 2.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid.

<sup>29</sup> Juvaini, *ibid.*, 661-662.

<sup>30</sup> Ibn-e-Khaldun, *ibid.*, 140.

<sup>31</sup> Daftary, *The Isma'ilis: Their History and Doctrines*, 106.

<sup>32</sup> Ibn-e-Khaldun, *ibid.*, 140.

<sup>33</sup> Juvaini, *ibid.*, 662.

Boyle, dismisses this narrative as incorrect in the book's footnotes, reaffirming Ibn Khaldun's version as the correct one. This complication gave rise to a conflict among the Fatimids, with one part supporting Nizar's right and the other supporting Abul Qasim's right to the throne. Those who supported Nizar mostly resided in Iraq, Syria, Qumish and Khorasan while those who sided with Abul Qasim resided mostly in Egypt<sup>34</sup>. While the troops and people of the Caliphate expressed consolidation with Abul Qasim al-Musta'li and placed him upon the throne, Nizar fled with his two sons to Alexandria and prepared for a revolt<sup>3536</sup>. However, the Caliph sent his troops after Nizar who succeeded in capturing and subsequently imprisoning him and his sons. He, along with his two sons, was murdered in prison in AD 1095<sup>37</sup>. Juvaini states that one of Nizar's sons had a son in Alexandria to whom the-then chief of the "Heretics of Alamut" traced his descent<sup>38</sup>.

All of these events left a permanent scar upon the face of the Isma'ili school and resulted in an irreversible schism that created two sects of Isma'ilis: the al-Musta'li Isma'ilis and the Nizari Isma'ilis. It was the latter sect that the *Hashshāshīn* adhered themselves to and some scholars, such as Farhad Daftary, believe that it might have been the subject of the succession of Nizar that could have caused a possible dispute between Hassan bin Sabbah and Badr al-Jamali when the former had come to Cairo for studies, in AD 1078<sup>39</sup>.

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<sup>34</sup> Ibid.

<sup>35</sup> Ibid.

<sup>36</sup> Ibn-e-Khaldun, *ibid.*, 140.

<sup>37</sup> Daftary, *The Isma'ilis: Their History and Doctrines*, 3.

<sup>38</sup> Juvaini, *ibid.*, 663.

<sup>39</sup> Daftary, *The Isma'ilis: Their History and Doctrines*, 123.



## Military Identity

The best-known and most famous – or notorious – aspect of the *Hashshāshīn* is undeniably their military identity: their identity as one of the most feared assassins from the time of the Crusades.

During the approximate 170 years of their activity (AD 1090 – AD 1256/60), the *Hashshāshīn* successfully assassinated a number of high profile targets. This included their first, Nizam-ul-Mulk Tusi in AD 1092<sup>40</sup>, atabeg of Mosul and Seljuk military commander Mawdud in AD 1113<sup>41</sup>, as well as Abbasid Caliph, al-Mustarshid bi-Allah in AD 1135<sup>42</sup>.

Like a *bona fide* military order, the *Hashshāshīn* were organized in a proper hierarchical structure. The chain of command as described by P.K. Hitti was as follows: *da'i al-du'ah* (grandmaster) at the top, followed by *al da'i al kabir* (grand prior), followed by “ordinary propagandists”, and lastly and most importantly, the *fida'is* (the assassins)<sup>43</sup>. The *fida'is* carried out the assassinations upon the grandmaster's command, putting their lives in danger – and usually losing them. The dagger was their most favoured weapon, which meant coming within an arm's length of the target, as in the case of Nizam-ul-Mulk<sup>44</sup>. The spear was also infrequently used, such as in the assassination of Aaz Abul Mahasin, Barkiyaruq's vizier<sup>45</sup>. Other methods were also employed, but rarely.

Another proof of the highly militarized identity of the *Hashshāshīn* is their choice of “residence”: hilltop forts or castles. The first castle captured by the Order was Alamut

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<sup>40</sup> Ibn-e-Khaldun, *Tarikh Ibn-e-Khaldoon*, Vol. 7, 38.

<sup>41</sup> Ibid., 92.

<sup>42</sup> Ibid. 127.

<sup>43</sup> Philip K. Hitti, *History of the Arabs*, Third Edition, (London: Macmillan and Co. Ltd.), 1946, 446.

<sup>44</sup> Ibn-e-Khaldun, *ibid.*, 38

<sup>45</sup> Ibid., 72.

in AD 1090<sup>46</sup>, which remained the Persian grandmaster's seat till its fall in AD 1256. Within the next decade they had captured Girdkuh, Lammasar (AD 1096) and Shahdiz (AD 1100). By AD 1140, they had Masyaf, al-Kahf, al-Qadmus and Ullayqah as well<sup>47</sup>. Some other castles named by Ibn al-Athir in his *al-Kamil f'il Tarikh* are Tabas, Wasnamkuh, Khalanjan, Ustunawand, Ardahnu<sup>48</sup> and Khaladkhan<sup>49</sup>. By the end of their time in AD 1256, the Nizaris had expanded their control to a great number of castles that fell in modern-day Iran and Syria, forming a kind of Nizari Isma'ili state composed exclusively of forts and castles. These fortifications provided excellent defense, and the fact that nobody could bring them down, even the great Muslim Crusader Salah-ud-Din Ayyubi, testifies this. Hulagu Khan alone was able to achieve that feat just because of his use of the-then superior military technology, the mangonel. The *Hashshāshīn*'s notorious methods of assassination, their strict hierarchy and respect for the superior's orders, coupled with their impregnable forts – some of which survive to this day – is what ensured their survival in hostile territories, for nearly three centuries. This is no small feat if we compare their population strength with that of their adversaries.

## Intellectual Identity

The most obscure, nearly unknown and almost completely overlooked aspect of the *Hashshāshīn* is their intellectual credentials. And maybe understandably so, too, for when Hulagu Khan sacked the Isma'ili castles, he destroyed their libraries, too. If

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<sup>46</sup> Daftary, *A Short History of the Ismailis*, 124.

<sup>47</sup> Hitti, *ibid.*, 448

<sup>48</sup> Ibn al-Athir, *ibid.*, Part 1, 43.

<sup>49</sup> *Ibid.*, 44.

efforts are made to extract Nizari Isma'ili thought from other works of the time, some of their literature can be recovered.

Juvaini's *Tarikh*, for example, sheds some light on those lost works, since he accompanied Hulagu on his sack of Alamut. Juvaini took special permission from Hulagu to look into the treasury and library of the castle for any items that might be of use to the Khan<sup>50</sup>. He describes the library in the following words:

Now I was examining the library which they had gathered together over a period of many years, from amongst the multitude of lying treatises and false teachings touching their religion and belief (which they had mingled with copies of the noble Koran and all manner of choice books, interweaving good and evil) was extracting whatever I found in the way of rare and precious volumes after the manner of '*He bringeth forth the living out of the dead*', when I came upon a book containing the life and adventures of Hasan-i-Sabbah which they call *Sar-Guzasht-i-Sayyidna*. From this work I have copied whatever was to the point and suitable for insertion in this history, adducing whatever was confirmed and verified.<sup>51</sup>

*Sarguzasht-i-Sayyidna* is still considered one of the most important sources of Nizari Isma'ili history and is one of the better known of the works destroyed with Alamut's library. Juvaini's choice of the name for this chapter, "Of Hasan-i-Sabbah and His

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<sup>50</sup> Juvaini, *Ibid.*, 666.

<sup>51</sup> Juvaini, *ibid.*

Innovations (Tajdid)..." also shows that the *Hashshāshīn* were not only a band of assassins but were intellectually active, as well. How else would Hassan bin Sabbah, the creator of the Order, be considered a *Mujaddid* (one who practices *Tajdid*) or "innovative"? Surely he was a fairly renowned theological thinker, having already borne much of the burden of establishing a completely new religious sect on his shoulders. Furthermore, the presence of a vast number of books in the library of Alamut also testifies the notion that there were intellectual activities conducted within the walls of the castle. What they were in their entirety is unfortunately a question whose answer we are not likely to ever find.

Thus, to answer the opening question – "Who were the *Hashshāshīn*?" – in a nutshell, it can be said that they were Nizari Isma'ilis who resided on hilltop castles through Syria and Iran from the 11<sup>th</sup> to 13<sup>th</sup> centuries AD. Their claim to fame is the assassinations they committed during the said period, and although their intellectual works must have been substantial, most of them are inaccessible to people today because they were lost when Hulagu Khan sacked and burnt the *Hashshāshīn*'s castles in the 1250s.

## Chapter 2: Hassan bin Sabbah: Early Days and Time in Egypt

*“It was under such circumstances that in al-Mustansir’s succession dispute, Hasan upheld the cause of Nizar and severed his relations with the Fatimid regime and the da’wa headquarters in Cairo which had lent their support to al-Musta’li. By this decision, Hasan Sabbah had, in fact, founded the independent Nizari da’wa on behalf of the Nizari imam who then was inaccessible.”*

- Farhad Daftary, *A Short History of the Ismailis*<sup>52</sup>

Hassan bin Sabbah, variously also called Hasan Sabbah (as in the above-given excerpt) and Hassan-i-Sabbah, was the founder of the *Ḥashshāshīn*. The most extensive and exclusive biographical account of his life, the *Sarguzasht-i-Sayyinda*, mentioned in the previous chapter, is unfortunately not available to modern researchers. However, an indirect source for this work is Ata Malik Juvaini’s *Tarikh-i-Jahangusha* since it contains a chapter that was, according to the author, constructed out of the *Sarguzasht*, itself<sup>53</sup>.



**FIGURE 2.1** “His father came from the Yemen to Kufa, then from Kufa to Qom and from Qom to Ray.” The path of Hassan bin Sabbah’s father as described by Juvaini. (Image courtesy Google Maps)

<sup>52</sup> Daftary, *A Short History of the Ismailis*, 120.

<sup>53</sup> Juvaini, *ibid.*, 666.

## Roots and Conversion to Isma'ilism

Juvaini states that Hassan bin Sabbah's name – in its entirety – was, "Hasan, son of 'Ali, son of Muhammad, son of Ja'far, son of Husain, son of Muhammad, [son of] Sabbah the Himyari"<sup>54</sup> – therefore, he belonged to the "Himyar tribe"<sup>55</sup>. His father, he states, was from Yemen, who later moved to Kufa, then to Qum then to Rey where Hassan was born<sup>56</sup>. Farhad Daftary differs slightly stating that Hassan was born in Qum and it was after his birth that his family moved to Rey<sup>57</sup>. Daftary further mentions that he was born in the AD 1050s<sup>58</sup>. Both Juvaini and Daftary concur that ibn-e-Sabbah was born into a Twelver (or Imami) Shi'ite family, and that he converted to Isma'ilism later under the influence of Amira Zarrab/Darrab<sup>5960</sup>. Juvaini even quotes Hassan to state:

'I followed the religion of my fathers, that is Twelver Shi'ism.

There was a person in Ray called Amira Zarrab who held the beliefs of the Batinis of Egypt. We constantly disputed with each other and he tried to destroy my beliefs. I did not give in to him but his words took root in my heart. Meanwhile I was overcome with a very dreadful illness and I thought to myself: "That is the true religion and because of my fanaticism I would not admit it. If, which Heaven forbid, my appointed hour should come, I shall have perished without attaining the truth." It so happened that I recovered from that illness.'<sup>61</sup>

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<sup>54</sup> Juvaini, *ibid.*, 667.

<sup>55</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>56</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>57</sup> Farhad Daftary, *Ismailis in Medieval Muslim Societies*, (London: I.B. Tauris), 2005, 127.

<sup>58</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>59</sup> *ibid.* 127-128

<sup>60</sup> Juvaini, *ibid.*, 667.

<sup>61</sup> *Ibid.*

Although the cause for the conversion described in the account attributed by Juvaini to Hassan bin Sabbah is a little vague, however, if Juvaini didn't tamper with his words, thus was the story of his conversion from Twelver Shi'ism to Isma'ilism. Daftary adds that Hassan's age at this time was around seventeen<sup>62</sup>. Hassan continues – as related by Juvaini – that he gained further knowledge about Ismai'ilism from Bu-Najm Sarraj, after which he became aware of its “hidden secrets”<sup>63</sup>. Another person called Mu'min took Hassan's oath of allegiance to Imam al-Mustansir, the Fatimid Caliph-Imam, after much effective persuasion<sup>64</sup>. Thence, according to his own account, Hassan bin Sabbah became a Batini.

### **Joseph Hammer-Purgstall's Account**

Joseph Hammer-Purgstall, however, has different opinions. In his 19<sup>th</sup> century “defining” history of the *Ḥashshāshīn* called *Histoire de l'Ordre des assassins*, “The History of the Assassins” – translated into the English Language by Oswald Charles Wood – Hammer-Purgstall has given different sketch of Hassan's family roots. He states:

Hassan Sabah, or Hassan-ben-Sabah, [...] pretended that his father had gone from Kufa to Kum, and from Kum to Rei. This allegation met, however, with considerable contradiction from the natives of Khorassan, particularly those of Tus, who unanimously

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<sup>62</sup> Daftary, *Ismailis in Medieval Muslim Societies*, 128.

<sup>63</sup> Juvaini, *ibid.*, 668.

<sup>64</sup> *Ibid.*

asserted that his ancestors had constantly dwelt in the villages of that province.<sup>65</sup>

It cannot be said where Hammer-Purgstall gets the latter information from, since it was not provided in Hassan's account cited by Juvaini, nor does he mention the source of his information in his book. This lack of reference renders his version of Hassan's background extremely weak. Furthermore, Hammer-Purgstall also goes on to state that Hassan was sent by his father to study under a certain Mowafek Nishaburi, whose name isn't mentioned in Hassan's own account either, nor is the reference of information, again, mentioned by the author. Thus, until this information is verified by any primary source, Hammer-Purgstall's "opinion" of Hassan bin Sabbah's roots is hereby discarded.

## **Time in Egypt**

Meanwhile, Hassan bin Sabbah's own account in *Tarikh-i-Jahangusha* continues. He states that when Abd-al Malik bin Attash, the Isma'ili *da'i* in Iraq – or the chief *da'i* of Persia according to Farhad Daftary<sup>66</sup> – came to Rey in AD 1071-2/464 AH, he succeeded in meeting him. As a result of this meeting, it seems, ibn Attash subsequently made Hassan deputy *da'i* and suggested him to go to Egypt to meet the Caliph-Imam, al-Mustansir. Hassan complied and left for Egypt, crossing Isfahan in AD 1076-7/469 AH and reaching Egypt in AD 1078-9/471 AH<sup>67</sup>. He reflects upon his time in Egypt in the following words:

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<sup>65</sup> Hammer-Purgstall, *ibid.*, 42.

<sup>66</sup> Daftary, *ibid.*, 126.

<sup>67</sup> Juvaini, *ibid.*, 668.



‘I stayed there nearly a year and a half, and during my stay, though I was not admitted before Mustansir, he knew of me and several times spoke in praise of me. Now Amir-al-Juyush [the vizier, Badr-al-Jamali], his Commander-in-Chief, who was an absolute and all-powerful ruler, was the father-in-law of his younger son, Musta’li, whom by a second designation he had made his heir. Now I, in accordance with the principles of my religion, conducted propaganda on behalf of Nizar. On this account Amir-al-Juyush was ill-disposed towards me and girded himself to attack me so that they were compelled to send me by ship to Maghrib with a party of Franks.’<sup>68</sup>

Thus, to say the least, Hassan bin Sabbah was an unwelcomed guest in the Fatimid capital, not due to the Caliph-Imam’s disapproval, but because of his powerful vizier’s displeasure. The fact that he was not even allowed to meet the Caliph – which was one of the main tasks he had to achieve in Egypt – is a strong indicator of the Fatimid bureaucracy’s lack of favour for him. Further, due to his open support for Nizar, Hassan made his position in Egypt even weaker and was, finally, insultingly ousted out.

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<sup>68</sup> Ibid.

## **Lessons Learnt in Egypt and their Influence upon the Formation of the *Hashshāshīn***

When he was setting out for Egypt, Hassan bin Sabbah was looking to gain further knowledge about his new religion, Isma'ilism. However, what he actually gained from his time in Egypt was, perhaps, a lesson in religious politics. Farhad Daftary describes this well when he writes:

Hasan seems to have learnt important lessons in Egypt, which he took into account when developing a revolutionary strategy. By that time, the Persian Ismailis were aware of the declining fortunes of the Fatimid regime. The shrewd Hasan had witnessed the difficult situation of the caliph-imam at the very centre of the Fatimid state. He must have readily realised that the Fatimid regime, then under the effective control of Badr, lacked both the means and the resolve to assist the Persian Ismailis in their struggle against the Saljuqs, who were the major military power in the Near East. It was in recognition of such realities that Hasan Sabbah eventually charted an independent course of action.<sup>69</sup>

What Daftary fails to mention, however, is how indignantly Hassan bin Sabbah was treated while he was a “guest” of the Fatimid Caliph. Not only was ibn-e-Sabbah disappointed in the Caliphate’s digression from what he believed to be the right method

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<sup>69</sup> Ibid., 123-124

of succession according to his religion, but possible also felt insulted by the treatment he met with at the hands of the vizier, Badr-al-Jamali. Having said that, the more deep-rooted effect of this experience must have been caused by the unfair treatment that the vizier meted out to Nizar, the eldest son of al-Mustansir, due to his undue favour for the younger, al-Musta'li. According to the rules of Imamate primogeniture, Nizar was the rightful successor of al-Mustansir. Badr-al-Jamali, on the other hand, supported al-Musta'li even while his father was alive. Later, in AD 1094, when al-Mustansir passed away, it was through the support of Badr-al-Jamali's son, al-Afdal Shahanshah, who was the vizier of the time, that al-Musta'li was placed upon the throne. Stanley Lane-Poole believes that the reason behind the favour for al-Musta'li over Nizar was because Nizar had aged – he was fifty – while al-Musta'li was young thus “more amenable to management than a mature man”<sup>70</sup>. If Hassan bin Sabbah's own account is to be believed, the reason behind Badr-al-Jamali's – and subsequently al-Afdal's – favour for al-Musta'li was the fact that he was his relative. Thus, he preferred nepotism over what his religion taught to be the right method of succession. For a man like Hassan – a freshly converted and, hence, likely more emotionally volatile Isma'ili – this must have meant blasphemy. And to see the Fatimid Caliphate in this “blasphemous” state must have lifted all his hopes from its rulers as well as its bureaucracy. His opinion was perhaps justified, too, given the Fatimid Caliphate's quick journey downhill after the Nizari-Musta'li schism in 1095 AD – the Caliphate fell merely a hundred years after Hassan's departure from Egypt.

But it was long before the fall of the Fatimids and a few years even before the succession of al-Mustali in AD 1094 that Hassan bin Sabbah had already put together the Order of

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<sup>70</sup> Stanley Lane-Poole, *A History of Egypt in the Middle Ages*, (New York: Charles Scribner's Son), 1901, 162.

the Assassins – that, too, after decades of work. The fact that he immediately set to work after reaching Persia shows how sure he was about the hopelessness of the situation in Egypt, and how little the Fatimids looked like supporting the Persian Isma'ilis against the Sunni Seljuks<sup>71</sup> who, at the time, reigned supreme in Persia, Iraq, Syria and as far as modern-day Turkey. Thus, Hassan probably felt that there was no sense left in looking for “foreign” support; that the only sensible line of action was to form an organization on his own to safeguard the interest of the Isma'ilis of Persia.

It is, thus, evident that the time that Hassan bin Sabbah spent in Egypt had a very profound impact on him, and on the formation of the *Hashshāshīn*. Had the Fatimids been more welcoming of Hassan and looked likely to support him and his cause in Persia, he would more easily have settled for foreign support instead of taking an independent course, himself. This, especially since his community in Persia was severely outnumbered by the Seljuks, who were hostile towards the Isma'ilis. It was the sting of disappointment suffered by him in Egypt that was strong enough to propel him into immediate, independent action as soon as he returned home – the driving force that made him take matters into his own hands.

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<sup>71</sup> Another possible reason presented by scholars for Hassan's formation of the *Hashshāshīn* is his Persian patriotism – and the impression that the “Arabs” of Egypt were in no mood to help out the Persians against the Seljuk Turks. This reason could have its validity but no proof of Persian patriotism is seen in Hassan's own account. He even traces his own descent to Yemen, making himself an ethnic Arab.

## Chapter 3: Capture of Alamut and the Formal Formation of the Order

*“At any rate, it was in the very heart of the Iranian world, in the medieval region of Daylam in northern Persia, that Nizari Ismailis first appeared on the historical stage, while the activities of the Persian Ismailis antedated the Nizari-Musta’li schism 487/1094.”*

- Farhad Daftary, *Ismailis in Medieval Muslim Societies*<sup>72</sup>

### After the Expulsion from Egypt

When the Fatimids deported Hassan bin Sabbah from Egypt on a Frankish vessel with the intention of shipping him off to the Maghreb<sup>73</sup> they might have expected to see or hear no more of him. However, luck saw to it that the vessel that Ibn-e-Sabbah had boarded swayed off in the direction opposite to the intended one. Hassan relates and Juvaini quotes in the following words:

‘The sea was rough and drove the ship towards Syria, where a miracle (*vaqi’a*) happened to me. From thence, I went to Aleppo, from whence, by way of Baghdad and Khuzistan, I arrived in Isfahan in Zul-Hijja of the year 473 [May-June, 1081].’<sup>74</sup>

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<sup>72</sup> Farhad Daftary, ed., *Ismailis in Medieval Muslim Societies*, (London: I. B. Tauris), 2005, 124.

<sup>73</sup> North-Western Africa

<sup>74</sup> Juvaini, *Tarikh-e-Jahangusha*, Vol.1, 669.

It cannot be said how long it took Hassan to reach Isfahan from Cairo, but a year could be a rough estimate since he reached Egypt at some point in 1078-9 AD and stayed there for a year and a half, which would make it approximately the mid of 1080 AD when he was shipped off from the Fatimid capital. And since he reached Isfahan in May-June 1081 AD, the entire journey took approximately one year.



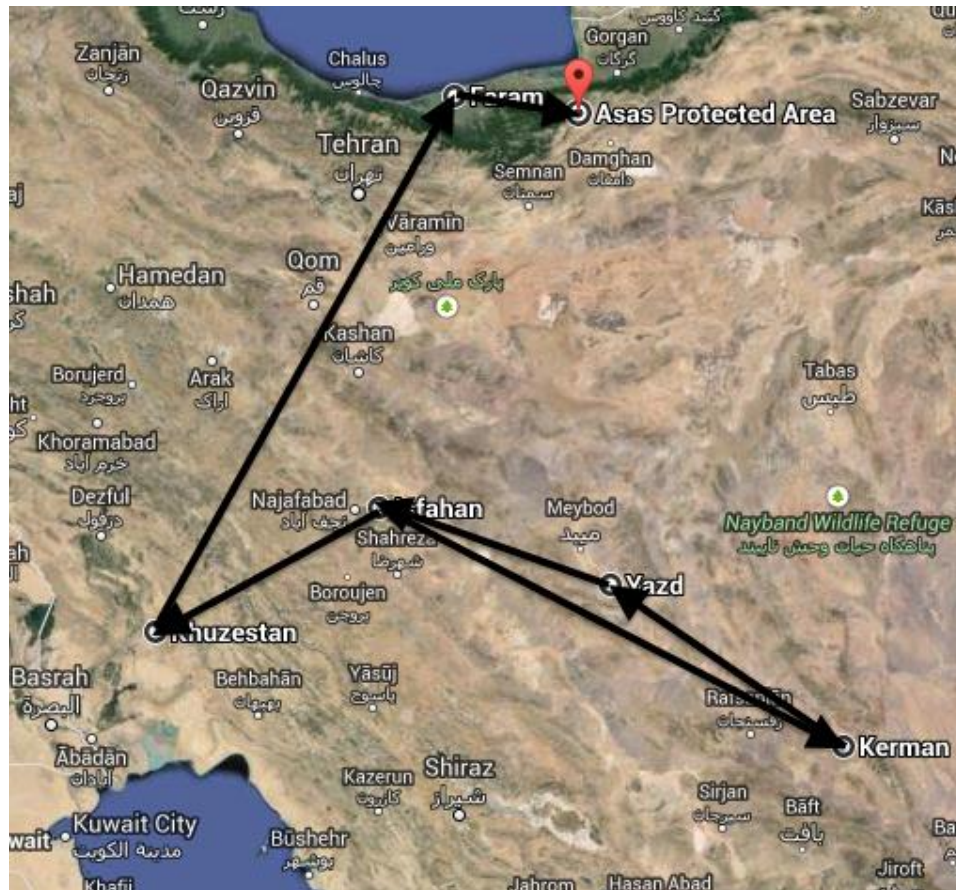
**FIGURE 3.1** ‘The sea was rough and drove the ship towards Syria, where a miracle (*vaqi’a*) happened to me. From thence, I went to Aleppo, from whence, by way of Baghdad and Khuzistan, I arrived in Isfahan in Zul-Hijja of the year 473 [May-June, 1081].’ Hassan bin Sabbah’s route drawn on a modern map. (Image courtesy Google Maps)

## Pre-Alamut days of Propaganda and Travel in Persia 1081 – 1090 AD

Once back to Isfahan, Hassan bin Sabbah traveled all over Persia in order to propagate his faith:

‘I arrived in Isfahan in Zul-Hijja of the year 473 [May-June, 1081]. From thence I proceeded to Kerman and Yezd and conducted propaganda there for a while. Then I returned to Isfahan and went to Khuzistan for the second time and from thence, by way to the desert, to Firrim and Shahryar-Kuh.’<sup>75</sup>

<sup>75</sup> Juvaini, *ibid.*, 669.



**FIGURE 3.2** 'I arrived in Isfahan in Zul-Hijja of the year 473 [May-June, 1081]. From thence I proceeded to Kerman and Yezd and conducted propaganda there for a while. Then I returned to Isfahan and went to Khuzistan for the second time and from thence, by way to the desert, to Firrim and Shahryar-Kuh.' Hassan bin Sabbah's propaganda route in Persia. (Shahryar Kuh is now known as Hezarjarib mountains, indicated on the map by Asas Protected Area. It is also possible that the Firrim mentioned could have been in the same area.) (Image courtesy Google Maps)

Here, in the region of Damghan, Hassan states, he stayed for the next three years, all the while conducting propaganda:

'I remained three years in Damghan, from whence I sent da'is to Andij-Rud and the other districts of Alamut to convert the

people. And I went to Jurjan, Tarz, Sarhadd and Chinashk and returned from thence.’<sup>76</sup>



**FIGURE 3.3** ‘I remained three years in Damghan, from whence I sent da’is to Andij-Rud and the other districts of Alamut to convert the people. And I went to Jurjan, Tarz, Sarhadd and Chinashk and returned from thence.’ The map shows modern names of some of the cities visited by Hassan bin Sabbah during his time in Damghan (the village of Sarhadd is located near Shirvan in North Khurasan). The black lines show Hassan’s own displacement, while the dotted line shows where he sent his *da’is* for propaganda. (Image courtesy Google Maps)

## Opposition by Nizam-al-Mulk

Nizam-al-Mulk Tusi, the famous and powerful vizier who served the Seljuk sultans, Alp Arslan and Malik Shah, has been incorrectly linked to Hassan bin Sabbah as a schoolfellow by virtue of one Edward FitzGerald’s *Rubaiyat of Omer Khayyam*. FitzGerald emphatically relates a story reportedly told by Nizam-ul-Mulk about the “Three Schoolfellows” – Nizam, Omar Khayyam and Hassan bin Sabbah. This story was extracted by FitzGerald out of from Mir-Khvand’s History of the Assassins as recounted in Calcutta Review, No. 59<sup>77</sup>. The story states that the three of them were schoolfellows who had decided that whoever of the three gained a position of importance later in life, would accommodate the other two, as well. The fortunate one happened to be Nizam-al-Mulk, who became the vizier of the Seljuk sultanate, and due to his “generosity” kept his word and granted each of his friends, positions in the

<sup>76</sup> Ibid.

<sup>77</sup> Omar Khayyam, *Rubaiyat of Omar Khayyam, the Astronomer-Poet of Persia*, (London: Bernard Quaritch), 1859, 2.



government. However, Hassan tried to overthrow his friend and in doing so was disgraced and disowned<sup>78</sup>. This tale created by Mir-Khvand is quite remarkable – in the worst ways – since Nizam-al-Mulk and Hassan bin Sabbah were born at least thirty years apart. Hassan, as has already been stated was born in AD 1050 while Nizam-ul-Mulk was born somewhere between AD 1018 and AD 1020<sup>79</sup>. So unless Nizam-ul-Mulk was still at school when he was over forty, Mir-Khvand's narrative has no truth in it.

However, Nizam-al-Mulk, it seems – and as is logical, since he was the serving vizier of Seljuk Sultan Malik Shah – *was* quite antagonistic of Hassan bin Sabbah, as indicated by the following passage from Hassan's account:

‘Nizam-al-Mulk had charged Bu-Muslim Razi to lay lands (*sic* hands?) on me and he was making great efforts to find me. I could not therefore go to Ray although I wished to proceed to Dailaman, whither I had sent *da'is*. Accordingly I went to Sari from whence I reached Qazvin by way of Dunbavand and Khuvar of Ray; and so avoided Ray itself.’<sup>80</sup>

With the possibility of an acquaintance of the two in their youth rejected, it can be said that the above-mentioned efforts of the vizier of the Sultanate were clearly not generated by personal animosity, or due to a possible history that he shared with ibn-e-Sabbah, but out of a sheer sense of danger. Being the cunning and powerful vizier that

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<sup>78</sup> Ibid., iv-v.

<sup>79</sup> Nizam al-Mulk, tr. Hubert Darke, *The Book of Government or Rules for Kings*, (New York: Routledge), 2002, ix.

<sup>80</sup> Juvaini, *ibid.*, 669.

he was, he certainly kept a sharp eye on Hassan and his religious activities, which were deemed heretical by the Sunni Seljuks. Furthermore, having observed his vast travels across Persia, it seems that the vizier wished to contain or arrest Hassan as soon as possible, which is why he had sent a man after him. It was in order to avoid being caught by this man, that Hassan had to take a long route to Alamut by avoiding Ray (now Shahr-e-Ray), where it seems Bu-Muslim Razi was stationed. The path is indicated on the map below.



**FIGURE 3.4** 'I could not therefore go to Ray although I wished to proceed to Dailaman, whither I had sent *da'is*. Accordingly I went to Sari from whence I reached Qazvin by way of Dunbavand and Khuvar of Ray; and so avoided Ray itself.' The route that Hassan wished to take is shown by the dotted lines, and the one he did eventually take is shown by the unbroken ones. (Image courtesy Google Maps)

Once in Qazvin, Hassan bin Sabbah states that he sent a *da'i* to Alamut<sup>81</sup>, which is not very far from Qazvin. Alamut – which is a form of “alah amut” meaning the “eagle’s nest” – was in the hands of an ‘Alid named Mahdi, allotted to him as a fief by Seljuk sultan, Malik Shah<sup>82</sup>. The *da'i* succeeded in converting some of the occupants of

<sup>81</sup> Ibid.

<sup>82</sup> Ibid.

Alamut, but failed to convert Mahdi, who turned all the converts out of the castle but later accepted them back<sup>83</sup>.

### **Hassan bin Sabbah's Infiltration of Alamut**

“From Qazvin I went to Dailaman, then to the district of Ashkavar and then to Andij-Rud, which is adjacent to Alamut; and here I remained for some time,”<sup>84</sup> writes Hassan bin Sabbah. Most of these towns are not locatable on the modern map, but it is easy to imagine that they must lie in the whereabouts of Alamut Castle, in the-then province of Daylam and at the northern tip of the modern-day province of Qazvin. Juvaini relates that Hassan's “extreme asceticism” attracted many converts in the said region, and it was finally on the 4<sup>th</sup> of September, AD 1090/6<sup>th</sup> of Rajab, 483 AH that he was smuggled into the castle, under the pseudonym of Dihkhuda<sup>85</sup>. Although Juvaini does not mention it in his book, Farhad Daftary adds that Hassan pretended to be a teacher who had come to the castle to teach the children of its garrison<sup>86</sup>.

The role of the owner of the fiefdom, the ‘Alid Mahdi, is portrayed as a very feeble one by Juvaini. He states that when the ‘Alid found out about Hassan's presence in the castle, he was completely helpless against the situation, and *he* was permitted by Hassan to leave the castle, instead of the other way round<sup>87</sup>. This shows how great a hold Hassan had already established by converting the inhabitants of the castle. Furthermore, he had also succeeded in converting the *ra'is* – or the head – of the town<sup>88</sup> named

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<sup>83</sup> Ibid., 670.

<sup>84</sup> Ibid.

<sup>85</sup> Ibid.

<sup>86</sup> Daftary, *A Short History of the Ismailis*, 124.

<sup>87</sup> Juvaini, *ibid.*, 670.

<sup>88</sup> Ata Malik Juvaini, tr. John Andrew Boyle, *The History of the World-Conqueror*, Vol. I, (Cambridge: Harvard University Press), 1958, 112.

Muzaffar Mustaufi<sup>89</sup>. Hassan asked this *ra'is* to purchase Alamut from the 'Alid. The text of his letter as described by Juvaini, was:

‘The *ra'is* MZ (*may God preserve him!*) is to pay 3,000 dinars, the price of Alamut, to the 'Alid Mahdi. *Blessings upon the Elect Prophet and his family! “Our sufficiency is God, and He is an excellent protector.”*<sup>90</sup>

The extraction of the payment did not prove to be a challenge at all for Mahdi: when he approached Muzaffar Mustaufi with Hassan's note, the former kissed the writing once and immediately afterwards paid him the required sum<sup>91</sup>. Clearly, Mustaufi held Hassan bin Sabbah in extremely high respect – something that earned the latter the greatest stronghold he could wish for.

### **Importance of Picking Alamut as a Stronghold**

As is visible in the satellite image of Alamut Castle today (Figure 3.5), the ruins lie perched upon a hilltop with very steep sides in Iran's Alborz range. Hilltop castles are excellent defensive architecture since the hill's steep sides provide natural defense to the building from invading armies. This is primarily why Alamut Castle was a very good choice – if Hassan bin Sabbah had any – to serve as the primary stronghold for the *Hashshāshīn*.

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<sup>89</sup> Juvaini, *ibid.*, Vol. II, 670.

<sup>90</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>91</sup> *Ibid.*, 671.



**FIGURE 3.5** Alamut Castle today, (Image courtesy Google Maps)

The locational genius in making Alamut a stronghold was recognized by Peter Willey in his book *The Eagle's Nest*. He states:

The isolation of the Alamut Valley was, in effect, the principal reason why Hasan Sabbah decided to establish his powerbase here and was able to maintain it for so long against any attack. Although a mere 120 km from Tehran and 40 km from Qazvin, the region was only accessible by mule-track until very recently.<sup>92</sup>

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<sup>92</sup> Peter Willey, *The Eagle's Nest: Ismaili Castles in Iran and Syria*, (London: I.B. Tauris & Co Ltd), 2005, 103.

It was this strategic positioning and inaccessibility of the castle that shielded it against military attacks and helped the *Hashshāshīn* survive in the sea of territory governed by the Seljuks, who had remarkable military strength. Thus, as the first stronghold of a young group, it provided as much security as ibn-e-Sabbah could have hoped for. Here lay the foundation stone of what was to become one of the most feared underground groups of assassins in the Middle Ages.

### **The Doctrine of Hassan bin Sabbah**

Hassan bin Sabbah's teachings were a very pivotal part of his movement. It was his intellectual and spiritual strength, and not his political power or economic status, that earned him followers around Persia without his being a king or priest or even an Imam. And it was solely because of his teachings that he made his way into Alamut with as much ease as he did, having converted most of the castle's own population, as well as the most powerful man in town, Muzaffar Mustaufi, beforehand. The kind of respect and reverence that he inspired was evident from Mustaufi's treatment of his note: kissing the writing before handing the 'Alid Mahdi the sum mentioned on it. The fact that he paid the large amount of gold without showing any hesitation is also no mean proof of the high status Mustaufi granted to Hassan bin Sabbah. Thus, keeping the influence of his teachings in view, it is important to find out what Hassan's doctrine really was.

Farhad Daftary writes in *The Ismailis: Their History and Doctrines* that early Nizari Isma'ilism was heavily dependent upon the doctrine of *ta'lim*<sup>93</sup> – the school of thought stressing upon the teachings and role of the Imam. The doctrine, reportedly developed

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<sup>93</sup> Daftary, *The Isma'ilis: Their History and Doctrines*, 342.

by Hassan bin Sabbah himself<sup>94</sup>, instructed believers of Nizari Isma'ilism to look to their Imam for all kinds of religious guidance. In the absence of an Imam, they were to seek guidance from the *hujja*<sup>95</sup> or *hojjat*, which literally means “proof or argument”<sup>96</sup>. In this case, the word is used for the man who presents – or becomes – the “proof of God” to people<sup>97</sup>. Hassan bin Sabbah, himself, according to Daftary, was a *hujja* who served the purpose of enlightening his people in the absence of an Imam<sup>98</sup>.

Ata Malik Juvaini sheds more light on Hassan's teachings, when he writes that ibn-e-Sabbah would “admit nothing but teaching and learning (*ta'līm va ta'ullum*)”<sup>99</sup>. He goes on to explain that Hassan rejected the power of reason as insufficient in gaining knowledge of God, since if reason was enough, he believed, there would have been no argument on the topic among different sects<sup>100</sup>. He argued that the presence of the Imam was essential in gaining religious guidance, whether on its own, or in addition to reason (*nazar-i- 'aql*)<sup>101</sup>. He also attempted to refute the claim of those who advocated the sufficiency of reason in gaining the knowledge of God, and in doing so, attempted to refute their entire belief (*mazhab*) altogether<sup>102</sup>. And, finally, to place himself in an advantageous position, he stated: ““I have proved [the necessity for] instruction and since there is no other than I who speaks for instruction, therefore the determination of the instruction is by my words.””<sup>103</sup> In other words, this meant Hassan bin Sabbah was to be the chief instructor of the new faith of Nizari Isma'ilism, and was to be revered

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<sup>94</sup> Ibid.

<sup>95</sup> Ibid.

<sup>96</sup> <http://www.iranicaonline.org/articles/hojjat>

<sup>97</sup> Ibid.

<sup>98</sup> Daftary, *ibid.*

<sup>99</sup> Juvaini, *ibid.*, 671.

<sup>100</sup> Ibid.

<sup>101</sup> Ibid., 672.

<sup>102</sup> Ibid.

<sup>103</sup> Ibid., 673.

as such. It is, then, understandable that his followers held him in such high esteem. However, since Juvaini was strictly against Hassan bin Sabbah and his teachings, it is possible that the said sentence never came out of Hassan's mouth. Either way, Hassan bin Sabbah advocated the importance of the teacher in gaining the knowledge of God – and possibly other religious matters – and it is only natural that the one who came up with the thought was granted the status of its foremost teacher. This teacher, however, was no ordinary teacher – he was one who managed to inspire dangerous levels of loyalty in his disciples.



## Chapter 4: Expansion: the Strongholds of the *Hashshāshīn* in Iran and Syria and their Architectural Features

*“Hasan exerted every effort to capture the places adjacent to Alamut or in that vicinity. Where possible he won them over by the tricks of his propaganda while such places as were unaffected by his blandishments he seized with slaughter, ravishment, pillage, bloodshed and war. He took such castles as he could and wherever he found a suitable rock he built a castle upon it.”*

- Ata Malik Juvaini, *Tarikh-i-Jahangusha*<sup>104</sup>

### Alamut Castle

Before delving into the details of the Order’s expansion to other castles, it is important to present an analysis of the castle of Alamut itself since it was the primary stronghold of the Order for over one-and-a-half centuries, at a stretch. It was truly *the* impregnable fort that sheltered Hassan bin Sabbah’s followers, along with their faith – the fort that enabled a handful of Nizaris to survive in a sea of adversaries.

As mentioned in the last chapter, Alamut’s geographical location hilly, steep surroundings strengthened the castle’s defenses naturally, by rendering it inaccessible for most attacking armies. A truer picture of the geographical surroundings of Alamut can be imagined by reading Lieutenant Colonel Justus Shiel’s traveling account of the region as published in *The Journal of the Royal Geographical Society of London*. Lieut. Col. Shiel traveled the valley in May, 1837<sup>105</sup>. Details given in the account that are irrelevant to the subject under discussion would be left out, therefore it should suffice

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<sup>104</sup> Juvaini, *ibid.*, 673-674.

<sup>105</sup> *The Journal of the Royal Geographical Society of London*, Vol. 8 (London: John Murray), 1838, 430.

to state that Lieut. Col. Shiel's journey began in Tehran, and, after following the Alborz range and Shah-Rūd River for some miles, Shiel and his party reached the region of Alamut by May 23, 1837. The first village they arrived at in the-then district was that of "Yerek"<sup>106</sup> which is not locatable on the modern map, probably because its name has changed or Shiel heavily Anglicized it, as in the case of Gazorkhan, the next village that the British party arrived at in Rudbar Alamut. Lieut. Col. Shiel spells it as "Gaser Khání"<sup>107</sup>. It could be that Gazorkhan is the very village later to be attacked repeatedly by Malik-Shah's emirs. The village, today, viewed through satellite is shown in Figure 4.1.



**FIGURE 4.1** Village of Gazorkhan at the foot of the rock of Alamut (Image courtesy Google Maps)

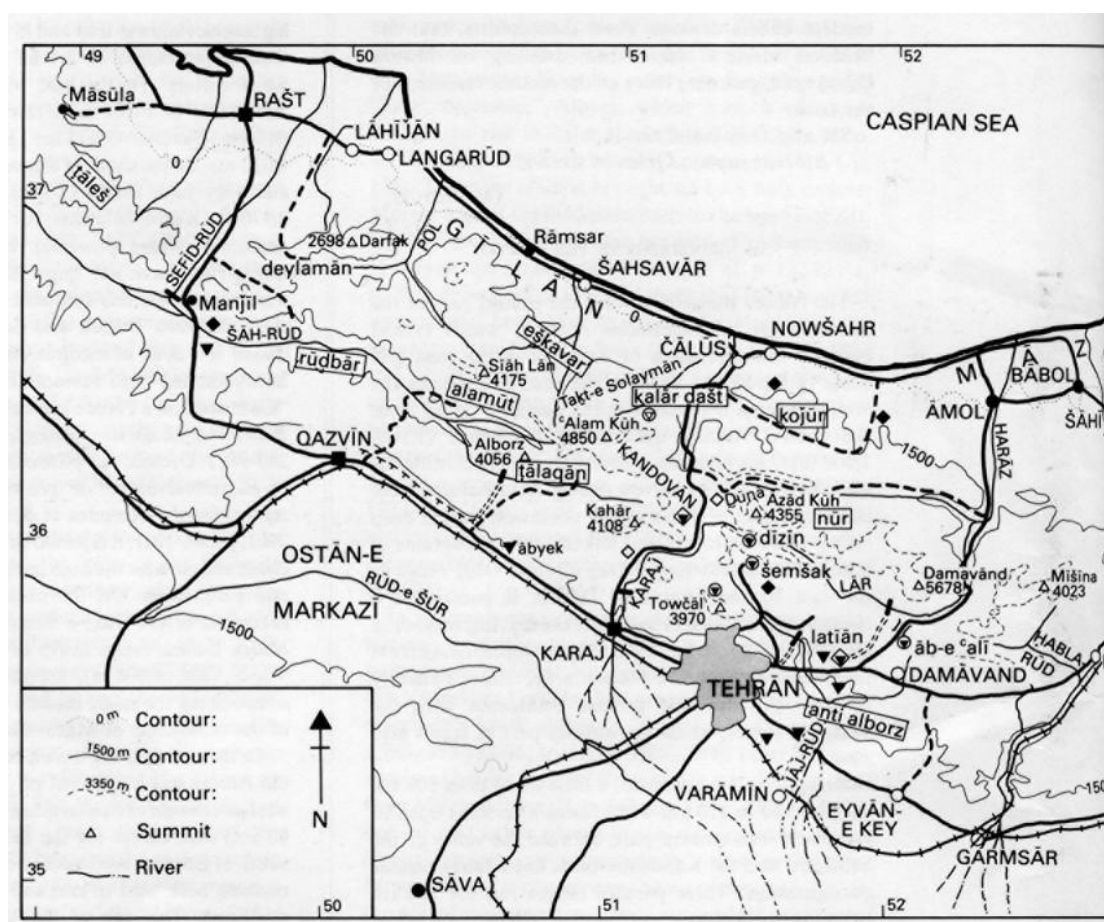
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<sup>106</sup> Ibid., 431.

<sup>107</sup> Ibid.

## Topography of Alamut's Surroundings

Scholars generally concur that Alamut valley and its hilly surroundings were the first shield that Alamut Castle had against its attackers. Peter Willey attributes<sup>108</sup> the isolation of the Alamut valley primarily to the lack of development and poverty that has historically prevailed in Rudbar Alamut, which in turn is due to the topography of the region. He further elaborates by stating that “[T]he most striking feature (*sic.*) of the Alborz is the steepness of the slopes”<sup>109</sup> caused by the sharp rise and fall in the mountains’ altitude, especially around Rudbar Alamut. Figure 4.2 shows a map of the Alborz range in the said region:

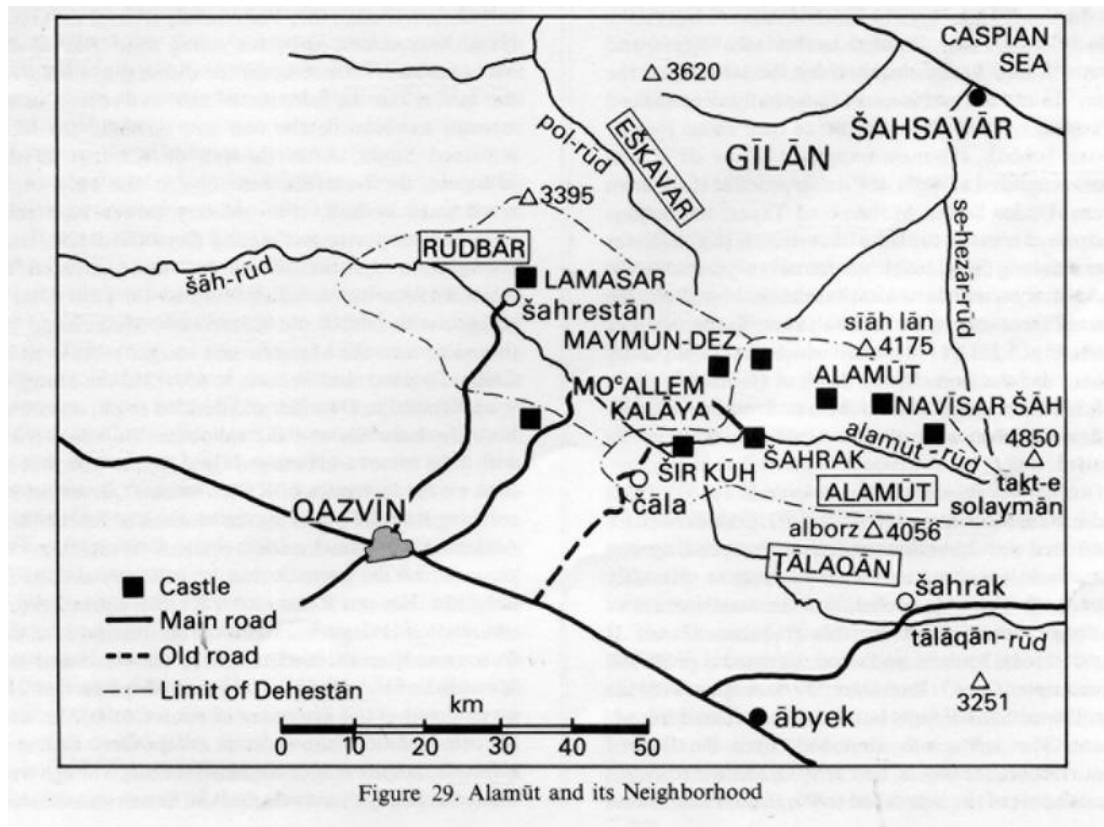


**FIGURE 4.2** Map of Alborz Mountains courtesy Encyclopaedia Iranica (IranicaOnline.Org)

<sup>108</sup> Willey, 104-105.

<sup>109</sup> Ibid., 105.

Wiley states that the strip of Alborz around the Alamut region is a mere 80 km wide, yet peaks frequently reach 3,050 meters in height<sup>110</sup>. A closer map of the Alamut Valley is given in Figure 4.3.



**FIGURE 4.3** Map of Alamut Valley courtesy Encyclopedia Iranica (IranicaOnline.org)

As indicated by the legend, the black squares on the map mark the location of the Assassins' castles. If the map is to be trusted, Alamut castle is surrounded on three sides by peaks of more than 4000 meters in height. The three peaks must have shielded the castle from attacks by making the terrain extremely difficult for attackers to master. At the only remaining opening – the west – the village of Gazor Khan is located, which ultimately suffered the most damage caused by the attacks waged by Alamut's

<sup>110</sup> Wiley, *ibid.*, 104.

aggressors. However, being protected from three sides made Alamut's occupants' defensive duties much easier by giving them only one side to defend. The defence of the fourth side, too, was made a lot easier by the altitude of the rock on which Alamut Castle stood perched upon – which brings us to the next defensive feature of the castle.

### **The Rock of Alamut**

The rock of Alamut, as already stated, added immensely to the defenses of the castle. Lieut. Col. Shiel describes the massive rock as follows:

The rock of Alamut stands alone; it is about two miles north of the village of Gaser Khání. The ridge is about 300 yards in length from east to west, and very narrow, not 20 yards at the top. The height is about 200 feet on all sides excepting the west, where it may be 100. It is a bare naked rock, exceedingly steep.<sup>111</sup>

Since the direction of the rock from Gazorkhan mentioned by the Lieutenant Colonel is wrong – the rock is not to the north of the village but to its northeast, if not the pure east, as shown in Figure 4.1 – the easts and wests mentioned in the excerpt are thrown into doubt. Nevertheless, the image of a triangular protruding rock is fairly evident from Shiel's verbal sketch. The National Geographic Magazine defines the projecting piece as a "rock pinnacle"<sup>112</sup>, and presents the following image to illustrate it:

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<sup>111</sup> *The Journal of the Royal Geographical Society of London*, 431.

<sup>112</sup> [http://ngm.typepad.com/blog\\_central/2008/08/irans-castle-of-the-assassins.html](http://ngm.typepad.com/blog_central/2008/08/irans-castle-of-the-assassins.html)





**FIGURE 4.4** The rock of Alamut (Image courtesy NGM.com)

While Shiel estimates the rock to be 200 feet high, Peter Willey states that it lies 185 meters above the level of Shotorkhan village<sup>113</sup>, which is located quite a distance south of Alamut Castle. Willey further states that the rock lies in a northwest to southeast direction, is “140 meters long” and between 40 and 9 meters wide, the latter being at the top of the rock<sup>114</sup>.

The height of the rock provided another addition to the defensive strength of the castle of Alamut. Any army that could have managed to reach the foot of the rock would have had to clamber 185 meters or so upward a narrow and steep rock before reaching the castle, itself. The placement of the foot – which lay on the castle’s western end – however, would have been a weak link had the village of Gazorkhan not provided a natural shield to it. Couple this with the fact that the inhabitants of Gazorkhan were Hassan bin Sabbah’s own followers, and the weak link becomes another one of Alamut’s defensive strengths.

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<sup>113</sup> Willey, *ibid.*, 107.

<sup>114</sup> *Ibid.*, 108.

## The Castle of Alamut

This brings us to the last defensive feature of Alamut: the castle, itself. Peter Willey described the entire fortification in thorough detail in his 1963 book, *The Castles of the Assassins*. It is important to note that the castle might not be in the same state today as described in Willey's book, and that the entire details of the fortification cannot be reproduced in this short analysis.

The boundaries of the castle begin at the rock's northwestern side somewhere near its top<sup>115</sup>. The first feature of the castle is a "tongue" of barren land, 150 feet in length and 30 feet in breadth. Willey states that this patch, although fortified at the brim, does not look like it was used as a living space since it doesn't have any remnants of internal walls. An important feature of this space is the water cisterns that had been caved out of the rock on the tongue's western end as well as on the southwestern face of the rock<sup>116</sup>. These cisterns somewhat explain the castle's water supply, even though it is not entirely clear where the water came into these storage tanks from. Another feature towards the east of the cisterns is an archway, which is the doorway of a tunnel which Willey believes could have been a "sally port" for the castle's garrison<sup>117</sup>. Willey also hints – in his earlier work – that the said patch of rock that lies at Alamut Castle's entrance could have been the site for Hassan bin Sabbah's notorious garden of paradise; however, in his later work, *The Eagle's Nest*, he dismisses the possibility.

A few feet above to the southeast of this patch, on a sharp incline, lies what Willey interprets as the main body of the castle<sup>118</sup>. Measuring 350 feet by 125 feet at its widest,

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<sup>115</sup> Peter Willey, *The Castles of the Assassins*, (Fresno: Craven Street Books), 2001, 220.

<sup>116</sup> Ibid.

<sup>117</sup> Ibid.

<sup>118</sup> Ibid., 221.

this part of this castle housed a lot of its rooms. Willey states that he and his team inspected twenty of the rooms, including the largest, which lay at the center of the structure and measured 39.5 feet by 20 feet<sup>119</sup>. The walls of this room, alone, were 2 feet thick. Willey doesn't mention the material that was used to build the walls, but they were most probably made out of stone. At the south of this space lay a sloping terrace about 50 yards in length, which is covered in grass<sup>120</sup>. Willey also states that the Castle's curtain wall was built at the edge of this terrace, albeit doesn't mention which edge<sup>121</sup>.

At the eastern end of the castle lies the fortress wall or rampart – a massive wall 45 feet in height and as much as 10 feet in thickness. Granted, the wall presumably was hollow in part, since it housed the castle's staircase, nevertheless this structure undoubtedly strengthened the castle's defenses manifold, especially since, if Juvaini is to be believed, it was plastered with lead<sup>122</sup>. The scribe of Mongol King Hulegu Khan writes that when the castle “was being demolished, it was as though the iron struck its head on a stone[.]”<sup>123</sup>. Since the eastern end of the rock is the one overlooking the steep valley underneath, the heavily leaded outer walls must have been made to defend the castle from mangonel attacks from down below. Willey states that this outer wall has a turret at each end, stairwells inside which descend deep into the wall and traces of a gatehouse somewhere across its length<sup>124</sup>. As already mentioned, Willey also states that the castle's main entrance was also situated inside this fortress wall.

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<sup>119</sup> Ibid.

<sup>120</sup> Ibid.

<sup>121</sup> Ibid.

<sup>122</sup> Juvaini, 720.

<sup>123</sup> Ibid.

<sup>124</sup> Willey doesn't mention exactly where the “remains of the gatehouse” that he mentions are located.



Moving clockwise onward, at the southeastern end of the Alamut complex lies what is called the “Onion Castle”. This “Piyaz Qal’a” is a smaller construction believed, according to Willey, for a very long time to house stables, possibly because it was thought that it wasn’t fortified<sup>125</sup>. Contrary to the established beliefs of the time, the Onion Castle was, actually, fortified, though apparently not as strongly as the main castle<sup>126</sup>. One striking feature of this part of the castle was a massive water channel or “qanat” cut into the middle of the rock’s southern face: 600 feet long, approximately 12 feet wide with its depth ranging between 11 and 13 feet. According to Juvaini, this “conduit” was drawn from the river “Bahru” possibly another name for the river Shah-Rūd<sup>127</sup>. This was probably Alamut’s primary source of water. Willey admires this construction as “the most impressive feature of the castle”<sup>128</sup>. His admiration is understandable as the channel served two of the most important purposes for the castle: water supply and defence. The four cisterns located above the channel were used to store water, while the great width and depth of the channel helped it to serve as a defensive barrier, like moats around classic medieval European castles did. The water channel coupled with the massive lead-covered wall – both of which rather surprisingly lay at the southern end – rendered the southern end of Alamut castle almost absolutely impregnable. Juvaini states in his *Tarikh-i-Jahangusha* that the cisterns and wells had started to be put into place since the time of Hassan bin Sabbah and continued till the very fall of Alamut<sup>129</sup>. This indicates the attention Hassan awarded to supplying adequate water to the castle. Unfortunately, Juvaini deemed it

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<sup>125</sup> Ibid., 222.

<sup>126</sup> Ibid., 224.

<sup>127</sup> Juvaini, *ibid.*, 721.

<sup>128</sup> Willey, *The Castles of the Assassins*, 224.

<sup>129</sup> Juvaini, *ibid.*, 720

cumbersome to provide the details of the castle's construction and how much of it could be attributed to Hassan bin Sabbah and his followers. Juvaini does, however, mention that, the castle's construction may have started in the year 860-1 AD/ 246 AH, by an Al-i-Justan, the-then king of Dailam, if the history of Gilan is to be believed<sup>130</sup>. Since the castle was in place and very much functional before Hassan's arrival, it isn't possible to discern how much of it was built by the *Hashshāshīn* through textual sources, alone.

### **Seljuk Attacks on Alamut**

As soon as Hassan bin Sabbah gained possession of Alamut, he sought to acquire more strongholds, in order to strengthen his roots in Persia. However, before he could look to spread his influence, he was forced to defend his existing abode: Sultan Malik-Shah's emir, Yürün-Tash, the Seljuk chief of the district of Alamut, attacked the castle time and again to massacre as many of Hassan's followers as he could<sup>131</sup>. However, despite repeated attacks, it is interesting to note that Yürün-Tash never succeeded in capturing the castle. This might be because he did not attempt it – which is unlikely, since it would have been in his interest, as well as his Sultan's, to recapture Alamut – or because Hassan's *Hashshāshīn* were able to ward the attack off – also, unlikely since their strength was nothing compared to the mighty Seljuks. It is possible that Malik-Shah did not consider the group a substantial threat at the time – only a nuisance. Nevertheless, Yürün-Tash's attacks were certainly damaging, so much so that the residents of Alamut fell short of provisions and decided to leave the castle. Juvaini reports that Hassan decided to stay only after he supposedly received a message from his Imam –

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<sup>130</sup> Ibid.

<sup>131</sup> Ibid., 674.

Mustansir, the Caliph-Imam of the Fatimid Caliphate, since the Nizari-Musta'li schism hadn't yet taken place – asking him to stay in the castle “because good fortune awaited them there”. After this event, the town started to be known as *baladat-al-iqbal*, “The Town of Good Fortune”<sup>132</sup>. Hassan duly obliged with his Imam's command. Plans to abandon Alamut were buried and the propaganda continued.

## **Castles of the Alborz Mountains**

As asserted in the paragraph quoted in the beginning of this chapter, Hassan bin Sabbah's biggest concern was to annex the territory surrounding Alamut, in Rudbar Alamut and beyond. The capture of castles in the vicinity of Alamut made perfect sense since it strengthened all of the castles' defenses, by mutually guarding each other.

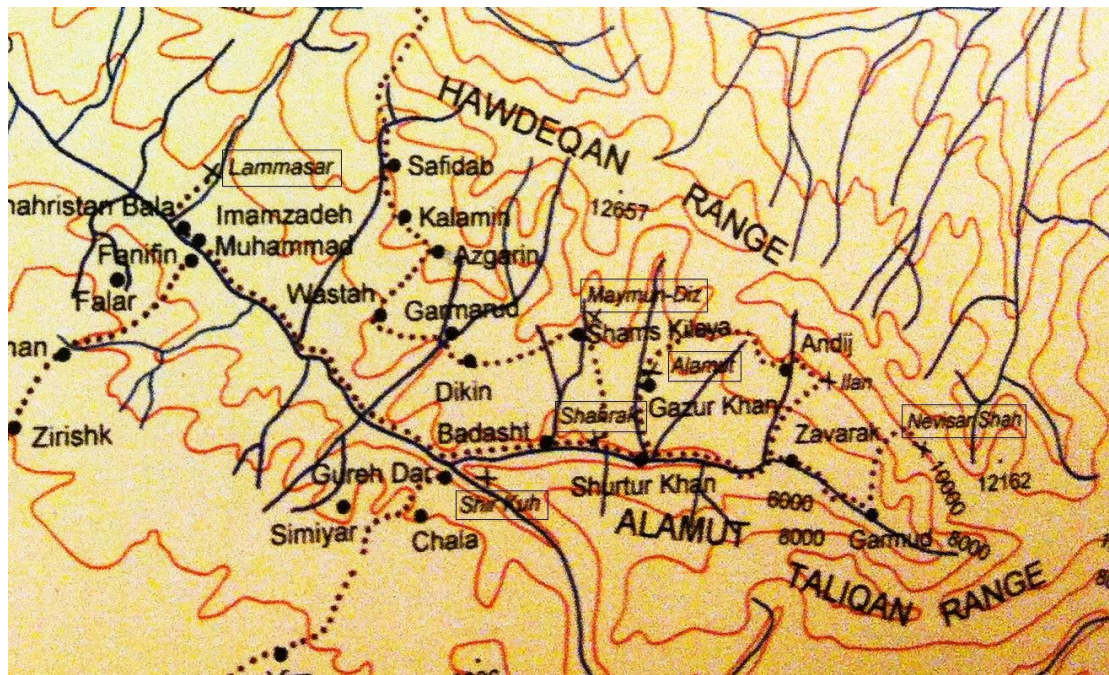
## **Castles of Alamut Valley**

According to Peter Willey, there are “over sixty castles” in Alamut valley, alone<sup>133</sup>. Willey, along with his exploration team, studied a few of them in 1960-61 on a tour of Alamut valley and its surrounding regions. Some of the castles that they explored, other than Alamut, included the castles of Shahrak, Shirkuh and Maymun-Diz. The following map taken from Peter Willey's *The Castles of the Assassins* shows the entire region and the castles in it:

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<sup>132</sup> Ibid.

<sup>133</sup> Willey, *The Castles of the Assassins*, 23.



**FIGURE 4.5** Alamut Valley and its surroundings. The boxed names indicate the Assassins' castles. (Image courtesy Peter Willey's *The Castle of the Assassins*)

### Maymun-Diz

Of all the castles in Alamut valley, Maymun-Diz was perhaps the most important after Alamut. As Figure 4.5 shows, Maymun-Diz is located fairly close to Alamut, making it one of the most important Isma'ili castles in the Alborz Mountains. Ata Malik Juvaini states that the castle's construction was ordered by 'Ala-ad-Din Muhammad<sup>134</sup>, the seventh ruler of Alamut<sup>135</sup>. His instructions to his men were "to survey the heights and summits of those mountains for the space of 12 years until they chose that lofty peak which confided secrets to the star Capella[.]"<sup>136</sup> The peak that was finalized had a "spring of water on its top and three others on its side"<sup>137</sup>. The castle of Maymun-Diz then began to be constructed. Juvaini states that the castle's ramparts were made out of plaster and gravel, and that a stream was brought "from a parasang" away to supply

<sup>134</sup> Juvaini, *ibid.*, 627.

<sup>135</sup> Farhad Daftary, *The Ismailis: Their History and Doctrines*, 302.

<sup>136</sup> Juvaini, *ibid.*

<sup>137</sup> *Ibid.*

water to the castle.<sup>138</sup> Maymun-Diz also served as the seat of ‘Ala ad-Din’s son, Rukn-ad-Din Khurshah and it was here in this castle that he resided when Hulagu Khan came to destroy the *Hashshāshīn* and their castles<sup>139</sup>.

### **Other Castles in the Alborz Mountains**

The Alborz Mountains are fairly expansive, and the *Hashshāshīn* seemingly made good use to this vast expanse of uneven land by constructing castles in spread out spots. Assassin castles in the Alborz Mountains in regions other than Alamut Valley include Samiran, Lima, Lammasar, Nevisar Shah, Ilan, Shir Kuh and Girdkuh. Ibn al-Athir adds Ustunawand and Ardahnu to the list<sup>140</sup>, both of which are close to Shahr-e-Rey; and another by the name of Wasnamkuh, which was next to Abhar. According to Ibn al-Athir, Wasnamkuh was occupied by the *Hashshāshīn* as early as 1091 AD/ 484 AH<sup>141</sup>. It was besieged by Barkiyaruq for eight months in 1096 AD, and its entire population was killed by the end of the siege<sup>142</sup>.

Of all of the above-mentioned castles, Lammasar and Girdkuh are of particular importance.

### **Lammasar**

Lammasar – variously known as Lambsar or Lanbasar – is located next to the town of Razmian, inside Rudbar Alamut. The following map (Figure 4.6) shows its exact location:

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<sup>138</sup> Ibid.

<sup>139</sup> Ibid., 717.

<sup>140</sup> Ibn al-Athir, *ibid.*, Part 1, 43.

<sup>141</sup> Ibid.

<sup>142</sup> Ibid.



**FIGURE 4.6** Lammasar Castle's location in Rudbar Alamut (Image courtesy Google Maps)

According to Ata Malik Juvaini, Lammasar was captured on the night of the 10<sup>th</sup> of September 1102 AD/24 Zul-Qa'da 495 AH, against the will of its inhabitants who did not want to be forcefully converted to Nizari Isma'ilism<sup>143</sup>. The same source suggests that Kiya Buzurg-Umid and a few other followers were sent to acquire the castle, who achieved this task by entering the castle by stealth and killing all of its occupants. Juvaini further states that Buzurg-Ummid stayed in Lammasar for 20 years without ever leaving it, until Hassan bin Sabbah asked him to meet him when the latter was on his deathbed<sup>144</sup>. It was also one of the last Isma'ili castles to fall to the Mongols.

## **Girdkuh**

The castle of Girdkuh – also spelled as Gerdkuh and Gerdkouh – lies quite a distance away from Alamut and very close to the city of Damghan in Semnan province, Iran.

Figure 4.7 shows Girdkuh's location in relation to Damghan and Alamut:

<sup>143</sup> Juvaini, 679.

<sup>144</sup> Ibid.





**FIGURE 4.7** Girdkuh, Alamut and Damghan on the modern map. (Image courtesy Google Maps)

Juvaini states that the castle of Girdkuh was acquired through the services of the *ra'is* Muzaffar<sup>145</sup>, who had earlier been of help to Hassan bin Sabbah in purchasing Alamut. The year itself is not mentioned, but Juvaini does state that it was around the time when Barkiyaruq and Muhammad, the two sons of Malik Shah, had begun quarreling. Barkiyaruq was the sultan, and Amirdad Habashi was a “justicer” who had his seat in Damghan<sup>146</sup>. Juvaini states that *ra'is* Muzaffar requested Habashi to ask Sultan Barkiyaruq for the castle of Girdkuh, which he did<sup>147</sup>. Sultan Barkiyaruq granted the request and awarded Habashi the castle. *Ra'is* Muzaffar very cleverly assumed the status of Habashi’s lieutenant and ascended Girdkuh, spent a lot of money on its fortification and repair, stocked it with all of Habashi’s “treasuries” and then declared himself a Batini<sup>148</sup>. According to Farhad Daftary, this even took place in 1096 AD/ 489 AH<sup>149</sup>, though it cannot be said how he estimates this year since, as already stated, Juvaini does not mention the year<sup>150</sup>. It is possible that *ra'is* Muzaffar’s bold move to take Girdkuh for the *Hashshāshīn* did not turn Amirdad Habashi against him, for in the year 493 AH (1099/1100 AD) when the troops of Barkiyaruq and Ahmed Sanjar

<sup>145</sup> Ibid.

<sup>146</sup> Ibn al-Athir, *ibid.*, Part 1, 29.

<sup>147</sup> Juvaini, *ibid.*, 679.

<sup>148</sup> Ibid.

<sup>149</sup> Daftary, *The Ismailis: Their History and Doctrines*, 321.

<sup>150</sup> Rashid-al-Din Hamadani’s *Jami al-Tawarikh* is the only other possible source that could have presented any valid information on the topic.

confronted each other, Habashi – who fought for Barkiyaruq – had 5,000 Batinis among his troops<sup>151</sup>. *Ra'is* Muzaffar stayed in charge of Girdkuh for forty whole years<sup>152</sup>. Juvaini further states that when Nizam-ul-Mulk Ahmed – Nizam-ul-Mulk Tusi's son – besieged Alamut at the behest of Sultan Muhammad – another of Barkiyaruq's brothers and Malik-Shah's sons – Hassan bin Sabbah sent his wife and two daughters to Girdkuh for protection<sup>153</sup>. This shows that Girdkuh, being a distance away from Alamut Valley, was considered a safe haven for the *Hashshāshīn* in times of war. The castle was also one of the last ones to give in to the Mongols.

## Expansion to Quhistan

One of the first regions that Hassan bin Sabbah sought to expand his influence to was Quhistan. It was as early as 1091-2 AD/ 484 AH that the leader of the *Hashshāshīn* commissioned a certain *da'i* named Husain of Qa'in<sup>154</sup> to propagate his ideas in Quhistan. Seemingly an odd choice at first – it is far away from Hassan's central castle, Alamut – the expansion to Quhistan turned out to be a wise move by Sabbah, which met with immediate success. Ibn al-Athir sheds some light on the reasons behind the instant success of the *Hashshāshīn* in Quhistan:

The reason they ruled there is that in Quhistān there remained survivors of the Sīmījūr family, emirs of Khurasan in the days of the Samanids. One of the survivors of the line was a man called al-Munawwar, who was held in respect by high and low. When

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<sup>151</sup> Ibn al-Athir, *ibid.*, Part 1, 28.

<sup>152</sup> Juvaini, *ibid.*, 679.

<sup>153</sup> *Ibid.*, 680.

<sup>154</sup> Juvaini, *ibid.*



Kul-Sārigh controlled Quhistān he treated the people unjustly and tyrannically. He wished to take a sister of al-Munawwar without legal sanctions. This compelled al-Munawwar to seek support from the Ismā'īlīs and to ally with them. Thus they became important in Quhistān, which they came to control, including Khūr, Khūsaf, Zawzan, Qā'in, Tūn and neighbouring regions.<sup>155</sup>

This could be one of the reasons behind the *Hashshāshīn*'s popularity, which was acknowledged by H.A.R. Gibb, translator of Ibn al-Qalanisi's *The Damascus Chronicle of the Crusades*, when he terms the order the "celebrated Batini movement"<sup>156</sup>. Contemporary chroniclers like Juvaini, Ibn al-Athir and Ibn al-Qalanisi, however, are of contrasting opinion and not shy of expressing their extreme dislike for the sect.

### **Geographical Extent**

Modern scholars<sup>157158</sup> concur that Quhistan was the southern/southeastern part of the medieval region of Khorasan, even though the extent of the region cannot be derived precisely. It seems that Quhistan was not an administrative region, but more of a geographical one. The historical province of Khorasan, itself, was expansive, and its boundaries not determined, yet the region of Quhistan can be said to roughly include western parts of modern-day Afghanistan as well as some of the modern Iranian province of South Khorasan. The capital of the region was possibly Herat. Figure 4.8 shows an estimation of the region.

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<sup>155</sup> Ibn al-Athir, *ibid.*, Part 1, 43.

<sup>156</sup> Ibn Al-Qalanisi, tr. H. A. R. Gibb, *The Damascus Chronicle of the Crusades*, Mineola: Dover Publications Inc.), 2013, 28.

<sup>157</sup> Daftary, *Ismailis in Medieval Muslim Societies*, 132.

<sup>158</sup> Willey, *Eagle's Nest*, 189.



**FIGURE 4.8** The circle shows a rough estimation of the historical region of Quhistan. Dotted boundaries on the original map identify modern-day South Khorasan. (Image courtesy Google Maps)

### Castles of the *Hashshāshīn* in Quhistan

The first castle in the region named by Juvaini was the castle of Dara<sup>159</sup>, which, according to him, was located near Sistan. The historical region of Sistan roughly corresponds to the modern Iranian province of Sistan Va Baluchestan, but Juvaini could have been referring to the town of Sistan, which is located inside the said province. However, the translator's note informs the reader that Dara is located to the south of Tabas and the southeast of Birjand, which seems a little geographically inaccurate considering Birjand is to the east of Tabas, itself. Figure 4.9 shows the location of each of these landmarks:

<sup>159</sup> Juvaini, *ibid.*, 676.



**FIGURE 4.9** Tabas, Birjand and Sistan Va Baluchestan at the southeastern end of modern-day Iran  
(Image courtesy Google Maps)

Considering the fact that Dara was besieged by Ghizil-Sarigh, one of Sultan Malik Shah’s chief emirs, in 1092 AD/ 485 AH<sup>160</sup>, speaks of its high importance. However, Juvaini refers to another castle called Mu’minabad, calling it “the fountain-head of their infidelity and heresy”, which shows that it might have been the most important *Hashshāshīn* castle in Quhistan, at least by the time of Hasan, the grandson of Kiya Buzurg-Ummid, around 1164 AD<sup>161</sup>. Juvaini further states that the governor of the region at the time was *ra’is* Muzaffar<sup>162</sup>, which is understandable since he includes Girdkuh in Quhistan, as well, but a little unfathomable since Muzaffar had to be very old in the said year considering he captured Girdkuh nearly 70 years earlier.

Ibn al-Athir mentions a castle by the name of Tabas, too<sup>163</sup>. It is possible that this was another name for the castle of Dara, or that Tabas had a castle of its own.

<sup>160</sup> Ibid, 675.

<sup>161</sup> Ibid., 691.

<sup>162</sup> Ibid.

<sup>163</sup> Ibn al-Athir, *ibid.*, Part 1, 43.

## Other Castles in Persia

Aside from the Alborz Range and Quhistan, the *Hashshāshīn* found settling points in the southwestern parts of Persia, especially around Isfahan, the-then capital of the Seljuks. Ibn al-Athir mentions al-Tunbur, which was next to Arrajan, modern-day Behbahan, and was captured by one Abu Hamza the cobbler<sup>164</sup>. Another was “The Inspector’s Castle”<sup>165</sup> – Qal-at al-Nazir – which was in Khuzistan, and another called Khaladkhan<sup>166</sup>, which was in between Fars and Khuzistan. Ibn al-Athir also mentions Khalanjan, a castle that was “five leagues” from Isfahan. And then there was Shahdiz – or the castle of Isfahan, as Ibn al-Athir calls it<sup>167</sup> – the most famous of them all. Figure 4.11 shows these locations on the modern map:



**FIGURE 4.11** Isfahan, Khuzistan, Arrajan (Behbahan) and Fars on the modern map. (Image courtesy Google Maps)

<sup>164</sup> Ibid.

<sup>165</sup> Ibid.

<sup>166</sup> Ibid., 44.

<sup>167</sup> Ibid., 41.

## Castle of Shahdiz

Ibn al-Athir informs us that Shahdiz was built by Malik-Shah, the Seljuk sultan who reigned from 1072 AD to 1092 AD<sup>168</sup>. The series of events, as presented by the same source, that led to the formation of the castle are uncannily similar to those that led to the formation of Alamut. Of Shahdiz, Ibn al-Athir states:

The reason for its construction was that a Byzantine officer came to him [Malik-Shah], accepted Islam and joined his service. One day Malikshah went hunting and a hound, an excellent hunter, ran away and went up the hill there. The sultan and the Byzantine followed it and found it on the site of the [future] fortress. The Byzantine said to him, ‘Had we a hill like this, we would put a castle on it which would prove useful for us.’<sup>169170</sup>

Shahdiz was acquired for the *Hashshāshīn* by Ahmad ibn Attash, the son of Hassan bin Sabbah’s teacher, ‘Abd-al-Malik ibn Attash<sup>171</sup>. Ibn al-Athir states that Ibn Attash succeeded in capturing the fortress by gaining favour with its Khuzistani commander, so much so that he was “allow to administer affairs”<sup>172</sup>. As soon as the castle’s commander died, Ibn Attash took control of it. Ibn al-Athir insists that the people of the

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<sup>168</sup> Ibid.

<sup>169</sup> Ibid., 41-42

<sup>170</sup> The famous story of Alamut, also related by Ibn al-Athir among others, replaces Malik-Shah with a “Daylami prince” and the hound with an eagle. Medieval rulers clearly took animals’ behavior very seriously.

<sup>171</sup> Ibn al-Athir, *ibid.* Part 1, 42.

<sup>172</sup> Ibid.

surrounding areas suffered so much due to Ibn Attash's looting of goods and murders that they began saying, "A castle led to by a dog and suggested by an infidel must end in evil"<sup>173</sup>. Farhad Daftary states that Ibn Attash assumed control of Shahdiz in 1100 AD/ 494 AH<sup>174</sup>, even though neither Ibn al-Athir nor Ata Malik Juvaini gives a date for the event.

Since the castle was located so close to the Seljuk capital, and because Ibn Attash reportedly taxed the villages in the castle's vicinity in return for their safety, the *Hashshāshīn* could not hold the castle for too long. After the death of Barkiyaruq in 1105, Sultan Muhammad I became the ruler over the territory left by his half-brother. One of the first moves that he made after assuming the sultan's office was to arrange a siege of Shahdiz, which his forces did on the 2<sup>nd</sup> of April 1107 AD/ 6<sup>th</sup> of Sha'ban 500 AH<sup>175</sup>. The castle was taken on the 25<sup>th</sup> of June 1107 AD/ 2<sup>nd</sup> Dhu'l-Qa'da 500 AH, most of its inhabitants were slain, the remainder escaped and Ahmed Ibn Attash, the commander, was taken prisoner<sup>176</sup>. After being dragged through the streets, he was flayed alive and his skin was stuffed with straw. Needless to say, he subsequently died. Ibn Attash's son was beheaded and his wife, too, jumped off the castle and committed suicide<sup>177</sup> and Shahdiz returned to the Seljuks.

## Expansion to Syria

Hassan bin Sabbah's decision to expand his influence to Syria was arguably the most important one for the *Hashshāshīn*'s survival. With a territory so far from Persia, with a different atmosphere altogether, Hassan bin Sabbah's men and his Order cemented

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<sup>173</sup> Ibid.

<sup>174</sup> Daftary, *The Ismailis: Their History and Doctrines*, 330.

<sup>175</sup> Ibn al-Athir, *ibid.*, Part 1, 118.

<sup>176</sup> *Ibid.*, 119.

<sup>177</sup> *Ibid.*

their presence in the lands of the Seljuks even more with this move. And, as shall be seen, the *Hashshāshīn* were more warmly welcomed here than they had been in Persia. Although Isma'ilism had prevailed in Syria since the time of the Fatimid occupation, the Syrian *Hashshāshīn* did not evolve out of the existing stock of Isma'ilis. Ibn Al-Qalanisi (c. 1070 AD – 1160 AD), who was twice the mayor of Damascus, writes:

Now the person known as al-Hakim al-Munajjim the Bātinī, a number of the entourage of the king Fakhr al-Mulūk Rudwān, lord of Aleppo, was the first to profess the doctrines of the Bātinīya in Aleppo and Syria, and it was he who commissioned the three men to kill Janāh al-Dawla at Hims.<sup>178</sup>

The said murder of Janah al-Dawla took place in the year 1103 AD/496 AH<sup>179</sup>, so the Assassins must have arrived in the country at some time before given year, by virtue of one of Hassan bin Sabbah's *da'is*, al-Hakim al-Munajjim. Ibn Al-Qalanisi also mentions an "Abu Tahir the goldsmith", later in his chronicle, as the one – together with al-Hakim al-Munajjim – responsible for bringing the "detestable doctrine" of the Batinis to Syria<sup>180</sup>. Interestingly, Juvaini does not mention al-Hakim or Abu Tahir throughout his *Tarikh-e-Jahangusha*, however, he does mention a certain Bu-Tahir Arrani, the one who stabbed Nizam-ul-Mulk Tusi<sup>181</sup>. As shown by the excerpt given above, al-Hakim al-Munajjim – the "physician-astrologer", as the name literally means – was taken under the wing by Rudwan, the son of Tutush. Since Rudwan was reduced to being the ruler of Aleppo, after his brother Duqaq had rebelled and snatched control

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<sup>178</sup> Ibn Al-Qalanisi, *ibid.*, 58.

<sup>179</sup> *Ibid.*, 57.

<sup>180</sup> *Ibid.*, 145.

<sup>181</sup> Juvaini, *ibid.*, 676-677.



of Damascus, it can be safely assumed that the earliest settling point of the *Hashshāshīn* in Syria was Aleppo. By 1113-14 AD, Ibn Al-Qalanisi states, their power in Aleppo was “formidable”<sup>182</sup>. Ibn al-Athir states that after Rudwan’s death, Alp Arslan persecuted the Nizaris and arrested Abu Tahir the Goldsmith along with many of his followers<sup>183</sup>. As a result of this move, many Nizaris joined the Franks’ service<sup>184</sup>, which shows the lack of religious drive in their activities.



**Figure 4.12** Locations in Syria where the Nizaris established their influence (Image courtesy Google Maps)

Another region that came under the *Hashshāshīn*’s control, around 1106 AD was Afamiya<sup>185</sup>. The important castle of Shaizar was captured from a tribe by the name of Banu Munqidh, in 1108/9 AD according to Ibn al-Athir<sup>186</sup> and in 1113 AD according to Ibn Al-Qalanisi<sup>187</sup>. Ibn Al-Qalanisi’s is the more reliable date.

However, the Order’s influence was not limited to the regions they controlled directly, their supporters resided in regions farther away: Sarmin, Jawr, Jabal al-Summaq<sup>188</sup>, Ma’arrat al-Nu’mān and Ma’arrat Masrin<sup>189</sup> by around 1114 AD.

Later, by the efforts of one of the Batini

<sup>182</sup> Ibn Al- Qalanisi, *ibid.*, 145.

<sup>183</sup> Ibn al-Athir, Part I, 164.

<sup>184</sup> Ibn Al-Qalanisi, *ibid.*, 145.

<sup>185</sup> *Ibid.*, 73.

<sup>186</sup> Ibn al-Athir, Part I, 146.

<sup>187</sup> Ibn Al-Qalanisi, *ibid.*, 147.

<sup>188</sup> Ibn Al-Athir, Part I, 145.

<sup>189</sup> *Ibid.*, 147.



chiefs in Syria, Bahraam, the castle of Banyas was acquired from Zahir ad-Din Atabek in Dhu'l Qa'da 520 AH/November or December 1126 AD<sup>190</sup>. Ibn Al-Qalanisi reports that after acquiring Banyas, Bahraam improved its fortifications significantly<sup>191</sup>. The famed castle of Masyaf – or Masyad or Masyath – was captured by the *Hashshāshīn* in 1140-41 AD/ 535 AH “by means of a stratagem”<sup>192</sup>. P.K. Hitti states that by 1140 AD, the Order had al-Kahf, al-Qadmus and Ullayqah as well<sup>193</sup>. Figure 4.12 shows some of the locations under discussion on a modern map.

## **The Castle of Masyaf**

Later to become the seat of “the most famous leader of the Syrian Nizaris”<sup>194</sup>, Rashid ad Din Sinan, Masyaf was unarguably the most important of Isma’ili castles in Syria. The castle lasted under Isma’ili control for nearly 120 years even though it was not quite as inaccessible as the castles of the Alborz mountains. Somewhat of a spur castle by nature – since it was built by the bluff of a short hill – Masyaf had many features that added to its defensive strength, which will be discussed below.

## **Geographical Surroundings Today**

Figure 4.13 shows the location of Masyaf Castle in the modern city of Masyaf, Syria.

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<sup>190</sup> Ibid., 179-80.

<sup>191</sup> Ibid., 187.

<sup>192</sup> Ibid., 263.

<sup>193</sup> Hitti, *ibid.*, 448

<sup>194</sup> Daftary, *The Isma’ilis: Their History and Doctrines*, 332.



**FIGURE 4.13** Location of Masyaf Castle (Image courtesy Google Maps)

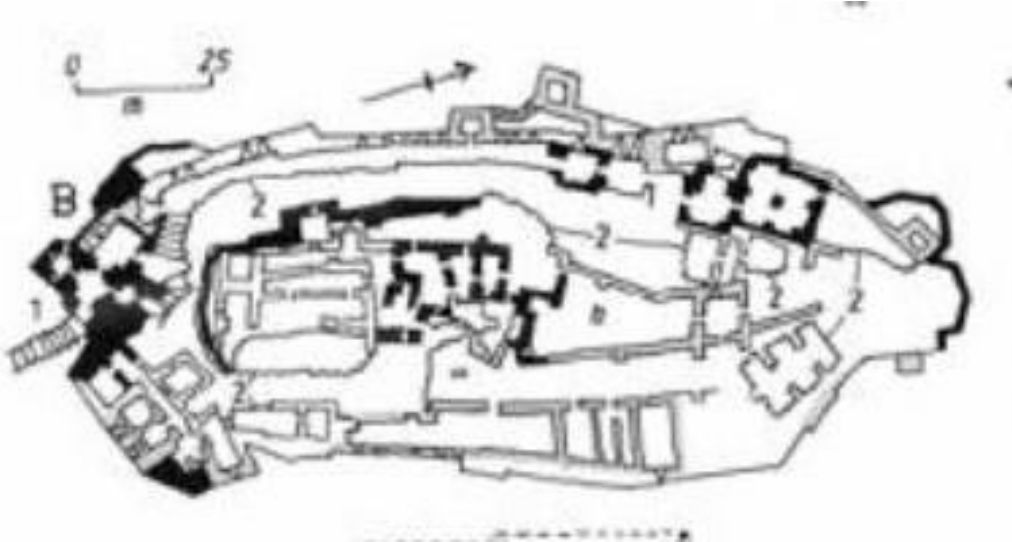
It is visible through Figure 4.13 that the castle is located on the eastern outskirts of the city of Masyaf, today. The barren and unoccupied land beyond the castle on the eastern side is vacant because it is “boulder strewn”<sup>195</sup>. The castle itself is perched up on a rock 20 meters above the rest of the city<sup>196</sup>.

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<sup>195</sup> <http://www.reuters.com/article/2007/07/13/us-syria-castle-assassins-idUSL1114464920070713>

<sup>196</sup> Willey, *ibid.*, 221.

## The Plan and Dimensions of the Castle



**FIGURE 4.14** Masyaf Castle from the 12<sup>th</sup> to 14<sup>th</sup> Centuries. The darker parts are believed to be added by the *Hashshāshīn* (Image courtesy David Nicolle's *Saracen Strongholds 1100-1500*<sup>197</sup>).



**FIGURE 4.15** Western View of Masyaf Castle Today (Image courtesy reuters.com<sup>198</sup>)

<sup>197</sup> David Nicolle, *Saracen Strongholds 1100-1500: The Central and Eastern Islamic Lands*, (New York: Osprey Publishing Ltd.), 2009, 32.

<sup>198</sup> <http://www.reuters.com/article/2007/07/13/us-syria-castle-assassins-idUSL1114464920070713>

Peter Willey states that the dimensions of the rock upon which the castle stands are approximately 150 meters by 70 meters (at its widest)<sup>199</sup> while the height of the castle's walls is approximately 6.5 meters<sup>200</sup>. However, according to the scale given in Figure 4.14, the dimensions of the castle itself seem to be approximately 130 m by 60 m.

### **Architectural Features of the Castle**

According to Peter Willey, the castle was first built into a fortified structure the 9<sup>th</sup> or 10<sup>th</sup> centuries<sup>201</sup>. A later construction was added to strengthen the outer "curtain-wall". However, the most addition came in the 13<sup>th</sup> century while the castle was held by the Nizari Isma'ilis.

Willey states that the Isma'ilis strengthened the defensive structure of the castle immensely, paying special attention to the strength of the western side of the outer wall, making it strong enough to withstand the impact of large stones<sup>202</sup>. Furthermore, they added towers to the structure, perhaps in order to increase the vantage point of the castle<sup>203</sup>.

Another important architectural feature of the castle are the arrow-slits that its outer wall is dotted with<sup>204</sup>. These allowed the occupants of the castle to spray their attackers with torched arrows – an excellent defensive measure to make your enemy retreat.

How the castle defended against a mass attack from outsiders is aptly summarized in the Willey's following lines:

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<sup>199</sup> Willey, *ibid.*, 222.

<sup>200</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>201</sup> *ibid.*, 226.

<sup>202</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>203</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>204</sup> *Ibid.*, 223.

A mass attack upon the castle would have been virtually impossible owing to the steep external staircase that is strongly defended by well-placed arrow slits. Attackers who may penetrate these defences are held up by the narrow dark passages they encounter, where they are exposed at every angle to the fire of the defenders.

### **Evaluation of Masyaf Castle's Defensive Strengths**

Although Masyaf may not qualify as a classic, textbook example of a spur castle – which are ideally defended on three sides by the steep sides of a hill<sup>205</sup> – nevertheless its architectural features make up for what its geographical location leaves unattended. Masyaf is definitely not one of the most suitable examples of a spur castle: lying on top of a 20-meter high rock, and defended on barely one half of its length by a boulder-strewn plain, the positioning of the castle leaves much to the architect for the strengthening of its defenses. The rock is not high enough to make the castle unapproachable for attackers, and the “spur” is not steep or rugged enough to ward the enemies off, altogether, either. Ideally speaking, it barely qualifies as a hilltop or spur castle.

The architecture of the castle, on the other hand, is masterful and uses its location to perfection. The strong and high outer wall, coupled with plenty of towers to look over the vast plain to the western side of the castle is an excellent defensive feature in itself. The arrow slits in the internal walls add to the plight of the attacker should he be able to breach the outer defense. Altogether, the construction of the castle of Masyaf was strong enough to withstand the best of 13<sup>th</sup> century attacks. And so it did.

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<sup>205</sup> Adrian Boss, *Archaeology of the Military Orders*, (New York: Routledge), 2006, 126

However, it would be unfair to take all away from the location of the castle, as well, since the rocky eastern side of the hilltop was evidently a huge aid in its defence. Its unbreachability can be judged from the fact that it lies unoccupied to this day. Clearly it was more than a challenge for 13<sup>th</sup> century armies to launch an attack from this side of the castle. This left only one side for the occupants of Masyaf to defend, which they did successfully through the various architectural features described above.

## Chapter 5: The *Khudawands* of Alamut

*“Hasan-i Sabbah and his next two successors at Alamūt ruled as dā’īs and hujjas, or chief representatives, of the Nizārī imams (who were then inaccessible to their followers). Subsequently, starting with the fourth ruler, Hasan ‘alā dhikrihi’l-salām, the Nizari imams emerged at Alamut to take charge of the affairs of the da’wa and state. The Nizārīs of the Alamut period were, thus, led by three dā’īs and hujjas and five imams, who are generally referred to as the lords (khudāwands) of Alamut in the Persian sources.”*

- Farhad Daftary, *The Isma’ilis: Their History and Doctrines*<sup>206</sup>

### **Hassan bin Sabbah, the First *Khudawand* of Alamut (1090 AD – 1124 AD)**

The founder of the order of the *Hashshāshīn* and Alamut’s first lord, Hassan bin Sabbah – or “al-Hasan ibn al-Sabbāh al-Rāzī”<sup>207</sup>, in the words of Ibn al-Athir – reigned atop Alamut for nearly 34 years<sup>208</sup>. During his reign, the order managed to spread its influence to all of the areas discussed in the previous chapter and, also, managed to form an ugly reputation as lethal assassins and looters.

As already mentioned in the last chapter, Hassan bin Sabbah sent *da’īs* to many regions to spread the message of the “new propaganda”. These regions included Quhistan, where Hassan sent Husain of Qa’in in 1091-2 AD<sup>209</sup>; the Alborz Mountains, where castles were captured over a timespan of at least twelve years<sup>210</sup>; the southwestern end of Persia, and,

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<sup>206</sup> Farhad Daftary, *The Isma’ilis: Their History and Doctrines*, 301-2.

<sup>207</sup> Ibn al-Athir, Part I, 184.

<sup>208</sup> From September, 1090 AD to May, 1124.

<sup>209</sup> Juvaini, *ibid.*, 679.

<sup>210</sup> Between the capture of Alamut in September, 1090 AD to the capture of Lammasar in September 1102.

perhaps most importantly, Syria, where Hassan bin Sabbah's men, al-Hakkim al-Munajjim and Abu Tahir arrived right after the turn of the century<sup>211</sup>.

### **Opposition by the Seljuks and Defence of Castles**

Another important feature of Hassan's reign was the successful defence of the many *Hashshāshīn* castles that the Seljuks laid siege to. As already mentioned before, Malik-Shah sent Arslan-Tash to remove Hassan and his followers from Alamut around June-July 1092 AD/ Jumada al-Awwal 485 AH<sup>212</sup>. Juvaini mentions that at this point in time, there were only about 60-70 people in Alamut and Hassan bin Sabbah called on one Dihdar Bu-'Ali from Zuvara and Ardistan to come for Alamut's help<sup>213</sup>. Bu-'Ali managed to bring 300 men to Hassan's aid, with whose help he was able to ward off the Seljuk threat for the time being<sup>214</sup>. The task was achieved by attacking the besieging army one night from the outside of the castle. Thus, it can be seen that one of Hassan bin Sabbah's greatest strengths was having silent supporters on the outside who could come to his help when needed so he did not have to rely entirely upon his own people for the defence of his strongholds.

Also in the year 1092 AD/ 485 AH, Malik-Shah sent Ghizil-Sarigh to Quhistan to crack down on the Quhistani Nizari castles<sup>215</sup>. Juvaini reports that Ghizil-Sarigh and his men besieged the castle of Dara<sup>216</sup>, which was discussed in the previous chapter. This siege, too, however, resulted in failure due to Malik-Shah's death. Similarly, in the years 1117-18 AD, Sultan Muhammad I's *atabeg*, Nush-Tegin Shir-Gir was about to take

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<sup>211</sup> Daftary, *Ibid.*, 57.

<sup>212</sup> Juvaini, *ibid.*, 675.

<sup>213</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>214</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>215</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>216</sup> *Ibid.*, 676.



Lammasar when he heard of the sultan's death and had to abandon his siege<sup>217</sup>. But not all of the Seljuk campaigns against the *Hashshāshīn* were unsuccessful.

One of Malik-Shah's earliest attempts against Alamut, headed by Yürün-Tash, the chief of the district of Alamut, succeeded in ruining the crops and massacre the people who lived at the foot of the rock<sup>218</sup>. Sultan Barkiyaruq's Emir, Unur, also besieged "a fortress on the mountain in Isfahan"<sup>219</sup>, possibly Shahdiz, in 1098 AD/ 492 AH having sworn to fight the *Hashshāshīn*. What became of Emir Unur's attempt, chronicler Ibn Athir does not state. Barkiyaruq later – in the year 1100/01 AD – conducted targeted killings of some of the leaders of the *Hashshāshīn* successfully<sup>220</sup>.

Also during Hassan's lordship, Seljuk sultan Muhammad I brutally took the castle of Shahdiz in the year 1107 AD/ Shaban 500 AH<sup>221</sup>, killing most of its inhabitants and having its commander, Ibn Attash, flayed alive<sup>222</sup>. In the same sultan's reign, Seljuk forces under the command of Amir Anūshtakīn Shīrkīr took the *Hashshāshīn* castles of Kulām (November/December, 1111 AD) and Bira<sup>223</sup>. Sultan Muhammad was perhaps the most successful of the Seljuks in combating the Nizaris. His successor, Sultan Sanjar was also actively planning to uproot the *Hashshāshīn*, sending an army to Quhistan to begin this mission<sup>224</sup>. Hassan reportedly – in Juvaini's account – tried to mediate peace but his efforts were rejected. Then one day he bribed one of Sultan Sanjar's eunuchs to strike a dagger into the floor beside the sultan's bed while he was fast asleep. The eunuch completed the task and the sultan was shocked to see the sight when he woke up the next morning. Hassan then sent a messenger to the sultan with the following message:

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<sup>217</sup> Ibid., 681.

<sup>218</sup> Ibid., 674.

<sup>219</sup> Ibid Athir, Part I, 20.

<sup>220</sup> Ibid., 46.

<sup>221</sup> Ibid., 118.

<sup>222</sup> Ibid.

<sup>223</sup> Ibid., 185.

<sup>224</sup> Juvaini, Ibid., 681.

“Did I not wish the Sultan well that dagger which was struck into the hard ground would have been planted in his soft breast.”<sup>225226</sup> From that day onward, Sanjar did not only abandon his plans to bring the *Hashshāshīn* down, he awarded them a pension of 3000 dinars and allowed them to collect toll money from travelers passing by their castles<sup>227</sup>. As can be seen, much of Hassan’s success laid in his ability to use his cards to perfection.

### **Hassan’s Asceticism, Justice and Stance on Women**

Juvaini’s records of the *Sarguzasht* contain plenty of references to Hassan’s asceticism, for example in the following passage:

Now Hasan-i-Sabbah had founded his cause and his law (*nāmūs*) upon asceticism, continence and ‘*the enjoying of righteousness and the forbidding of unrighteousness*’, and during the 35 years that he dwelt in Alamut nobody drank wine openly nor put it in jars. Indeed such was his austerity that a certain person having played the flute in the castle he expelled him therefrom and would not re-admit him.<sup>228</sup>

Thus, if Juvaini is to be believed, Hassan held asceticism so dear that not only did he base his entire philosophy on self-restraint, he also put that philosophy into practice. His commitment to the idea was so strong that when his son, Muhammad, was accused of drinking wine, Hassan had him put to death<sup>229</sup>.

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<sup>225</sup> Ibid., 681-2.

<sup>226</sup> This incident is commonly mistakenly associated with Rashid-ad-Din Sinan and Salah ad-Din.

<sup>227</sup> Juvaini, *ibid.*, 682.

<sup>228</sup> Ibid., 680.

<sup>229</sup> Ibid.

Similarly, Hassan also seems to have been fairly just. Juvaini reports<sup>230</sup> an incident in which a resident of Alamut, an 'Alid named Zaid Hasani, tried propagate his own ideas in the castle and attempted to bring Hassan down. In order to achieve this end, he had a certain man called Ahmad of Dunbavand murder Husain of Qa'in – whom Hassan had sent to Quhistan to conduct propaganda – and later put the blame of the act on Hassan's other son, Ustad Husain. Hearing this, Hassan had both, his son and Ahmad of Dunbavand, executed. This shows that Hassan bin Sabbah valued justice over familial relations. However, on the flip side, when he learnt of the truth of these events, he executed Zaid Hasani along with a son of his, and murdering a son for his father's acts is beyond the realms of "fairness". It can, thus, be concluded that Hassan's policies on justice – if any – lacked consistency: at times he administered it with brutal fair-mindedness and at others he, perhaps, let himself get carried away by emotion.

Hassan's stance on women can somewhat be understood from his decision to send his wife and daughters away to Girdkuh when Alamut was laid under siege<sup>231</sup>. He wrote to the *rai's* Muzaffar – the commander of Girdkuh – to give the women some work as they could use the spindle<sup>232</sup>. This shows that Hassan was in favour of using women as a work force, but considered them too fragile to be put into danger. Juvaini, however, draws a curious conclusion from this incident, remarking that this act was in consistency with Hassan's law (probably of asceticism) and that from that day onward, the *Hashshāshīn* governors were not have any women with them while they remained in office<sup>233</sup>. It seems less believable that Hassan sent his wife and two daughters away at the time of the siege to prevent himself from any kind of indulgence, and more

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<sup>230</sup> Ibid., 679.

<sup>231</sup> Ibid., 680.

<sup>232</sup> Ibid.

<sup>233</sup> Ibid.

believable that he sent them away for their own protection, especially since Girdkuh was one of the *Hashshāshīn*'s safest strongholds.

### **Illness and Death**

During Sanjar's reign – approximately May-June 1124 AD/ Rabi al-Thani 518 AH – Hassan bin Sabbah fell ill. He subsequently named Kiya Buzurg-Umid, the commander of Lammasar, as his successor, entrusted Dihdar Abu-‘Ali of Ardistan – who had earlier helped him out at the siege of Alamut – the chancery of the order, and made Kiya Ba-Ja’far<sup>234</sup> its military commander<sup>235</sup>. He told them all to work in unison until “the Imam came to take control of his kingdom”<sup>236</sup>. Hassan passed away on the 23<sup>rd</sup> of May 1124 AD/ the 6<sup>th</sup> of Rabi al-Thani 518 AH and a very important chapter in the *Hashshāshīn*'s history came to an end.

### **Kiya Buzurg-Umid, the Second Lord (1124 AD – 1138 AD)**

If Juvaini's account is to be relied upon – and there's little else that can provide us with primary information on the topic – Buzurg-Umid's reign was fairly uneventful. Of all the things Juvaini records from this fourteen years long period, is the battle between the Seljuk sultan, Ghiyath ad-Din Mas'ud and the Abbasid caliph, al-Mustarshid bi-Allah, which took place in June-July 1135/ Ramadan 529 AH<sup>237</sup>. Unfortunately, the Nizaris had little association with this event, except that they were accused of the subsequent murder of al-Mustarshid bi-Allah<sup>238239</sup>. Juvaini also reports that the *Hashshāshīn*'s

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<sup>234</sup> Kiya Ba-Ja’far was already the military commander during Hassan's reign and retained his position under Buzurg-Umid.

<sup>235</sup> Juvaini, *ibid.*, 682.

<sup>236</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>237</sup> Ibn al-Athir, *ibid.*, Vol. 1, 316.

<sup>238</sup> *Ibid.*, 318.

<sup>239</sup> Juvaini, *ibid.*, 685-6.

strongholds remained secure during Buzurg-Umid's reign, too, since Sultan Sanjar was still in power and still unwilling to risk his life by targeting the Nizaris abodes<sup>240</sup>. However, Ibn Athir states that one of Ghiyath ad-Din Mas'ud's "mamlukes", Abbas, avidly massacred the Nizaris, building "a beacon from their heads at Rayy"<sup>241</sup>. Ibn Athir continues to boast that this same Abbas besieged Alamut and set fire to one of the Nizaris' villages and "burnt everyone there, men, women and children, and all else beside."<sup>242</sup> Thus, the hostilities against the order continued as usual in Kiya Buzurg-Umid's reign.

### Activities in Syria

Ibn Athir insists that the *Hashshāshīn*'s "offensive power grew great"<sup>243</sup> in the year 1126-1127 AD/ 520 AH, perhaps particularly with respect to their activities in Syria. In the same year Bahraam, one of the most important of the Syrian Nizaris, escaped to Syria and later acquired the castle of Banyās<sup>244</sup>. Two years later, the same man marched against the head of the Nusayris, Druze and Magians, who was known as Al-Dahhāk. Bahraam and his men were beaten and the Nizari commander was slain<sup>245</sup>. Subsequently, Isma'il replaced Bahraam as the head of the Nizaris at Banyās<sup>246</sup>. Another massacre was not too far off when Taj al-Muluk, the lord of Damascus, had 6,000 "Batinis", who were residing in the city and in its outskirts, murdered<sup>247</sup>. Threatened by the political atmosphere in Syria, Isma'il decided to surrender Banyās to the Franks and take refuge in their territory where "they experienced hardship,

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<sup>240</sup> Ibid., 683.

<sup>241</sup> Ibn al-Athir, *ibid.*, Vol. II, 10.

<sup>242</sup> Ibid.

<sup>243</sup> Ibid., Vol. I, 260.

<sup>244</sup> Ibid., 260-1.

<sup>245</sup> Ibid., 277.

<sup>246</sup> Ibid.

<sup>247</sup> Ibid., 278.

humiliation and shame”<sup>248</sup>. The surrender of Banyās to the Christian Frankish forces and taking refuge in their territory is another proof of the lack of religiousness in the Nizaris of Syria, who seemingly operated completely independently from Alamut.

### **Buzurg-Umid’s Death**

Kiya Buzurg-Umid remained the Lord of the *Hashshāshīn* till the 9<sup>th</sup> of February 1138 AD/ 26<sup>th</sup> of Jumada al-Awwal 532 AH “when he was crushed under the heel of Perdition and Hell was heated with the fuel of his carcass”<sup>249</sup> to quote Juvaini. Unfortunately, Juvaini’s passionate words fail to inform us whether Buzurg-Umid died a natural death or otherwise.

Three days before his death, Buzurg-Umid named his son, Muhammad, his successor, thereby starting the disagreeable trend of hereditary lordship among the *Hashshāshīn*. The trend had effectively been shunned by Hassan bin Sabbah, who had appointed Buzurg-Umid as his successor solely on merit.

### **Muhammad bin Buzurg-Umid, the Third Lord (1138 AD – 1162 AD)**

Juvaini would have us believe that the twenty-four-years long reign of Kiya Buzurg-Umid’s son, Muhammad, was as uneventful as his father’s. Ibn Athir’s records, on the other hand, suggest that Alamut’s third Lord’s reign was strewn with incidents of aggression – though mostly initiated by the men in Quhistan. Juvaini states that Muhammad’s first “accomplishment” was to assassinate al-Mustarshid’s son, ar-Rashid bi-Allah<sup>250</sup> after the latter attempted to attack the *Hashshāshīn*:

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<sup>248</sup> Ibid.

<sup>249</sup> Juvaini, *ibid.*, 685.

<sup>250</sup> Ibid., 686.

When Rashid succeeded to the Caliphate some wished to depose him while others persisted in their allegiance to him. After several times going to war with Sultan Mas'ud he set out from Baghdad to attack the Heretics and avenge his father's blood. He fell sick upon the way and in that enfeebled state arrived in Isfahan. Suddenly some vile *fida'is* entered his audience-chamber and stabbed him to death. He was buried on the spot.<sup>251</sup>

Juvaini also adds that it was after the assassination of ar-Rashid billah that Abbasid Caliphs went into hiding. It is important to note that Sultan Mas'ud was at loggerheads with al-Mustarshid as well as ar-Rashid, so it is possible that the *Hashshāshīn* were hired by Mas'ud to assassinate the two caliphs.

### **Quhistani Nizaris' Offensives**

Juvaini does not mention anything about the Seljuks' measures against the order, or vice versa, during Muhammad's period. Ibn Athir, however, informs us of several incidents when the Nizaris who resided in Quhistan, headed by one Ali bin Hassan, conducted attacks on several regions in the province of Khorasan. The first of these attacks took place in June-July 1154 AD/ Rabi-ul-Awwal 549 AH, when the order's Quhistani wing sent approximately 7,000 men to attack Khorasan's district of Khwāf, while the stationed troops were engaged in battle with the Oghuz<sup>252253</sup>. Emirs Muhammad bin Unur and Farrukhshāh bin Mahmūd al-Kāsānī successfully defended the province

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<sup>251</sup> Ibid.

<sup>252</sup> Oghuz is a subgroup of the family of Turkish languages. These men were, perhaps, belonged to the said linguistic group.

<sup>253</sup> Ibn al-Athir, Part II, 72.

against the attack, killing most of the invading force<sup>254</sup>. Two years later, in November-December 1156 AD/ Shawwal 551 AH the group carried out another attack in the Khorasani region of Tabas, this time inflicting damage, plundering what they found and imprisoning some of the Seljuk sultan's important statesmen<sup>255</sup>. Two more years later, in 1158-9 AD/ 553 AH, the Quhistani Nizaris made enemies among the residing Turkoman<sup>256</sup> tribes by attacking their settlements, for which the former were severely punished by the latter<sup>257</sup>. Ibn Athir informs us that when the Turkomans retaliated to the attacks, only nine Nizaris survived<sup>258</sup>. One year later, in 1159-60 AD/ 554 AH, the Nizaris of Quhistan were involved in another encounter with the Seljuks when Muhammad bin Unur sent his men to collect tribute from the castles<sup>259</sup>. Instead of paying the tribute, the Nizaris attacked the Emir's men, taking their leader, Qayba, hostage, who survived only after giving his daughter in marriage to the Nizari chief, Ali bin Hasan<sup>260</sup>. In Muhammad's reign the Nizaris also attempted to spread to the region of Ghūr in 1161 AD/ 556 AH, succeeding in gathering a following but were subsequently expelled from the land by Sayf ad-Din Muhammad<sup>261</sup>. The Quhistani Nizaris were again in action later that year, when they attacked a group of sleeping Turkoman travelers in Nishapur, killing most of them and stealing their money and goods<sup>262</sup>.

Even though most of the above-mentioned attacks conducted by Nizaris seemed to be for the purpose of looting instead of expansion, yet it must have been at the back of their

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<sup>254</sup> Ibid.

<sup>255</sup> Ibid., 85.

<sup>256</sup> Turkomans are a branch of Turkish people. In the Seljuk era, Turkomans were invited to settle in territories controlled by the Seljuks and were trusted by the Seljuk sultans.

<sup>257</sup> Ibid., 101.

<sup>258</sup> Ibid.

<sup>259</sup> Ibid., 111.

<sup>260</sup> Ibid.

<sup>261</sup> Ibid., 124.

<sup>262</sup> Ibid., 130.



minds that Sultan Sanjar – who was wary of the Nizaris’ threat – was still in power and was, for the most part, engaged in battle with the Kara-Khitans. This gave the order more breathing space and allowed them to be more comfortable in their aggression, wherever that may be committed and for whatever purpose.

## **Death**

Muhammad bin Buzurg Umid passed away on the 20<sup>th</sup> of February 1162 AD/ 3<sup>rd</sup> of Rabi al-Awwal, 557 AH and his son, Hasan, succeeded him as the fourth lord of Alamut. Regarding this incident, Ibn Athir’s account makes an appalling mistake, one that could throw his entire chronicle’s credibility into doubt:

This year [1162] there died al-Kiyā al-Sabbāhī, lord of Alamūt, the leader of the Isma’īlīs. His son took his place and publicly repented. He and his followers restored the prayers and the Ramadan fast. They sent to Qazwīn requesting people who could lead them in prayer and teach them the ordinances of Islam and these were duly sent.<sup>263</sup>

Ibn Athir made four glaring mistakes in the passage above: he confused Muhammad bin Buzurg-Umid with his father, Kiya Buzurg-Umid; he misnamed Kiya Buzurg-Umid as al-Kiya al-Sabbahi; he mistook Kiya’s death to have occurred in 1162 AD when he had died in 1138 AD instead, and confused his successor with Jalal-ad-Din Hasan, the sixth Lord and third Nizari Imam. As we shall find out, Muhammad’s successor, Hasan, was anything but “repentant” of his and his forefathers’ actions.

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<sup>263</sup> Ibid., 137.

## **Hasan, the Fourth Lord and First Imam of the *Hashshāshīn* (1162 AD – 1166 AD)**

Arguably one of the most controversial rulers of Alamut, Hasan bin Muhammad bin Buzurg-Umid was also the first Imam of the Nizari Isma'ilis. Born in the year 1126-7 AD/ 520 AH, Hasan nurtured a profound interest in the teachings of Hassan bin Sabbah and his own ancestors from a young age<sup>264</sup>. Being well-read, well-versed and reportedly having charming mannerisms, Hasan managed to generate a following among the dwellers of Alamut, especially because most of them believed him to be the Imam Hassan bin Sabbah had promised<sup>265</sup>. Hasan's father, Muhammad, was averse to this notion and punished those who believed his son to be the Imam. On one occasion Muhammad killed 250 people and expelled a further 250, who believed that Hasan was the Imam<sup>266</sup>. Under the circumstances, Hasan, himself, became defensive and rejected the notion that he had attempted to pose as the awaited Imam<sup>267</sup>. Juvaini also states that Muhammad was apprehensive of the thought of his son being the Imam because he believed the latter was not morally fit for such an honour<sup>268</sup>. Juvaini later informs us that Hasan was known to drink wine<sup>269</sup>, and the "irreligious and shameless" Nizaris thought drinking wine and committing sins was a sign that Hasan was the Imam<sup>270</sup>. This is why Hasan managed to garner a lot of support when he took Alamut's charge after his father's death.

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<sup>264</sup> Juvaini, *Ibid.*, 686.

<sup>265</sup> *Ibid.*, 687.

<sup>266</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>267</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>268</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>269</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>270</sup> *Ibid.*, 688.

## **The Imamate of Hasan bin Muhammad**

One of the most common charges leveled against the Nizaris is that their Imamate is not authentic since their first Imam, Hasan, was not the son of an Imam. Since the Imamate is carried forward by the laws of primogeniture, an Imam had to be fathered by an Imam – which Hasan was not. The Nizaris, however, believe differently.

There are two different traditions supporting Hasan's Imamate that are believed in and propagated by the Nizari Isma'ilis. The first, as related by Juvaini, states that during the reign of Hassan bin Sabbah, a grandson of Nizar was brought to Alamut in disguise. Hassan made him stay in the village at the foot of the castle's rock, which is now known as Gazor Khan. The grandson of Nizar – thereby one of the Nizari Imams – fornicated with Muhammad bin Buzurg-Umid's wife, as a result of which Hasan was born<sup>271</sup>. Of this tradition, too, there were two variants. The first suggests that there were three generations between Nizar and Hasan and that Hasan's true name was "Hasan, the son of al-Qahir bi-Quwwat-Allah, Hasan, the son of al-Muhtadi, the son of al-Hadi, the son of Nizar"<sup>272</sup> while the other believes that there were two generations between Nizar and Hasan and that the latter's name was: "Hasan, the son of al-Muhtadi, the son of al-Hadi, the son of Nizar"<sup>273</sup>.

The second tradition states that Nizar's grandson and Muhammad bin Buzurg-Umid had sons on the same day, and these two were exchanged by a woman three days later, so that Muhammad's son was sent away with the Imam and the Imam's son – i.e. Hasan – became the prince of Alamut<sup>274</sup>. Of these, Juvaini states, the first tradition is more commonly accepted but the descendants of Buzurg-Umid adhere to the second one. In contradiction to this statement, Juvaini also states that when Muhammad suspected the

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<sup>271</sup> Ibid., 692.

<sup>272</sup> Ibid., 695.

<sup>273</sup> Ibid.

<sup>274</sup> Ibid., 693.

Imam of fornicating with his wife, he had him killed<sup>275</sup>. Therefore, the truth in either story is highly suspect.

### **Declaration of Caliphate**

On the 17<sup>th</sup> of Ramadan of the year 559 AH<sup>276</sup> – July-August 1164 AD – Hasan held an elaborate ceremony at the foot of the hill of Alamut in which he declared a message that he supposedly received from the Imam<sup>277278</sup>. The gist of the message, according to Juvaini, was:

“Hasan, son of Muhammad, son of Buzurg-Umid, is our Caliph, *hujjat* and *da'i*. And our sect (*shi'a*) must obey and follow him in all spiritual and temporal matters, and regard his command as binding, and deem his word our word, and know that Maulana, has had pity on them, and called them to his mercy, and brought them to God.”<sup>279</sup>

Juvaini – obviously – rejects this *khutba* sent by the Imam as fake, calling the Arabic used in the text “broken, corrupt and full of gross mistakes and confused expressions”<sup>280</sup> thereby indicating that it was not written by the Arabic-speaking Imam, at all.

Even though during the ceremony Hasan named himself the *da'i*, *hujjat* and Caliph of the Imam, yet he later started to insist that he himself was the Imam<sup>281</sup>. By virtue of the

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<sup>275</sup> Ibid., 694.

<sup>276</sup> Ibid., 688.

<sup>277</sup> Ibid., 688.

<sup>278</sup> Another inconsistency in Juvaini’s narrative: if the Imam had already been murdered by Muhammad bin Buzurg-Umid, how did he communicate with Hasan after the death of Muhammad?

<sup>279</sup> Juvaini, *ibid.*, 689.

<sup>280</sup> Ibid.

<sup>281</sup> Ibid., 690.

ceremony of the declaration of Hasan's caliphate, the 17<sup>th</sup> of Ramadan became known among the Nizaris as "the Festival of the Resurrection"<sup>282</sup>: the day they got the license to drink wine and "openly indulge in sport and pleasure"<sup>283</sup>.

However, the festivities were not restricted to the 17<sup>th</sup> of Ramadan, alone. Juvaini states that the Nizari Isma'ilis believed:

[T]hat the Resurrection is when men shall come to God and the mysteries and truths of all Creation be revealed, and the acts of obedience abolished, for in this world all is action and there is no reckoning, but in the world to come all is reckoning and there is no action.<sup>284</sup>

The "Festival of Resurrection", hence, was the beginning of the other world for Hasan and his followers. Therefore, after the arrival of the said "Resurrection", the Nizaris were ordered by Hasan to violate all rules laid down by the Shari'at, and were informed that everything that was previously unlawful for them – such as drinking wine – was now lawful. Prayer was no longer to be formal: the Nizaris were deemed to always have God in their hearts and have "their souls constantly turned in the direction of the Divine Presence, for such is true prayer"<sup>285</sup>. Hasan was evidently so obsessed with his idea of the Resurrection, and believed so incessantly in its truth, that he ordered for people who followed the Shari'at after the Resurrection to be punished just the way

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<sup>282</sup> Ibid.

<sup>283</sup> Ibid.

<sup>284</sup> Ibid., 695.

<sup>285</sup> Ibid., 696.

people who abrogated the laws of the Shari'at were punished before the Resurrection<sup>286</sup>.

Hasan did not waste time before spreading his message to other places under his control and ordered *ra'is* Muzaffar, the governor of the castles of Quhistan, to declare the new reforms in his region. Subsequently, the *khutba* of the "Resurrection Day" was read in the castle of Mu'minabad in Quhistan, by *ra'is* Muzaffar on the 28<sup>th</sup> of Dhul al-Qa'da 559 AH/ 18<sup>th</sup> of October 1164 AD<sup>287</sup>. Juvaini reports that, similar to the festivities arranged by Hasan in Alamut, the *ra'is* Muzaffar, too, arranged wine-drinking and harp-playing<sup>288</sup> to celebrate the arrival of the much awaited Resurrection.

### **Abandonment of the Faith by Some Nizaris**

The said series of events did not go down very well with all Nizari Isma'ilis. Some – especially those dwelling in Quhistan – started to abandon the Nizari faith, along with their homes, to start living in "Muslim" lands, instead<sup>289</sup>. Others still – who did not want to abandon their homes – disapproved of the latest developments verbally whenever they could<sup>290</sup>. One of the reasons behind the aversion of the common people to Hasan's actions was his clear rejection of the Shar'iat<sup>291</sup> and the endorsement of practices forbidden in Islam and forbidden by Hassan bin Sabbah, too.

Hasan's reign caused very obvious cracks in the Nizari cause in many ways: as already stated, there was already a schism among Nizari Isma'ilis upon the issue of the generations between Nizar and Hasan, and now Hasan's innovations in the faith saw

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<sup>286</sup> Ibid.

<sup>287</sup> Ibid., 691.

<sup>288</sup> Ibid.

<sup>289</sup> Ibid., 697.

<sup>290</sup> Ibid.

<sup>291</sup> Ibid., 696.

many followers abandoning it, altogether. Furthermore, the Nizaris seemingly were not a military force to be reckoned with, anymore, either, for none of the primary sources report any militant initiative taken by the group during the period of Hasan. Instead, according to Ibn Athir's chronicle, Emir Muhammad bin Unur, the Seljuk Emir for Khorasan or Quhistan raided the Nizaris' castles in the year 1163-64 AD/ 559 AH, plundered the inhabitants' belongings, killed many of them and took many others prisoner<sup>292</sup>. A year later the Nizaris suffered another blow when they attempted to besiege Qazvin and were dealt a heavy defeat by its dwellers<sup>293</sup>. There was no expansion to speak of, except for the construction of a castle near Qazvin<sup>294</sup>. Evidently, the first Imam's attention was reserved for his theological pursuits, while the rest of the order's affairs took a backseat.

The days of Hassan bin Sabbah surely felt like a thing of the distant past in the times of Hasan Ala' Zikrihi 's-Salam<sup>295296</sup> – as Hasan bin Muhammad's title went.

### **Hasan's Assassination**

The extent of the unrest caused by Hasan's policies among the Nizari Isma'ilis can be judged by the fact that the first Imam was murdered by one of his "followers", a Nizari – in fact, his own brother-in-law, Hasan bin Namavar<sup>297</sup>. Juvaini reports that Hasan bin Namavar stabbed Hasan bin Muhammad on the 6<sup>th</sup> of Rabi al-Awwal 561 AD/ 9<sup>th</sup> of

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<sup>292</sup> Ibn al-Athir, Part II, 155.

<sup>293</sup> Ibid., 159.

<sup>294</sup> Ibid.

<sup>295</sup> Juvaini, *ibid.*, 697.

<sup>296</sup> "Peace be on his mention"

<sup>297</sup> Juvaini, *Ibid.*

January 1166 AD in the castle of Lammasar<sup>298</sup> bringing the latter's four-year tumultuous reign to an end.

### **Muhammad bin Hasan, the Second Imam (1166 AD – 1210 AD)**

Muhammad bin Hassan – also termed “Nur al-Din Muhammad”<sup>299</sup> – succeeded his father at the age of 19<sup>300</sup>. The first step Muhammad had to take was to punish the murderer of his father: he had Hasan bin Namavar and the *entire* race of Buyids – to which Hasan belonged – killed<sup>301</sup>.

Muhammad's reign, too, saw further “libertinism” and “heresy” – to use the words of Ata Malik Juvaini – infiltrate the belief system of the Nizaris, while assassinations and robberies also continued<sup>302</sup>. Juvaini states that Muhammad attempted to incorporate borrowed philosophical thought into the religion and attempted – in vain – to boast the knowledge of Arabic, poetry, proverbs, exegesis, etc.<sup>303</sup> During Muhammad's long reign, he had two sons and he lived long enough to see them reach middle-age, too. The elder one, Hasan, was the natural heir to the Imamate and was beforehand named by the father as his successor. As soon as Hasan reached adulthood, he developed a dislike for his father's religious principals and turned against him<sup>304</sup>. Subsequently, the two became so opposed to each other that Muhammad reportedly started to carry arms with him wherever his son was around<sup>305</sup>. Muhammad's fears against his son were, perhaps, justified as Hasan did indeed make covert plans to put an end to the Nizari Isma'ili faith:

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<sup>298</sup> Ibid.

<sup>299</sup> Daftary, *The Ismailis: Their History and Doctrines*, 302.

<sup>300</sup> Juvaini, *ibid.*, 697.

<sup>301</sup> Ibid., 698.

<sup>302</sup> Ibid.

<sup>303</sup> Ibid.

<sup>304</sup> Ibid.

<sup>305</sup> Ibid., 699.



Now Jalal-ad-Din Hasan, whether because of the orthodoxy of his beliefs or because of his hostility towards his father [...], conspired against Muhammad and sent secretly to the Caliph of Baghdad and the sultans and rulers of other lands to claim that, unlike his father, he was by faith a Moslem and that when his turn came to reign he would abolish the Heresy and re-introduce the observance of Islam. And in this fashion he paved the way and made preparations (for the future).<sup>306</sup>

This passage leaves a lot wanting: which “other lands” did Hasan write to? How did the said measures help Hasan prepare for the future and in what ways? The “other lands” in question could very well be those of the Kara-Khitans whose shadow was constantly looming over northern Persia and who later merged into the Mongol Empire that caused the destruction of Baghdad as well as the Isma’ilis’ strongholds; or the lands of Chingiz Khan, himself. A farfetched conclusion could even accuse Hasan of inviting foreign powers to destroy the Nizaris’ castles, himself, in order to put an end to the faith. Nevertheless, Hasan’s intentions in writing to the rulers of foreign lands cannot be deduced with accuracy with the above-stated passage alone, and there is nothing to be gained from conjecture so the discussion is better abandoned.

### **Quhistan: Shihāb al-Dīn Ghūri Descends Upon the Nizaris**

Nur al-Din Muhammad’s reign saw the *Hashshāshīn* make another formidable enemy: Shihāb al-Dīn, the joint sultan of the Ghūrid Empire. In the year 1200-01 AD/ 597 AH,

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<sup>306</sup> Ibid.

Shihāb al-Dīn attacked a village whose residents were Ismaʿilis, ordered all the “men who could bear arms” to be killed, plundered the Ismaʿilis’ possessions and took their women as slaves<sup>307</sup>. He proceeded to another city named Gunābād, which was occupied completely by Ismaʿilis, and besieged it<sup>308</sup>. After this move, the Nizari lord of Quhistan sent a complaint about Shihāb al-Dīn to his brother, Ghiyāth al-Dīn, saying, ““There is a treaty between us. What have we done that you besiege my city?””<sup>309</sup>. Meanwhile, the Nizaris, afraid of Shihāb al-Dīn, asked for terms, which he offered them: they were to evacuate the city and leave it for one of the Ghūrids to take over who would reinstate regular prayer and other orthodox Muslim practices in it<sup>310</sup>. As for Shihāb al-Dīn, he left Gunābād and laid siege to another Nizari fortress<sup>311</sup>. At this point, Ghiyāth al-Dīn’s messenger came to Shihāb al-Dīn and delivered the elder brother’s order for the younger to depart and leave his subjects in peace<sup>312</sup>. Shihāb al-Dīn at first resisted, but when the messenger cut his tent’s cords off, the humiliated sultan had no choice but to end the siege and leave, albeit not back to Ghazna, his brother’s capital, but to India<sup>313</sup>.

### **Syria: Sinān and Salāh ad-Dīn Come Face-to-Face**

Around the time when Hasan bin Muhammad became the lord of Alamut, Rashid ad-Din Sinān, perhaps the best known of the Assassins in the West, also assumed power in Syria<sup>314</sup>. About ten years later, Salāh ad-Dīn – anglicized as Saladin – rose in Egypt as the first ruler of the Ayyubid dynasty and was later to become famous for recapturing

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<sup>307</sup> Ibn al-Athir, *ibid.*, Part III, 58.

<sup>308</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>309</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>310</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>311</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>312</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>313</sup> *Ibid.*, 59.

<sup>314</sup> Zsot Hunyadi & Jozsef Laszlovszky, ed., *The Crusades and the Military Orders: Expanding the Frontiers of Medieval Latin Christianity*, (Hungary: KEPIRO Ltd.), 2001, 28.

Jerusalem for the Muslims from the rule of the Franks. It is commonly believed that Salāh ad-Dīn and Sinan had many encounters, however, primary sources – including Salāh ad-Dīn’s own biography, *al-Nawādir al-Sultāniyya wa’l-Mahāsin al-Yūsufiyya*<sup>315</sup> or “The Rare and Excellent History of Saladin” by Bahā’ al-Dīn Ibn Shaddād – have very few reports of such incidents. One of these, penned down by Ibn al-Athir, goes as following:

When Saladin left for Aleppo, as we have previously related, he moved against the Ismā’īlīs’ territory in Muharram [July 1176] to wage war on them because of what they had done, attacking him and trying to kill him. He ravaged their land, destroying and burning. He besieged the fortress of Masyāf, one of their strongest and most impregnable castles. He set up trebuchets and pressed hard on the defenders without any break. Sinān, the leader of the Ismā’īlīs, sent to Shihāb al-Dīn al-Hārimī, the lord of Hama, who was Saladin’s maternal uncle asking him to intercede for him, and adding, ‘If you do not, we will kill you and all of Saladin’s family and emirs.’ Shihāb al-Dīn came to Saladin, interceded for them and asked for them to be pardoned. Saladin agreed to this, made peace with them and then departed.<sup>316</sup>

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<sup>315</sup> Baha al-Din Ibn Shaddad, tr. D.S. Richards, *al-Nawādir al-Sultāniyya wa’l-Mahāsin al-Yūsufiyya* or “The Rare and Excellent History of Saladin”, (Farnham: Ashgate Publishing Limited), 2002.

<sup>316</sup> Ibn al-Athir, *ibid.*, Part II, 249.

Ibn al-Athir informs us that earlier in the same year, the Nizaris attempted to murder Salāh ad-Dīn<sup>317</sup>. It is possible that in besieging Masyaf, the Ayyubid sultan did not want to put an end to the Nizaris but only wished to punish them for making an attempt on his life. It is also possible that instead of wiping them out, Salāh ad-Dīn found a better use for the *Hashshāshīn*, as is evidenced by the murder of Conrad of Montferrat, which was reportedly<sup>318</sup> conducted by the Assassins at Salāh ad-Dīn's behest.

### **Nur al-Din Muhammad's Death**

Muhammad's forty-four years long reign – the longest among the eight lords of Alamut – ended on the 10<sup>th</sup> of Rabi al-Awwal 607 AH/ 1<sup>st</sup> of September 1210<sup>319</sup> when he passed away. Juvaini states that he could possibly have been poisoned.<sup>320</sup>

### **Jalal-ud-Din Hasan, the Third Imam (1210 AD – 1221 AD)**

After a long period of religious innovation, the Nizari Isma'ilis took a sharp turn towards orthodoxy under Hasan, the son of Muhammad, whose title was Jalal-ud-Din. Ibn Athir again successfully mutilates the name as “Jalal al-Din ibn al-Sabbah”<sup>321</sup>, declaring that he was one of Hassan bin Sabbah's descendants<sup>322</sup>. As has already been stated, Hasan wrote letters to foreign rulers even during his father's reign, condemning his father and his predecessors' beliefs and insisting that he, Hasan, was in fact a believing Muslim. Once in power, Hasan turned his words into actions and prompted his subjects to abandon the ways of their forefathers, return to orthodox Islam and adhere to the

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<sup>317</sup> Ibid., 243.

<sup>318</sup> Ibid., 396.

<sup>319</sup> Juvaini, *ibid.*, 699.

<sup>320</sup> Ibid.

<sup>321</sup> Ibn al-Athir, *ibid.*, Part III, 156.

<sup>322</sup> Ibid., 156.

Shari'at<sup>323</sup>. According to Ibn Athir, the announcement for this was made in the year 1211-1212 AD/ 608 AH, a little over a year after Jalal-ad-Din assumed charge<sup>324</sup>. He again sent messengers to “the Caliph of Baghdad, Muhammad Khorazm-Shah and the *maliks* and emirs of Iraq and elsewhere to notify them of these changes”<sup>325</sup>. After his conversion was attested by Baghdad, rulers all over the Muslim world released fatwas recognizing his and his people's conversion, thereby allowing them all the “privileges” granted to fellow Muslims: Muslims were now allowed to marry the Nizaris and their rulers opened diplomatic ties with them<sup>326</sup>. The people of Qazvin – having suffered a lot at the hands of the predecessors of Hasan – were at first apprehensive of accepting the new change, but eventually, after their learned people visited Alamut and other territories of the Nizaris, Qazvin, too, accepted Hasan and his subjects as “Muslims”<sup>327</sup>. Jalal-ad-Din also ordered the building of mosques in his lands, had his forefathers' controversial books burnt and sent his Muslim mother on pilgrimage – Jalal-ad-Din and his followers became known as the “Neo-Moslems”<sup>328</sup>. These events are also attested by Ibn Athir, who states that these developments occurred in the year 1211-12 AD/ 608 AH<sup>329</sup>. All of these efforts bore fruit on the diplomatic level, as well: the rulers of the Muslim world were no longer aggressive towards the Nizaris so there were no crackdowns on their castles<sup>330</sup>. It is safe to assume that the Nizaris, too, were no longer engaged in assassinating their adversaries. But that does not mean that all was peaceful in the lands of the *Hashshāshīn*.

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<sup>323</sup> Juvaini, *ibid.*

<sup>324</sup> Ibn al-Athir, *ibid.*, Part III, 156.

<sup>325</sup> Juvaini, *ibid.*

<sup>326</sup> *Ibid.*, 699-700.

<sup>327</sup> *Ibid.*, 700.

<sup>328</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>329</sup> Ibn al-Athir, *ibid.* Part III, 156.

<sup>330</sup> Juvaini, *ibid.*, 701.

## New Friends and New Adversaries

With radical changes in belief system and practices, the Nizaris, under Jalal-ad-Din made new allies – and new enemies. Juvaini states that Jalal-ad-Din was particularly friendly with atabeg Muzaffar-ad-Din Öz-Beg – “Emir Uzbek ibn Pahlawān”<sup>331</sup> in Ibn al-Athir – the reigning king of Azerbaijan and Arran<sup>332</sup>. Öz-Beg, in turn, was at loggerheads with Nasir-ad-Din Mengli – “Manklī”<sup>333</sup> in Ibn al-Athir – the *mutamallik*, or the reigning ruler, of Iraq<sup>334335</sup>. Jalal-ad-Din formed a formal alliance with Öz-Beg in 1213-14 AD/ 610 AH, and moved into Azerbaijan with his troops to help the king in his battle against Mengli<sup>336</sup>. With the help of other forces, Öz-Beg and Jalal-ad-Din managed to defeat Mengli in 1214-15 AD/ 611 AH according to Juvaini<sup>337</sup>, and 1215-1216 AD/ 612 AH according to Ibn Athir<sup>338</sup>. As a prize for this victory, Jalal-ad-Din was granted the lands of Abhar and Zanzan<sup>339</sup>, and, in general, was more celebrated in the Muslim lands than ever before. However, the intensity of the mistrust that orthodox Muslims felt for the Isma’ilis can be judged by the fact that when Jalal-ad-Din requested the emirs of Gilan to give their women’s hand in marriage to him they refused, until Baghdad approved of the union<sup>340</sup>. The approval, of course, was duly granted and Jalal-ad-Din managed to take four wives from the mentioned quarters<sup>341</sup>.

Unarguably, Jalal-ad-Din’s most appalling act – about which suspicions were raised earlier in this chapter – was that of declaring allegiance to Chingiz Khan, even before

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<sup>331</sup> Ibn al-Athir, *ibid.*, Part III, 164.

<sup>332</sup> Juvaini, *ibid.*, 701.

<sup>333</sup> Ibn al-Athir, *ibid.*, Part III, 164.

<sup>334</sup> “Lord of the Uplands” in Ibn al-Athir, Vol. 3, p. 326.

<sup>335</sup> Juvaini, *ibid.*

<sup>336</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>337</sup> *Ibid.*, 702.

<sup>338</sup> Ibn al-Athir, *ibid.*, Part III, 164.

<sup>339</sup> Juvaini, *ibid.*, 702.

<sup>340</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>341</sup> *Ibid.*, 703.

the Mongol Emperor invaded Muslim regions<sup>342</sup>. Juvaini states that this claim was made by the Nizaris, and that the truth in the claim cannot be determined<sup>343</sup>. But he goes on to say:

[B]ut this much is evident, that when the armies of the World-Conquering Emperor Chingiz-Khan entered the countries of Islam, the first ruler on this side of the Oxus to send ambassadors, and present his duty, and accept allegiance was Jalal-ad-Din.<sup>344</sup>

Thus, it cannot be denied that Jalal-ad-Din did, in effect, surrender the Nizaris' castles to the Mongols before the latter actually took them in the 1250s. It also, thus, cannot be debated that the third Imam of the Nizari Isma'ilis himself worked diligently against the survival of his own faith, and his own state, and wished to annihilate both with his own hands.

## **Death**

Jalal-ad-Din passed away in November 1221 AD/ Ramadan 618 AH due to dysentery, which, some thought, occurred as a result of being poisoned by his own wives and sister<sup>345</sup>. For this, the vizier of the kingdom had the king's sister, wives and other relations executed – some were even burnt to death<sup>346</sup>. Jalal-ad-Din left his only son, nine-year-old Ala-ad-Din, in charge of the Nizari Isma'ili state<sup>347</sup>.

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<sup>342</sup> Ibid.

<sup>343</sup> Ibid.

<sup>344</sup> Ibid.

<sup>345</sup> Ibid.

<sup>346</sup> Ibid., 704.

<sup>347</sup> Ibid.

## **Ala-ad-Din, the Fourth Imam (1221 AD – 1255 AD)**

As has already been mentioned, Ala-ad-Din succeeded to the Nizari Isma'ili throne when he was merely nine years of age. Since the king was a minor, the need for a regent arose as soon as he assumed control of the Nizaris Isma'ili state. Juvaini states that in Ala-ad-Din's early years, the control of the kingdom had fallen to "the decision of women"<sup>348</sup>, but he does not mention exactly which women; they were most likely his mother – if she was still alive – and, perhaps, stepmothers or his father's sisters. Under the rule of this group of women, Juvaini further states, the Nizari Isma'ilis returned to their old beliefs and practices, rejecting the reforms brought about by Jalal-ad-Din.

Juvaini throws ample light upon the personal traits of Ala-ad-Din, stating, among other things, that the young king suffered from a "natural lack of intelligence and the want of education"<sup>349</sup>. These conditions became worse when, at about age fourteen or fifteen, he fell ill and his physician, in an attempt to cure him, cut his vein and shed a good deal of his blood. Instead of curing, however, the physician's act damaged the boy's brain as a result of which he started hallucinating and, ultimately, was struck with melancholia<sup>350</sup>. This worsened the affairs in his state as the incompetent ruler also grew extremely short-tempered – enough to execute somebody who so much as gave him a word of advice<sup>351</sup>. The Imam's followers, too, were intolerant of anybody contradicting his word and acting against his orders, since the Imam was supposed to be a demigod of sorts and was never supposed to be wrong<sup>352</sup>. Partly due to his disease

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<sup>348</sup> Ibid.

<sup>349</sup> Ibid., 705.

<sup>350</sup> Ibid.

<sup>351</sup> Ibid.

<sup>352</sup> Ibid.



and partly because he assumed the reigns of Imamate at a very young age and let the authority go to his head, the Imam believed he had a host of supernatural powers such as the ability to foretell the future and receive messages from the divine<sup>353</sup>.

Juvaini also informs us that in Ala-ad-Din's time "[t]heft, highway robbery and assault were daily occurrences"<sup>354</sup> that went unpunished. A high profile assassination – that of one of the emirs of Khwarazmi ruler Jalal ad-Din Mingburnu – brought a good deal of devastation to the order's settlements "from the confines of Alamut to Girdkuh in Khurasan"<sup>355</sup> at the hands of Mingburnu. The Nizaris later avenged the devastation caused by Jalal ad-Din by helping the Tatars against him in 1230 AD/ 628 AH<sup>356</sup>.

### **Relationship with His Son, Rukn-ad-Din**

Ala-ad-Din's condition had very adverse effects on his relationship with Rukn-ad-Din Khurshah, Ala-ad-Din's eldest son and heir apparent. Since all in the Nizari Isma'ili state knew that Rukn-ad-Din was going to be the next Imam, they treated him with the same respect and honored his word just like they honored his father's word<sup>357</sup>. The paranoid Ala-ad-Din did not welcome this equality in status and declared that he would make another of his sons, and not the eldest, his heir apparent<sup>358</sup>. Rukn-ad-Din was also subjected to ill treatment by his father and was forced to live in the women's quarters, forbidden to ever come out<sup>359</sup>. The dishonored and frustrated son began to feel threatened by his father and planned to rebel against his rule. He gathered support

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<sup>353</sup> Ibid., 706.

<sup>354</sup> Ibid.

<sup>355</sup> Ibn al-Athir, *ibid.*, Part III, 283.

<sup>356</sup> Ibid., 303.

<sup>357</sup> Juvaini, *ibid.*, 707.

<sup>358</sup> Ibid.

<sup>359</sup> Ibid.

from such of the state's ministers, soldiers and other men of importance who also felt unsafe under the ill-tempered king, by presenting the following argument:

‘Because [...] of my father's evil behaviour the Mongol army intends to attack this kingdom, and my father is concerned about nothing. I shall secede from him and send messengers to the Emperor of the Face of the Earth and to the servants of his Court and accept submission and allegiance. And henceforth I shall allow no one in my kingdom to commit an evil act [and so ensure] that land and people may survive’<sup>360</sup>

Rukn-ad-Din's plans to liberate the kingdom from his father's rule were cut short when he fell ill and was bedridden. However, on the 1<sup>st</sup> of December 1255/ 29<sup>th</sup> of Shavval, 653 while Rukn-ad-Din was still ill, his father was assassinated when he had fallen asleep, drinking, in a hut next to the castle of Shirkuh<sup>361</sup>. And, so, the estranged son became king.

### **Rukn-ad-Din Khurshah, the Fifth Imam (1255 AD – 1256 AD)**

Rukn-ad-Din's reign, though short, was highly eventful owing mostly to Hülegü Khan's invasion, which Juvaini's chronicle describes in detail. However, before the Mongols, was the issue of finding and punishing the murderer of his father. With much ado and after putting a lot of innocent souls to death, it was discovered that the murderer of Ala-ad-Din was his trusted companion, Hasan of Mazandaran<sup>362</sup>. It was also alleged by some

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<sup>360</sup> Ibid., 708.

<sup>361</sup> Ibid.

<sup>362</sup> Ibid., 708.

that Rukn-ad-Din was an accomplice in the murder, too, since he did not punish Hasan immediately but had him murdered later<sup>363</sup>.

Another of Rukn-ad-Din's earliest moves was to send an army to "Shal-Rud"; his men succeeded in taking the castle, murdering a lot of its occupants and looting their belongings<sup>364</sup>. The new Imam also shared his grandfather's orthodox beliefs and ordered his subjects to "behave as Moslems"<sup>365</sup>.

### **The Mongol Invasion**

As has already been mentioned, Rukn-ad-Din had every intention to swear allegiance to the Mongol Empire once he came into power. He accordingly sent a man – perhaps around April or May, 1256, before June that year in any case – to Yasa'ur Noyan, who was stationed in Hamadan, to declare his intention to submit to Hülegü Khan<sup>366</sup>. Yasa'ur asked Rukn-ad-Din to complete the act in person, in response to which Rukn-ad-Din sent his brother, Shahanshah, and other officials to Yasa'ur who decided that Shahanshah and his companions were to be escorted by his son, Moraqa, to Hülegü's court. On the other hand, and in stark contrast with the proceedings, Yasa'ur also headed a group of Mongol and Tazik forces to Alamut valley to attack Rukn-ad-Din's castles<sup>367</sup>. While Yasa'ur advanced, Rukn-ad-Din had his force and *fida'is* ready and waiting for the attackers atop the Siyalan-Kuh, or Syalan, to the northeast of the castle of Alamut. Juvaini states that the battle was well contested and that the attackers, Yasa'ur and his men, were forced to withdraw since "the hilltop was strongly fortified and the garrison large"<sup>368</sup>. The purpose of Yasa'ur's attack remained unclear until Shahanshah returned

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<sup>363</sup> Ibid., 711.

<sup>364</sup> Ibid., 712.

<sup>365</sup> Ibid.

<sup>366</sup> Ibid., 713.

<sup>367</sup> Ibid.

<sup>368</sup> Ibid.

from Hülegü's court bringing the message that the Mongol king demanded Rukn-ad-Din to destroy all of his castles and declare his submission to the Empire, after which no further attacks would be made against him or his people. This was probably every bit a lie, since – as we shall later find out – the Mongols' *yasa* clearly stated the annihilation of the Nizaris as one of its objectives. The Nizari king, however, declared submission to the “World-King” – as Juvaini, the Mongol court historiographer, calls Hülegü – and destroyed some of his castles but “in the case of Alamut, Maimun-Diz and Lammasar he simply removed the gates and demolished some of the battlements (*sar-dīvār*) and turrets (*kungra*)”<sup>369</sup>. As ready as Rukn-ad-Din was to submit to the Mongols, the actual act of submission was evidently much harder than he thought. However, after many unsuccessful attempts at saving his castles, Rukn-ad-Din finally came down from Maimun-Diz and surrendered his castles and his self to Hülegü on 19<sup>th</sup> of November, 1256/ 29-30 Shawwal, 654<sup>370</sup>. The Mongols captured and demolished all the Nizari castles in the Alborz range by January 2, 1257 AD/ Dhu al-Haj 16, 654 AH when Lammasar was taken<sup>371</sup>. Meanwhile, Ötegü-China, the commander of the army of Khorasan, dealt with the Quhistani Nizaris<sup>372</sup>. Girdkuh was apparently the last of the castles to be brought down, but a date has not been given. After capturing the castles, the Mongols showed no mercy to Rukn-ad-Din or his people. The Nizari king was assassinated with deception, along with other members of his family<sup>373</sup> and the rest of the Nizari Isma'ili community:

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<sup>369</sup> Ibid., 713-14.

<sup>370</sup> Ibid., 717.

<sup>371</sup> Ibid., 722.

<sup>372</sup> Ibid. 724.

<sup>373</sup> Ibid., 723-4

Now it had been laid down in the original *yasa* of Chingiz-Khan and also in the decree of Mengü Qa'an that none of that people should be spared, not even the babe in its cradle. And all his followers in their thousands and hundreds had been guarded by shrewd supervisors and they had spoken words and committed deeds such as called for haste and occasioned the shedding of their blood. The command was therefore issued for *elchis* to depart to all the armies with orders for each unit to put to death the men entrusted to it. [...] He [Rukn-ad-Din] and his followers were kicked to a pulp and then put to the sword; and of him and his stock no trace was left, and he and his kindred became but a tale on men's lips and a tradition in the world. So was the world cleansed which had been polluted by their evil.<sup>374</sup>

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<sup>374</sup> Ibid., 723-5.

## Chapter 6: Assassination: Targets, Methods and Goals

*“It was Hasan-i-Sabah who turned assassination into an art form – maximizing the political benefit of minimum loss of life and offering a more humane method of resolving political differences than the carnage and suffering of the traditional battlefield. Assassination has the unusual effect of entering directly into the halls of power and touching the decision makers themselves rather than the average citizen, the age-old victim of the political adventurism of his leaders.”<sup>375</sup>*

- James Wasserman, *The Templars and the Assassins*

Assassination, unarguably, was the one reason that gave the *Hashshāshīn* great renown – for better or for worse. Yet, considering their reputation as ruthless assassins, there is remarkably little evidence documented by their numero uno chronicler, Juvaini, to provide an authentic record of the assassinations conducted by the Order. Fortunately for historians, though, other contemporary chroniclers of the period have provided enough reliable material for us to present a comprehensive analysis of the topic.

### Assassinations

It can safely be said that the *Hashshāshīn*’s main targets of assassination were men of power: political or religious opponents, or aggressors against the Order’s strongholds. The first step towards proving this statement is to present details of the various assassinations conducted by the group, as chronicled by primary sources.

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<sup>375</sup> James Wasserman, *The Templars and the Assassins: The Militia of Heaven*, (Rochester: Inner Traditions International), 2001, 109.

## Assassinations in Persia

*Nizām-al-Mulk Hasan bin Alī bin Ishāq of Tūs – October 16, 1092 AD/ Ramadan 12, 485 AH*

It is generally believed – and supported by Juvaini<sup>376</sup> – that Nizām-al-Mulk Tūsī, the famous Seljuk vizier, was the *Hashshāshīn*'s first victim. Later historians like Ibn Khaldun also recognize the act, but do not mention if it was the first of the Order's assassinations<sup>377</sup>. Ibn al-Athir, however, differs, stating that a muezzin from Saveh, who had declined the Nizaris' call to their faith in the sect's early years, was "their first victim"<sup>378</sup>. Nevertheless, the repeated mistakes in Ibn al-Athir's narrative render it unreliable, therefore the "honour" of being the *Hashshāshīn*'s first victim remains with Nizām-al-Mulk. Juvaini gives a detailed description of the Seljuk vizier's assassination:

Hassan-i-Sabbah spread the snare of artifices in order at the first opportunity to catch some splendid game, such as Nizam-al-Mulk, in the net of destruction and increase thereby his own reputation. With the juggling of deceit and the trickery of falsehood, with absurd preparations and spurious deceptions, he laid the basis of the *fida*'is. A person called Bu-Tahir, Arrani by name and by origin, was afflicted 'with loss both of this world and of the next', and in his misguided striving after bliss in the world to come on the night of Friday the 12<sup>th</sup> of Ramazan, 485 [16<sup>th</sup> of October, 1092] he went up to Nizam-al-Mulk's litter at a stage called Sahna in the region of Nihavand. Nizam-al-Mulk

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<sup>376</sup> Juvaini, *ibid.*, 677.

<sup>377</sup> Ibn Khaldun, *ibid.*, Vol 7, 38.

<sup>378</sup> Ibn al-Athir, *ibid.*, Part I, 40.

having broken the fast, was being borne in the litter from the Sultan's audience-place to the tent of his harem. Bu-Tahir who was disguised as a Sufi, stabbed him with a dagger and by that blow Nizam-al-Mulk was martyred.<sup>379</sup>

In a few years' time – by 1098-9 AD/ 492 AH – the *Hashshāshīn* had managed to conduct “a series of assassinations of senior emirs in the sultan's<sup>380</sup> state”<sup>381</sup>, cementing their reputation as target killers.

*Emir Bilge Beg Sarmaz – July-August 1100 AD/ Ramadan 493 AH*

Ibn al-Athir states that the emir of Isfahan<sup>382</sup>, Emir Bilge Beg Sarmaz, was assassinated by the Nizaris in the Ramadan of 493 AH or the year 1100 AD<sup>383</sup>. His account does not reflect much upon the assassination methods of the Order but it does capture the fear induced by the *Hashshāshīn* with considerable effect:

In Ramadān [10 July – 8 August 1100] Emir Bilge Beg Sarmaz was killed at Isfahan in the palace of Sultan Muhammad. He had been very wary of the Bātinīs, never omitting to wear his breastplate and always having an escort. On that particular day he did not wear his breastplate and entered the sultan's palace with just a few men. The Bātinīs slew him. One was killed and another got away.<sup>384</sup>

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<sup>379</sup> Juvaini, *Ibid.*, 676-7.

<sup>380</sup> Seljuk Sultan Barkiyaruq.

<sup>381</sup> Ibn al-Athir, Part I, 24.

<sup>382</sup> *Ibid.*, 27.

<sup>383</sup> *Ibid.*, 33

<sup>384</sup> *Ibid.*



The above-given passage shows how strongly the threat of the *Hashshāshīn* was felt within the upper echelon of the Seljuk hierarchy. The Emir's fear of the Assassins was substantial enough for him to wear a breastplate – to protect himself from the *fida'is*' dagger – religiously, possibly even while he slept. Another important deduction that can be made from the given narrative is that the *Hashshāshīn* infiltrated targets' guard – those who had one – in order to assassinate them, for how else would they have known when Emir Sarmaz was traveling without his protective breastplate? And how else would they have been in the right position to make the most of the opportunity? Only a member of the emir's guard would have got away with carrying arms while staying close enough to be able to murder the emir as soon as an opportunity presented itself.

*Al-A'azz Abū'l-Mahāsin – December 6, 1101 AD/ Safar 12, 495 AH*

Al-Aa'zz Abū'l Mahāsin 'Abd al-Jalil ibn Muhammad al-Dihistani, the vizier of Seljuk Sultan Barkiyaruq, was assassinated in the year 1101 AD/495 AH by a “fair-haired youth”<sup>385</sup> who was suspected of being a Nizari. Ibn Khaldun also recognizes this event, out rightly holding the *Hashshāshīn* responsible for it.<sup>386</sup> He also mentions that the assassin used a spear to murder the vizier.

*Abū Ja'far ibn al-Mushāt – 1104-05 AD/ 498 AH*

Abū Ja'far ibn al-Mushāt – assassinated in 498 AH<sup>387</sup> – represents another category of people targeted by the *Hashshāshīn*: religious scholars. Ibn al-Athir states that Abū Ja'far was “one of the leading Shāfi'ī scholars”<sup>388</sup> who had “learnt his law from al-

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<sup>385</sup> Ibid., 54.

<sup>386</sup> Ibn Khaldun, Ibid., Vol. 7, 72.

<sup>387</sup> Ibn al-Athir, ibid., Part I, 92.

<sup>388</sup> Ibid.

Khujandī and used to teach and give sermons in Rayy”<sup>389</sup>. He was assassinated as he was stepping down from his teaching stool.

*Abbasid Caliph al-Mustarshid bi-Allāh – August 29, 1135 AD/ Dhu’l Qa’da 17, 529 AH*

One of the most high-profile assassinations allegedly carried out by the *Hashshāshīn* was that of the Abbasid caliph al-Mustarshid bi-Allāh Abū Mansūr, in 1135 AD<sup>390391392</sup>.

The caliph was held in confinement inside a tent by Seljuk Sultan Mas’ud, after the former had charged against and lost in battle to the latter in June-July 1135 AD/ Ramadan 529 AH<sup>393</sup>. It was in this state of isolation that on the 29<sup>th</sup> of August 1135 AD, twenty-four *Hashshāshīn* entered his tent and murdered him by giving him as much as twenty wounds<sup>394</sup>. Not only was this one of the most prolific murders conducted by the Order, it was also the most ruthless: after dealing twenty blows to him, the *Hashshāshīn* mutilated al-Mustarshid’s body by “cutting off his nose and ears and [leaving] him naked”<sup>395</sup>. This was, perhaps, the first time the Order turned an assassination into a terrorising message. Indeed, target-killing people in itself is a warning, but mutilating their dead bodies makes the warning all the more haunting – and hence, effective.

The oddest aspect of this murder was that al-Mustarshid did not have any particular history with the *Hashshāshīn*. He had not taken any offensive against their castles nor did he actively engage them in battle, to the writer’s knowledge. In fact, he had – as stated – recently locked horns with a common enemy: the Seljuk Sultan Ghiyath ad-Din Mas’ud. Was it his status as the crowned caliph of the Sunni Abbasid Caliphate the only

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<sup>389</sup> Ibid.

<sup>390</sup> Ibid., 318.

<sup>391</sup> Ibn Khaldun, *ibid.*, Vol. 7, 127.

<sup>392</sup> Juvaini, *ibid.*, 685-6.

<sup>393</sup> Ibn al-Athir, *ibid.*, Part I, 317.

<sup>394</sup> Ibid.

<sup>395</sup> Ibid., 318.

reason behind al-Mustarshid's violent assassination? Or was it that other forces – such as the Seljuk Sultan, himself – instigated the murder without having to face the blame for it? We can never be completely sure.

*Nizām al-Mulk Mas'ūd ibn 'Alī – March-April 1200 AD/ Jumada al-Thani 596 AH*

Nizām al-Mulk Mas'ūd ibn 'Alī, the vizier of Khwarazm-Shah Tekesh, was assassinated by the *Hashshāshīn* in 1200 AD/ 596 AH, according to Ibn al-Athir<sup>396</sup>. The motivation behind his assassination is also not clear. Ibn al-Athir's chronicle insists that Nizām al-Mulk Mas'ūd belonged to the Shafi'i school and worked for its promotion in Khwarazm<sup>397</sup>. It is possible that the *Hashshāshīn* assassinated him for his religious affiliations – just as they were persecuted for their religious affiliations.

*Shihāb al-Dīn Ghūri – March 13, 1206 AD/ Sha'ban 1, 602 AH*

When Shihāb al-Dīn Abū'l Muzaffar Muhammad ibn Sām al-Ghūri was assassinated, he was the reigning ruler of the Ghūrid dynasty that, at the time, spread from Khorasan in Persia to Bengal at the far east of India. Ibn al-Athir states that the Khokhars<sup>398</sup> were probably behind Shihāb al-Dīn's murder, but the *Hashshāshīn*, too, are suspected of committing the act<sup>399</sup>. Ibn al-Athir describes the incident in the following words:

When his men had left him [Shihāb al-Dīn] and he remained alone in a tent, this group [the Khokhars] sprang into action. One of them killed one of the guards at the entrance to Shihāb al-Dīn's pavilion. When he was killed, he cried out and his comrades

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<sup>396</sup> Ibid., Part 3, 52.

<sup>397</sup> Ibid.

<sup>398</sup> Ibid., 92.

<sup>399</sup> Ibid., 93.

rushed to see what was wrong with him and left their posts. There was a great commotion and the Khokars took advantage of this neglect of their watch. They went in to Shihāb al-Dīn in his tent and struck him with their daggers twenty-four blows and slew him. His men came in and found him on his prayer mat dead, in a position of prostration. They seized these infidels and killed them. Two of their number were circumcised men<sup>400</sup>.

It is claimed that it was the Isma'īlīs who killed him because they feared his expedition into Khurasan. He had an army that was besieging one of their fortresses[.]<sup>401</sup>

Shihāb al-Dīn's assassination was very characteristic of those carried out by the *Hashshāshīn*. He was a fierce political adversary: a very strong threat to the Nizari Isma'ili strongholds and to the sect's safety and strength throughout Khorasan. It would have been surprising that the assassination was associated with the Khokhars, had the deceased not been someone as influential as Shihāb al-Dīn. With a territory as expansive as his, Shihāb al-Dīn managed to make many enemies in his short life – and gave plenty of people plenty of reasons to be happy for his death.

It is important to note that Shihāb al-Dīn had been murdered while he was offering prayers. Traditionally, Islam forbids its followers from attacking a person while he is engaged in the act of offering prayers, because at that moment in time, he or she is utterly defenseless. Indeed, it is – and must always have been – considered shameful in the Muslim world to harm someone while he or she is praying. Thus, if the *Hashshāshīn*

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<sup>400</sup> Indicating that they were Muslims and, hence, not Khokhars.

<sup>401</sup> Ibid., 92-3.

did indeed assassinate Shihāb al-Dīn, they did so by disrespecting one of the most basic rules of battle laid down by Islam, and, in turn, disrespecting the religion itself. And this was not the only time they did so, either.

### **Assassinations in Syria**

The Syrian Nizaris did not lag far behind their Persian counterparts as far as target killing is concerned, kicking their fear-inducing “career” off almost as soon as they set foot on the eastern coast of the Mediterranean and continuing it till their very end. Accounts of some of the assassinations conducted by them follow.

#### *Janāh al-Dawla Husain Atābek – 1103 AD/ 496 AH*

The first assassination carried out by the the Syrian *Hashshāshīn* – as reported by Ibn Al-Qalanisi, a notable Syrian politician in the 12<sup>th</sup> century – was that of Janāh al-Dawla, the lord of Hims<sup>402</sup>, in as early as 1103 AD<sup>403</sup>. Ibn Al-Qalanisi’s account of the murder is both interesting and insightful:

In this year also news was received from Hims that its lord, the amīr Janāh al-Dawla Husain Atābek on descending from the citadel to the mosque for the Friday prayer, surrounded by his principal officers with full armour, and occupying his place of prayer, according to custom, was set upon by three Persians belonging to the Bātinīya. They were accompanied by a shaikh, to whom they owed allegiance and obedience, and all of them

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<sup>402</sup> Also known as Homs.

<sup>403</sup> Ibn Al-Qalanisi, *ibid.*, 57.

were dressed in the garb of ascetics. When the shaikh gave the signal they attacked the amīr with their knives and killed both him and a number of his officers. There were in the mosque at the time ten Sūfīs, Persians and others; they were suspected of complicity in the crime and were straightaway executed in cold blood, every man of them, although they were innocent.<sup>404</sup>

As has already been stated earlier, the Order's al-Hakim al-Munajjim first settled down in Aleppo, in the north of Syria, after Fakhr al-Muluk Rudwan took him under his wing. Janāh al-Dawla had been assigned as Rudwan's atabek by Tutush, Rudwan's father, before his death<sup>405</sup> but the two developed certain differences after which Janāh al-Dawla deserted Rudwan and captured Hims for himself, instead<sup>406</sup>. This falling out was possibly what led to Janāh al-Dawla's subsequent assassination and is also indicative of the nature of the *Hashshāshīn* as contract killer, since there is no proof of any rivalry between the Order and Janāh al-Dawla. The murder is also another example of the *Hashshāshīn* disrespecting traditional Islamic values by killing a man inside a mosque, which is considered a safe haven for all.

What's unusual about this assassination is the presence of a sheikh, or grandmaster, at the time and place of the murder. Chroniclers do not mention the grandmaster being present at the time and place of the act in any other assassination, even though entire bands of assassins had repeatedly been deployed to murder a single person. It's also interesting to note that upon hearing of the assassination of Janāh al-Dawla, Frankish forces that had encamped at al-Rastan, a few kilometers north of Hims, withdrew from

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<sup>404</sup> Ibid.

<sup>405</sup> Ibid., 24.

<sup>406</sup> Ibid., 31.

their post<sup>407</sup> showing how the fear of the *Hashshāshīn* had gripped everyone in the vicinity of the land of the Arabs and beyond – be they Muslims or non-Muslims.

*Khalaf ibn Mulā'ib* – 1106 AD/ 499 AH<sup>408</sup>

Khalaf ibn Mulā'ib, the lord of Afāmiya – approximately 130 kilometers southwest of Aleppo – is the second of the Syrian Nizaris' targets mentioned by Ibn Al-Qalanisi<sup>409</sup>. The chronicler states that a group of assassins had been sent from Aleppo by Abu Tahir – who had succeeded al-Hakim al-Munajjim – to



FIGURE 6.1 Afamiya – or Apamea – roughly 130 km southwest of Aleppo today. (Image courtesy Google Maps)

complete the task with the help of a local known as Abu'l-Fath of Sarmin<sup>410</sup>. Ibn Al-Qalanisi further levels an interesting allegation against Afāmiya's locals, stating that Ab'ul Fath had conspired with the people of Afāmiya, themselves, to carve a hole in the city's wall in order to let the said band of *fida'is* in<sup>411</sup>. Once inside, the assassins murdered Khalaf ibn Mulā'ib with two strikes of the dagger and then “raised the battle-cry upon the tower and proclaimed their allegiance to al-Malik Rudwān”<sup>412</sup>. The *Hashshāshīn* subsequently managed captured the town for themselves, too, which, in itself, might seem to be a sufficient enough reason for the assassination, but it seemingly was not the only one. Khalaf reportedly<sup>413</sup> had prior links with the Fatimid caliph who had installed him as the lord of Afāmiya in 1096-7 AD upon the request of its

<sup>407</sup> Ibid., 58.

<sup>408</sup> The news of the murder, writes Ibn Al-Qalanisi, was received on the 3<sup>rd</sup> of February 1106 AD or the 26<sup>th</sup> of Jumada Awwal 499 AH, so it must have taken place before the said date.

<sup>409</sup> Ibn Al-Qalanisi, *ibid.*, 72.

<sup>410</sup> Ibid., 72-3.

<sup>411</sup> Ibid., 73.

<sup>412</sup> Ibid.

<sup>413</sup> Ibid., 19.

townspeople. Readers would recall that the reigning Fatimid caliph in 1096-7 AD was al-Musta'li, the younger brother of the Nizari Isma'ili imam, Abu Mansur Nizar, and a fierce rival of the *Hashshāshīn*. Furthermore, the Fatimids were also known to oppose the Seljuks, making Khalaf bin Mulā'ib – their ally – a natural enemy of the Seljuk Rudwan and the Nizari *Hashshāshīn*, neither of whom would have enjoyed the presence of Fatimid influence in Syria.

*Emir Mawdūd ibn Altuntakīn/Altūntāsh*<sup>414</sup> – September 12 or October 2, 1113 AD/ Rabi al-Awwal or Rabi al-Thani 507 AH<sup>415</sup>

Emir Mawdūd, the renowned Seljuk military commander, was also allegedly assassinated by the Syrian Nizaris. There are many conflicts in the accounts of Ibn al-Athir and Ibn Al-Qalanisi over this particular event, from the date of the assassination to the identity of the assassins to the very name of the murdered commander. Importantly, Ibn al-Athir very clearly names the *Hashshāshīn* as the murderers because “they feared him, or that Tughtakīn<sup>416</sup> feared him so arranged for someone to assassinate him”<sup>417</sup>, but Ibn Al-Qalanisi does not name anyone responsible for the assassination. The latter’s account of the assassination, however, is much more vivid than that of Ibn al-Athir:

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<sup>414</sup> Altuntakīn in Ibn al-Athir Part I and Altūntāsh in Ibn Al-Qalanisi

<sup>415</sup> Last Friday of Rabi al-Awwal (September 12 1113) in Ibn al-Athir, Part I, p. 162, & last Friday of Rabi al-Thani (October 12 1113) in Ibn Al-Qalanisi, p. 139. It is hard to tell which of the two is accurate: Ibn Al-Qalanisi’s account, undoubtedly, should be more reliable since it is the actual primary source while Ibn al-Athir wasn’t even born when the said incident took place; however, Ibn al-Athir’s date fits better, logically, with the preceding chronological events.

<sup>416</sup> Zahir ad-Dīn Tughtakīn or Tughtagīn was the former Seljuk sultan Duqaq’s atabek, and the founder of the Burid dynasty in Damascus. He was on the battlefield, fighting the Franks with Mawdūd when the latter was assassinated. Considering Mawdūd’s allegiance to the Seljuks and the fact that Tughtakīn overthrew the Seljuks in Damascus himself, Ibn al-Athir’s allegation could hold water.

<sup>417</sup> Ibn al-Athir, Part I, 163.



On the last Friday of Second Rabī' of the year 507 (2nd October) the amīr Mawdūd came as was his custom from his encampment at the meadow outside the Iron Gate to the Cathedral Mosque, in company with the atābek (Tugtakīn). When the prayers were completed and Mawdūd had performed some supplementary prostrations, they went out together, the atābek walking in front by way of showing respect for him. Surrounding them both were Daylamites, Turks, Khurāsānīs, gens d'armes and armour-bearers, with weapons of all kinds, fine-tempered blades and keen thrusting-swords, rapiers of various sorts and unsheathed poniards, so that they were walking as if in the midst of a tangled thicket of intertwined spikes, while the people stood round about them to witness their pomp and the magnificence of their state. When they entered the court of the mosque, a man leapt out from among the crowd, without exciting the attention of anyone, and approaching the amīr Mawdūd as though to call down a blessing upon him and beg an alms of him, seized the belt of his riding cloak with a swift motion, and smote him twice with his poniard below the navel.<sup>418</sup>

The man, Ibn Al-Qalanisi writes, was subsequently beheaded “so that it might be known who he was”<sup>419</sup> – all to no avail – and Mawdūd succumbed to his wounds after

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<sup>418</sup> Ibn Al-Qalanisi, *ibid.*, 140.

<sup>419</sup> *Ibid.*

he was taken to Tughtakīn's house<sup>420</sup>. The assassin's corpse was later burnt<sup>421 422</sup>. Ibn al-Athir's account adds nothing substantial other than the killer's identity and motive, stated above.

*Al-Afdal ibn Badr al-Jamālī Shahanshah* – December 11 1121 AD/ Ramadan 29/30 514 AH

This particular assassination, though seemingly befitting the dagger of the *Hashshāshīn*, is believed by Ibn Al-Qalanisi – and by “all accurate and indisputable narratives”<sup>423</sup>, according to him – to be wrongly associated with the Nizaris<sup>424</sup>. Al-Afdal, the son of the powerful vizier Badr al-Jamali who has been mentioned earlier, was, like his father, the serving vizier of the reigning Fatimid caliph, al-Āmir. According to Ibn Al-Qalanisi, the caliph had become averse to his vizier due to the latter's apparent disobedience, and for the same reason the caliph had him slain<sup>425</sup>. The logic given by the chronicler for this strong allegation is the fact that al-Afdal had been murdered in Egypt<sup>426</sup>, and that al-Āmir showed “unconcealed joy before all the courtiers and men of rank in Misr and Cairo”<sup>427</sup> when he was killed. Should Ibn Al-Qalanisi be believed, thus, the *Hashshāshīn* should be absolved of this particular crime.

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<sup>420</sup> Ibid., 141.

<sup>421</sup> Ibid., 140.

<sup>422</sup> Ibn al-Athir, *ibid.*, 163.

<sup>423</sup> Ibn Al-Qalanisi, *ibid.*, 163.

<sup>424</sup> Ibid.

<sup>425</sup> Ibid.

<sup>426</sup> Ibid.

<sup>427</sup> Ibid.

*Emir Isfahsallār Saif al-Din Āq-Sunqur al-Bursuqī*<sup>428</sup> – November-October 1126 AD/  
Dhu'l Qa'da 520 AH<sup>429</sup>

The  
murder  
of al-  
Bursuqī,



the lord **FIGURE 6.2** Mosul: nearly 600 km east of Aleppo. (Image courtesy Google Maps)

of Mosul – in Northern Iraq, today – showed how vast the wingspan of the *Hashshāshīn*'s activity was and how they managed to attack their targets even way outside their range of influence. Both Ibn Al-Qalanisi and Ibn al-Athir concur that the emir was murdered by the Assassins at the time of the Friday prayer inside the congregational mosque<sup>430431</sup>, making it another of many occasions on which the Order went against traditional Islamic values and violated the sanctity of the mosque.

*Fatimid Caliph al-Āmir* – October 7, 1130 AD/ Dhu'l Qa'da 2, 524 AH

Fatimid Caliph, al-Āmir bi-Ahkām Allāh Abu 'Alī ibn al-Musta'li, was also allegedly murdered by the Nizaris. The allegation has been leveled by Ibn al-Athir, who states that the caliph was murdered because "he was a bad ruler of his subjects"<sup>432</sup> Ibn Al-Qalanisi does not mention the incident at all. The motive behind the murder given by Ibn al-Athir is ironic, since there is no logical reason why the Nizaris would have been concerned about the well-being of al-Āmir's subjects. The allegation on the *Hashshāshīn* becomes even weaker when we consider the fact that the Fatimid caliph

<sup>428</sup> Qasīm al-Dawla Āqsunqur al-Bursuqī in Ibn al-Athir, Part I, p. 261.

<sup>429</sup> 25 November/8 Dhu'l Qada in Ibn al-Athir, Part I, p. 261.

<sup>430</sup> Ibn Al-Qalanisi, *ibid.*, 177

<sup>431</sup> Ibn al-Athir, *ibid.*, Part I, 261.

<sup>432</sup> *Ibid.*, 283.

was murdered inside his own pleasure ground<sup>433</sup>. It is possible that the Egyptians were afflicted with internal conflict, which earlier resulted in the assassination of Al-Afdal, and the *Hashshāshīn* were wrongly accused of both acts.

*Tāj al-Mulūk* – May 7, 1131 AD/ Jumada al-Thani 5, 525 AH

The *Hashshāshīn*'s assassination attempt on Burī ibn Tughkīn – son of the aforementioned atabek of Duqaq – better known as Tāj al-Mulūk, was one of several that resulted in failure. In spite of that, Ibn Al-Qalanisi's account of this assassination is just as important as others, if not more, for it sheds plenty of light on the Nizaris' method of assassination:

They deputed emissaries from amongst the ignorant members of their brotherhood and their murderous gang to seize Tāj al-Mulūk unawares and assassinate him, and their choice fell upon two simpletons from Khurāsān, to whom they gave instructions to devise some means of gaining access to Tāj al-Mulūk and to kill him in his palace when an opportunity should offer. These two men reached Damascus in the guise of Turks, wearing the *qaba* and *sharbush*, and made their way to some acquaintances of theirs amongst the Turks, whose good offices they asked to enable them to enter the employment [of the amir] and have a regular salary assigned to them. Having thus deceived them – for the Turks had no suspicion of their purpose – they gradually progressed by insinuation and deceit until they found a place in

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<sup>433</sup> Ibid.

the body of Khurasanian troops organized as a cortege for the protection of Tāj al-Mulūk. They were regularly employed in this service, and were thought to be completely trustworthy, since they had been guaranteed. They watched for an opportunity to strike down Tāj al-Mulūk until, on Thursday 5<sup>th</sup> Latter Jumādā 525, when he had been to the bath and come back, and had reached the gate of his palace in the citadel of Damascus, all the members of his cortege, Khurasanians, Dailamites, and gens-d'armes, who were guarding him dispersed and left him, and they leapt upon him<sup>434</sup>.

Tāj al-Mulūk escaped with blow to the neck – dealt by one of the assassins' sword – and another to his side – dealt by the other assassin's knife<sup>435</sup>. The two assassins, on the other hand, were “hacked to pieces”<sup>436</sup> by Tāj al-Mulūk's guard – a fate most *fida'is* had on their mind before they went on a mission.

*Salāh ad-Dīn Yūsuf ibn Ayyūb* – May-June 1176 AD/  
Dhu'l Qa'da-Dhu'l Haj 571 AH

Salāh ad-Dīn's was another of the *Hashshāshīn*'s assassination attempts that went unrewarded. The renowned Muslim general was attacked by two Nizaris in the middle of 1176 AD while he held the castle of A'zāz – approximately 50 kilometers north of Aleppo



**FIGURE 6.3** Castle of A'zaz – approximately 50 km north of Aleppo, today. (Image courtesy Google Maps)

<sup>434</sup> Ibn Al-Qalanisi, *ibid.*, 202-3.

<sup>435</sup> *Ibid.*, 203.

<sup>436</sup> *Ibid.*

– under siege<sup>437</sup>. If Ibn al-Athir is to be believed, Salāh ad-Dīn had only his mailed helmet and brigandine to thank for saving his life that day<sup>438</sup>.

Oddly enough, this incident was not mentioned in Salāh ad-Dīn's biography, *al-Nawādir al-Sultāniyya wa'l-Mahāsin al-Yūsufiyya*. Perhaps the biographer, Bahā' al-Dīn Ibn Shaddād, did not deem the anecdote honourable enough for the Ayyubid ruler to be mentioned in his "Rare and Excellent History".

*Conrad of Montferrat* – April 28, 1192 AD/ Rabi al-Thani 13, 588 AH

The assassination of Conrad, Marquis of Montferrat – also Conrad I of Jerusalem – was perhaps the one that immortalized the name of the Assassins in the western world – even if for all the wrong reasons. Ibn al-Athir gives a surprisingly detailed account of the assassination:

Saladin made contact with the head of the Isma'īlīs in Syria, namely, Sinān, and encouraged him to send someone to kill the king of England. If he killed the Marquis, he would have ten thousand dinars. They were unable to assassinate the king and Sinān did not see any advantage for them in it, [being eager] that Saladin should not have a mind untroubled by the Franks and thus be free to deal with them. He was greedy to get money, so he inclined toward killing Marquis. He sent two men disguised as monks, who became associated with the lord of Sidon and Balian's son the lord of Ramla. They were both with the

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<sup>437</sup> Ibn al-Athir, Part 2, 243.

<sup>438</sup> Ibid.

Marquis in Tyre. The two stayed with them for six months, making a show of piety. The Marquis became acquainted with them and trusted them. On the above date the bishop at Tyre gave a banquet for the Marquis. He attended, ate his food and drank his wine and left. The two Bātinīs we have mentioned leapt on him and wounded him severely. One of them fled and entered a church to hide. It chanced that the Marquis was carried there to have his wounds bound. This assassin attacked and slew him. Both Bātinīs were killed in due course.<sup>439</sup>

For the Franks, the chief suspect for instigating the murder was Richard I, the king of England, because “he wished to become the sole ruler of the Syrian littoral”<sup>440</sup>.

If Ibn al-Athir’s account of the incident is to be believed, there are several points that can be deduced from his narrative. Firstly, if the murder of Conrad was carried out at Salah ad-Din’s behest, then the *Hashshāshīn* can be confirmed as contract killers in the purest form: they killed for money. Secondly, the wide expanse of the Order’s reach is reaffirmed, considering the king of Jerusalem would have been extremely hard to access. Not only did the Nizaris reach him, but also managed to train their men well enough to be able to infiltrate the king’s guard, win his trust and subsequently assassinate him. Third and last is the fact that the *fida’is* were extremely dedicated to their cause, since they did not leave their place or run and save their lives after wounding the Marquis – they made sure they killed him even if that meant losing their lives, which they most often did.

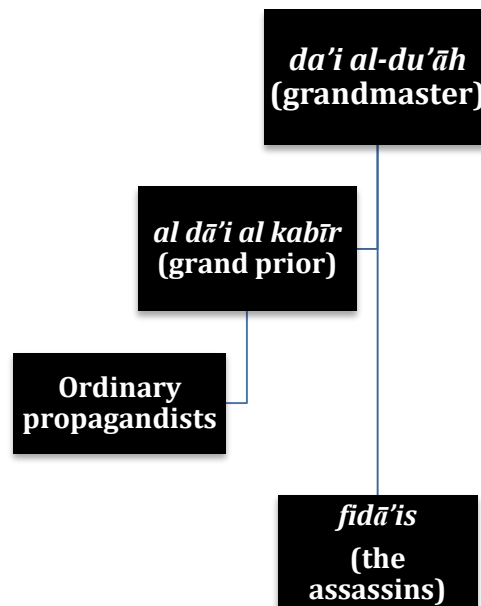
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<sup>439</sup> Ibid., 396.

<sup>440</sup> Ibid., 397.

## The Hierarchy

Although some writers – such as Marshall G. Hodgson, who reportedly<sup>441</sup> wrote in his *The Order of the Assassins* that, “There seems little reason to suppose that the *fidā’is*... formed a bottom rank in the Nizārī hierarchy below the *rafīqs* or *comrades* as the bulk of the Nizaris called themselves[.]” – do not believe that the *Ḥashshāshīn* worked in a strict hierarchical structure – and perhaps rightly so – there are others who suggest that they did, in fact, have a chain of command. This chain of command, as described by Professor P. K. Hitti<sup>442</sup>, can be displayed as follows:



Professor Hitti unfortunately fails to explain what the second and third in the given hierarchy were commissioned to do – though he does state that the *dā’i al kabīr* was the district in-charge – but the first and last in this power structure, as most know, were of great importance in the organization. The first, *da’i al-du’āh* was the grandmaster,

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<sup>441</sup> Juvaini, *ibid.*, 639.

<sup>442</sup> Hitti, *ibid.*, 446.



the mythical “Old Man of the Mountain”; the chief who gave out orders, while the last, the *fida’is*, were the assassins who were trained to put the order into practice to the best of their abilities, which usually sufficed.

## **Method of Assassination**

Among the many things that historians of the crusades ought to thank medieval chroniclers for, are their detailed descriptive accounts of the *Hashshāshīn*’s assassinations. It is hard to tell how much of these accounts was developed by the chroniclers’ own imagination, how much was a product of exaggeration that almost always makes its way through to hearsay, and how much was the real truth. However, when more than one chronicler presents the same information, it is somewhat authenticated – or as authenticated as thousand-years-old information can be.

Going through these excerpts, it is easy to spot the *fida’is*’ weapons of choice: varieties of a short stabbing device – the dagger, knife or poniard – a sword, or, occasionally, a spear. A short knife was perhaps their most preferred weapon.

Arguably the most astounding aspect of the *Hashshāshīn*’s assassination skills is their ability to wear a vast variety of disguises, which was their chief weapon of infiltration. From Sufi mystics – as in the case of Nizām al-Mulk Tūsi and Janāh ad-Dawla – to beggars – as in the case of Mawdūd – to Turks – in the case of Tāj al-Mulūk – and even to Christian monks – as in the case of Conrad I of Jerusalem: the ability of the *fida’is* to adapt to such an array of guises is impressive. What’s even more remarkable is the Nizari lords’ ability to train the assassins to perform all of these tasks, and it is a pity that the *Hashshāshīn*’s own literature is lost or we may have found out the exact training techniques employed by them.

It is also important to notice that the Nizaris felt no shame in working with people who did not share their beliefs. The Franks, for instance, were not the Nizaris' particular favourites, but they did join them when Alp Arslan started to persecute the followers of the sect<sup>443</sup>. Similarly, Al-Mazdaqani, one of the *Hashshāshīn*'s earliest aides in Syria, "was not of his [Bahraam's] way of thinking, [yet he] assisted him to spread his malicious devices and to manifest his secret objects."<sup>444</sup> There is no visible trend of religious exclusivity in the Order's activities.

## Myths

Here, it is important to recall Marco Polo's myth of the Old Man of the Mountain, in order to check how much of his account is supported by primary sources:

I will now tell you the whole story of this Old man as it was told by many people to me, Messer Marco Polo.

In their language, the Old Man was called Alaodin<sup>445</sup>. In a valley between two mountains he had had made the largest and finest garden that ever was seen. In it there were all the good fruits in the world. Here he had had built the fairest houses and the most beautiful palaces that any man ever saw, for they were covered with gilding, and adorned with the pictures of all the beautiful things of the earth. Further, he had had conduits made, and down one flowed wine, down another milk, down a third honey, and

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<sup>443</sup> Ibn Al-Qalanisi, *ibid.*, 145.

<sup>444</sup> *Ibid.*, 180.

<sup>445</sup> Probably Ala-ad-Din, the fourth Imam, even though Marco Polo wrongly identifies him as the one who surrendered to and was murdered by Hulagu and his men. It is odd that Polo's Old Man of the Mountain is so often misidentified as Hassan bin Sabah and Rashid ad-Din Sinan when his *Travels* clearly mention the name "Alaodin".

down a fourth water. There were also ladies and damsels there, the fairest on earth, who could play on all kinds of instruments, and sang and danced better than other women. And the Old Man made his people believe that this garden was Paradise. [...] Into that garden no man ever entered except those he wished to make Assassins. [...] The Old Man used to have these youths put in the garden, four, ten or twenty at a time, as he pleased. And he did it in the following way: he had a potion given them, as a result of which they straightaway fell asleep; then he had them taken up and put into the garden, and then awaked.

When they awoke, they found themselves inside, and saw all the things that I have told you, and so believed that they were really in Paradise. And the ladies and damsels remained with them all day, playing music and singing and making excellent cheer; and the young men had their pleasure of them. [...] When the Old Man wanted to send any of his men anywhere to kill some person, he would order the potion to be given to a certain number of them, and once they were asleep, he would have them taken up and brought into his palace.<sup>446</sup>

“Messer Marco Polo” goes on to state that this entire exercise was to motivate the assassins to wish for a swift death that would take them to Paradise once and for all<sup>447</sup>. Though Polo’s account cannot be rejected outright since there is no corresponding

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<sup>446</sup> Marco Polo, tr. Aldo Ricci, *The Travels of Marco Polo*, (New Delhi: Asian Educational Services), 2001, 49-51.

<sup>447</sup> Ibid., 52.

account to measure its truth against, nevertheless, the fact that Juvaini – who loathed the Nizaris and had access to perhaps all the facts about their entire history – does not mention any part of Marco’s story, does put it under considerable doubt. To add to that, neither Ibn al-Athir nor Ibn Al-Qalanisi mention any potion, paradise or Old Man in their accounts that are related above. Marco Polo’s intriguing travel tale, then, could very well be just that – an intriguing tale.

## **Other Forms of Violence**

The strong association of the *Hashshāshīn* with assassination – and their mastery of that “art” – has led people to believe that assassination was their only business. This is grossly untrue. Assassination may have been their forte but they were by no means restricted to it. The Nizari Isma’ilis’ state was just like any other medieval kingdom: they had a king – the imam – and his subjects; they had laws, however uncivilized; and they had to fight their enemies, sometimes in ways that they – or any other medieval society – would not be proud of.

## **Plundering and Mass Murdering**

Conducting raids on an enemy’s territory was not uncommon in the Middle Ages, and like any other state, the Nizari Isma’ilis often sent their men on these unholy missions. The first such incident reported in detail is by Ibn al-Athir, when a Nizari called Tahir led an attack on possibly a Turkoman caravan when it was going to Qa’in<sup>448</sup>. Only one survivor escaped, and no pillaging is reported<sup>449</sup>. Later, in 1104-05 AD/ 498 AH, a large band of *Hashshāshīn* set out from Bayhaq, raided a vast territory, killed many people

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<sup>448</sup> Ibn al-Athir, Part I, 40.

<sup>449</sup> Ibid.

and imprisoned their women<sup>450</sup>. At Khuwār al-Rayy, in the same year, they attacked a pilgrim caravan that had assembled from Khurasan, Transoxania, India and other places, killed as many as they wished and took their goods away as booty<sup>451</sup>.

Ibn al-Athir says something similar of Ibn Attash – one of the most prominent Nizari commanders of the Quhistani region – stating that he “sent his men to raid the highway, steal goods and kill whomever they could.”<sup>452</sup> He also alleges that the *Hashshāshīn* levied property taxes on the inhabitants of the regions under their control, which they had to pay if they wanted their lives and property to remain safe from the Nizaris’ harm<sup>453</sup>. On another occasion – November-December 1156 AD/ Shawwal 551 AH – the Order attacked Tabas in Khurasan to capture some of the Seljuk sultan’s statesmen, subsequently plundering their property and killing a few of their prisoners<sup>454</sup>. There were also repeated similar attacks on Turkomans, once in 1158-9 AD/ 553 AH in Quhistan<sup>455</sup>, and once in January 1161 AD/ Muharram 556 AH near Tabas Kilaki<sup>456</sup>. Judging by the fact that on all of these occasions the Nizari men stole a good amount of goods, the motive behind such attacks was probably the gathering of booty, but spreading terror is another possible and very probable motive.

## **Battle**

For a people so trained in the art of using the blade, the *Hashshāshīn* receive very little credit for their exploits on the battlefield – possibly because there were few of them compared to those of others such as the Seljuks. However, for a people of such meagre

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<sup>450</sup> Ibid., 92.

<sup>451</sup> Ibid.

<sup>452</sup> Ibid., 117.

<sup>453</sup> Ibid.

<sup>454</sup> Ibid., 85.

<sup>455</sup> Ibid., 101.

<sup>456</sup> Ibid., 130.

population, they featured fairly often in battle, and – if Ibn al-Athir is to be believed – “showed great steadfastness and extreme courage”<sup>457</sup> in it, too.

One of the first full-blooded battles fought by the *Hashshāshīn* was the famous Battle of Shaizar that Usama ibn Munqidh repeatedly refers to in his chronicles. For all the queer tales<sup>458</sup> that he tells of this encounter, ibn Munqidh does not reflect much on the skills of his opponents. One incident, in which an Isma’ili challenged and made short work of a few of Usama’s comrades before being killed himself<sup>459</sup>, does reflect somewhat on their mastery with the sword.

In June-July 1154 AD/ Rabi al-Thani 549 AH, the *Hashshāshīn* faced Farrukhshah and Muhammad ibn Unur, one of the emirs of Khurasan, in battle<sup>460</sup>. The Nizaris were seven thousand-strong and had set out to attack the Khurasani district of Khwāf when they were weakly confronted by Farrukhshah who later withdrew owing to his forces’ slimmer strength. Once Muhammad ibn Unur joined him, the two’s combined forces defeated the Nizaris with ease<sup>461</sup>. Five years later – in May-June 1159 AD/ Jumada Awwal 554 AH – the Nizaris took their revenge against ibn Unur by attacking his men who had come to their castles to collect the sultan’s tribute<sup>462</sup>. Not only were many of ibn Unur’s men killed, the force’s commander and ibn Unur’s brother-in-law, Qayba, was also taken hostage – a situation from which he escaped only after giving his daughter to the regional Nizari Isma’ili leader, in marriage<sup>463</sup>.

In Syria, the Order had repeatedly featured in battles against the Franks, such as in 1126 AD when Zahir al-Din Atabek was mustering forces to counter the advancing Baldwin

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<sup>457</sup> Ibn al-Athir, Part I, 119.

<sup>458</sup> Usama ibn Munqidh, tr. Paul M. Cobb, *The Book of Contemplation*, (London: Penguin Books), 2008, 129, 173, 176.

<sup>459</sup> *Ibid.*, 173.

<sup>460</sup> Ibn al-Athir, Part I, 72.

<sup>461</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>462</sup> *Ibid.*, 111.

<sup>463</sup> *Ibid.*

II of Jerusalem<sup>464</sup>. Ibn Al-Qalanisi states that the “Bātinīya” who were “noted for courage and gallantry”<sup>465</sup> were part of the various bands that had gathered on Monday, the 25<sup>th</sup> of January/ 27<sup>th</sup> of Dhu’l Haj to defend Damascus against Baldwin’s forces<sup>466</sup>. Similarly, in the Shawwal of 552 AH or November-December of 1157 AD, the *Hashshāshīn* were part of the force that drove a band of invading Franks out of Shaizar<sup>467</sup>. The group also formed part of the troops of Rudwan, the lord of Aleppo<sup>468</sup>. In 1213-14 AD/ 610 AH, the reigning ruler at Alamut, Jalal-ad-Din, made an alliance with and lent military support to the king of Arran and Azerbaijan, Muzaffar-ad-Din Öz-beg, in the latter’s fight against Nasir-ad-Din Mengli, the ruler of Iraq<sup>469</sup>. A year later, the coalition – with support from Baghdad and Syria – succeeded in defeating Mengli after whom Ighlamish was instated as the ruler of Iraq<sup>470</sup>. Ighlamish was later assassination, allegedly by the *fida’is* of Jalal-ad-Din, himself<sup>471</sup><sup>472</sup>. Juvaini states that the Abbasid Caliph, al-Nāsir li-Dīn Allāh (reign: 1158 AD – 1225 AD), also asked for a band of *fida’is* from Jalal-ad-Din, perhaps for protection amidst increasing threats from the northeast<sup>473</sup>. It is evident, then, that the *Hashshāshīn* were not just a band of assassins, they were a formidable force on the battlefield too and had a small, but organised, military – like any of their contemporary states.

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<sup>464</sup> Ibn Al-Qalanisi, *ibid.*, 175.

<sup>465</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>466</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>467</sup> *Ibid.*, 342.

<sup>468</sup> *Ibid.*, 115.

<sup>469</sup> Juvaini, *ibid.*, 701.

<sup>470</sup> *Ibid.*, 702.

<sup>471</sup> *Ibid.*, 391.

<sup>472</sup> Ibn al-Athir, Part 3, 171.

<sup>473</sup> Juvaini, *ibid.*, 391.

**PART 2:**

**Modern “Islamic”  
Terrorism**



## Chapter 7: Modern “Islamic” Terrorist Groups: Identities and Methods

*“We stress the importance of martyrdom operations against the enemy, these attacks that have scared Americans and Israelis like never before.”*

- Osama bin Laden, February 2003<sup>474</sup>

It has been a long time since the last of the Assassins breathed their last – over seven hundred years – but their legacy seemingly has lived on. The manner in which the dreaded *fida’is* killed their targets, with blatant disregard for their own lives, has a loud resemblance with “suicide attacks” conducted by terrorist organizations, today. But are the two really that similar? We can find out only after comparing modern terrorist outfits and their activities with those of the *Hashshāshīn*.

### “Islamic” Terrorism

Although there have been widespread objections against associating terrorists with Islam – or any other religion – yet the most common – and easiest – term to identify militant outfits like Al-Qaeda, Taliban, and, most lately, the Islamic State (IS), unfortunately remains “Islamic terrorists”. That is for one simple reason: they identify with the faith and believe that they are waging holy war – or jihad – against their respective targets. Or at least that’s how the script goes. How much truth there is in their claims and how much of their war is truly holy, that is to be ascertained – albeit

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<sup>474</sup> *Osama bin Laden: famous quotes*, The Telegraph, May 2, 2011, available at: <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/asia/afghanistan/8487347/Osama-bin-Laden-famous-quotes.html>

in another piece of research. The only thing to be ascertained in this particular research work are the similarities – or the lack of them – between the murders conducted by modern Muslim terrorist outfits and the *Hashshāshīn*'s assassinations. For that purpose, we would look at a select few of these outfits and analyze their terrorist attacks:

## **Al-Qaeda**

Al-Qaeda is perhaps the most globally recognizable of the names associated with the world of terrorism. Whether or not the term “al-qaeda” – meaning base or foundation in Arabic<sup>475</sup> – itself denotes the notorious terrorist group is a lengthy debate<sup>476</sup>, and one that is beyond the scope of this research work, therefore, to simplify matters, the term would be used as it usually is – to denote the notorious terrorist outfit.

Although analysts believe that al-Qaeda is “not one organization, but a loose confederation of terrorist organizations with members living and operating in over 40 countries”<sup>477</sup>, yet its origins are generally traced to 1988 when Osama bin Laden and a few of his non-Afghan compatriots formed a “militant group”<sup>478</sup> in Peshawar, Pakistan, on the suggestion of Abdallah Azzam<sup>479</sup>. An excerpt whose author according to journalist Jason Burke was Azzam, himself, sheds light on the jihadist mentality of the man who conceived the notion of al-Qaeda, and therefore of the organization, itself:

There is no ideology, neither earthly nor heavenly, that does  
not require... a vanguard that gives everything it possesses

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<sup>475</sup> Jason Burke, *Al-Qaeda: The True Story of Radical Islam*, (New York: I. B. Tauris), 2006, 1.

<sup>476</sup> See Burke, *Al-Qaeda: The True Story of Radical Islam*, 1-14.

<sup>477</sup> Lawrence J. Bevy, ed., *Al-Qaeda: An Organization to be Reckoned With*, (New York: Nova Science Publishers Inc.), 2006, 30.

<sup>478</sup> Burke, *ibid.*, 3.

<sup>479</sup> *Ibid.*, 2.

in order to achieve victory... It carries the flag all along the sheer, endless and difficult path until it reaches its destination in the reality of life, since Allah has destined that it should make it and manifest itself.<sup>480</sup>

As the concept of jihad in the Quran is to “strive in Allah’s cause” as reflected by verses 9:24<sup>481</sup> and 60:2<sup>482</sup>, the gist of the above-given excerpt is jihadist in nature – albeit not the kind of jihad that the majority of the world is aware of. Azzam’s words show the desire to form a “vanguard” that would hold the beacon for an ideology – possibly the ideology of Islam – and lead it to victory, because Allah wishes it to be so. In essence, the desired “vanguard” would practice jihad by leading Allah’s ideology to victory. How it would do so, he does not state; but the activities of his brainchild – the militant organization, or, confederation of militant organizations, al-Qaeda – clarified that in due time.

### **Terrorist Attacks**

On February 26, 1993, the first notorious attack on the World Trade Center took place, killing six people and injuring over a thousand<sup>483</sup>. For this attack, a man called Ramzi Ahmed Yousef, a Pakistani national, was allegedly held responsible<sup>484</sup>. Although Yousef himself was not a member of al-Qaeda, but his uncle, Khalid Sheikh Mohammed, was and still is a leading member of the group, as well as the alleged chief

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<sup>480</sup> Ibid.

<sup>481</sup> *The Holy Quran*, Maulawī Sher ‘Alī, tr., (Tilford: Islam International Publications Limited), 2004, 207.

<sup>482</sup> Ibid., 661

<sup>483</sup> Burke, *ibid.*, 101.

<sup>484</sup> Ibid., 102.

architect of the attacks of September 11, 2001<sup>485</sup>. It is also possible that Yousef was indirectly working for the group, as al-Qaeda had a lot of terrorist organizations, as well as independent terrorists, under its wing. Despite his involvement in the terrorist attack, Ramzi Yousef managed to escape safely out of the United States, and go back to Pakistan. Not many knew that this attack was one of the first of many to come from newly formed al-Qaeda.

Eight years later, the attacks of September 11, 2001 occurred, mimicking those of February 26, 1993, but much deadlier. 2,996<sup>486</sup> people – including the hijackers, reportedly 19 in number<sup>487</sup> – were believed to have lost their lives on the day in a number of attacks carried out with four<sup>488</sup> hijacked aircrafts, two of which brought the World Trade Centre down. Unlike 1993, however, this time al-Qaeda openly accepted responsibility of all the devastation caused by the attacks – all of which was intentional<sup>489</sup>. These were arguably the attacks that effectively put “suicide terrorism” on the map.

### Targets and Methods

Since 9/11 and before that, al-Qaeda has carried out plenty of similar attacks – such as the failed December 29, 1992 bombings in Yemen<sup>490</sup> – that employed explosive material, with or without a suicide bomber. The organization’s main target was evidently one, the United States. The 1992 Yemen bombing, for instance, intended to

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<sup>485</sup> *The 9/11 Commission Report*, first edition, (New York: W.W. Norton & Company), 2004, 145.

<sup>486</sup> Robert J. Jackson, *Global Politics in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century*, (New York: Cambridge University Press), 2013, 345.

<sup>487</sup> Edward Hendrie, *9/11: Enemies – Foreign and Domestic*, (Garrisonville: Great Mountain Publishing), 2011, 1.

<sup>488</sup> *The 9/11 Commission Report*, 1.

<sup>489</sup> CBC News, *Bin Laden claims responsibility for 9/11*, October 29, 2004, available at: <http://www.cbc.ca/news/world/bin-laden-claims-responsibility-for-9-11-1.513654>

<sup>490</sup> Edward F. Mickolus & Susan L. Simmons, *Terrorism, 1992-1995: A Chronology of Events and a Selectively Annotated Bibliography*, (Westport: Greenwood Publishing Group), 1997, 250.

kill a group of U.S. Marines who were staying at the Gold Mohur Hotel in Aden<sup>491</sup>, but due to its mistiming, resulted in the death of an Austrian tourist and a member of the hotel staff, instead<sup>492</sup>. On August 7, 1998, the group bombed U.S. embassies in Kenya and Tanzania, which resulted in the 224 deaths<sup>493</sup> and on October 12, 2000, successfully bombed the U.S. Navy's USS *Cole*<sup>494</sup>. The United States was clearly on al-Qaeda's target, but it wasn't the only one. The expanse of the group's adversaries extended farther than the U.S., as indicated by bin Laden's *Declaration of Jihad against the Americans Occupying the Land of the Two Holy Sanctuaries*<sup>495</sup> which declared war on all "Zionist-Crusaders" who had occupied Jerusalem and Saudi Arabia<sup>496</sup> – this, for al-Qaeda, meant the entire Western world, *including* common people. Attacks such as one on a synagogue in Djerba, Tunisia, in 2002 which resulted in the deaths of fourteen German, one French and four Tunisian citizens<sup>497</sup> showed how al-Qaeda was ready to attack common, unarmed people in its quest to bring the alleged Zionist-Crusaders down, and didn't even consider it collateral damage – they were all on their target. According to a BBC report, al-Qaeda's spokesperson Sulaiman Abu Ghaith presented the following reason for bombing the Tunisian synagogue: "A youth could not see his brothers in Palestine butchered and murdered... [while] he saw Jews cavorting in Djerba."<sup>498</sup> Whether that "Jew" was a man of authority or an ordinary human being, does not matter to the organization – they were all seen as enemies. This was a testament

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<sup>491</sup> Ibid.

<sup>492</sup> Ibid.

<sup>493</sup> Ballard C. Campbell, *Disasters, Accidents, and Crises in American History: a Reference Guide to the Nation's Most Catastrophic Events*, (New York: Infobase Publishing), 2008, 413.

<sup>494</sup> Kirk S. Lippold, *Front Burner: Al-Qaeda's Attack on the USS Cole*, (New York: PublicAffairs), 2012, xxiii

<sup>495</sup> Gilles Kepel & Jean-Pierre Milelli, ed., *Al Qaeda in its Own Words*, (Cambridge: Harvard University Press), 2008, 47

<sup>496</sup> Brad K. Berner, *Jihad: Bin Laden in His Own Words: Declarations, Interviews and Speeches*, (New Delhi: Peacock Books), 2007, 33.

<sup>497</sup> BBC News, *Al-Qaeda claims Tunisia attack*, June 23, 2002, available at: [http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/middle\\_east/2061071.stm](http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/middle_east/2061071.stm)

<sup>498</sup> Ibid.

to the fact that the extent of al-Qaeda's adversaries spread much farther and wider than just the United States of America – and much farther and wider than just men of importance. All of the attacks mentioned above were not intended to kill a single person, to murder a single person who held power; to *assassinate* a president or a prime minister, perhaps. Only once in their twenty-six years of known existence did al-Qaeda carry out an assassination: that of Afghan military commander, Ahmad Shah Massoud on September 9, 2001<sup>499</sup>. This shows that a vast majority of al-Qaeda's attacks were never meant to be *assassinations* – targeting one direct enemy – they were meant to be mass killings. This, in turn, shows that their goal was not to kill their direct opponents, but to spread terror among common people – even if common *western* people – by ensuring that they always felt their lives in danger.

## **Taliban**

Al-Qaeda's Pashtun<sup>500</sup> brothers in crime, the Taliban – from the Arabic word, *tālib*, which means “student” – sprouted out of the same root as their Arab counterparts: the Soviet war in Afghanistan. The organization came into – or was brought into – shape in the form of an army developed to wage jihad against the communist Soviet army in Afghanistan in the 1980s<sup>501</sup>. After the USSR withdrew in 1989, a band of similar men resisted the regime of President Mohammad Najibullah for three years before it fell in 1992, giving way to the formation of the Islamic State of Afghanistan, which lasted for four years. In 1994<sup>502</sup>, the Taliban started a declared military movement against the

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<sup>499</sup> Assaf Moghadam, *The Globalization of Martyrdom: al-Qaeda, Salafi Jihad, and the Diffusion of Suicide Attacks*, (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press), 2011, 88.

<sup>500</sup> Ahmed Rashid, *Taliban: Islam, Oil and the New Great Game in Central Asia*, (London: I.B. Tauris), 2002, 1.

<sup>501</sup> Ibid.

<sup>502</sup> Ibid.

Afghan government, and by 1996 successfully toppled it<sup>503</sup>. Their government lasted for five years – five arguably forgetful years for the Afghans, especially for the Afghan women whose movement and education was heavily restricted during the period<sup>504</sup> – before it was demolished by NATO forces in November, 2001<sup>505</sup>. One of the reasons given by then President of the United States, George W. Bush, for the invasion of Afghanistan was the proposition that the Mullah Omar-led government was sheltering – among other jihadists – al-Qaeda leaders who were behind the September 11 attacks<sup>506</sup>. This was perhaps the first time the name of the Taliban was associated with terrorism – and it certainly wasn't the last.

## **Terrorism**

In the past thirteen years, after the fall of their government in Afghanistan, the Taliban have developed into one of the most feared terrorist groups of modern times. The group reportedly made a total of 40 terrorist attacks on foreign targets, and as many as 304 terrorist attacks on domestic targets between October 7, 2001 and February 2, 2007, in Afghanistan, alone<sup>507</sup>. The same source suggests that the Taliban's major targets are “national aid agencies, other non-governmental organizations (NGOs), and Afghan and foreign nationals”<sup>508</sup>. However, the source fails to mention police and military forces, both of which are frequently at the wrong end of the Taliban's attacks, such on

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<sup>503</sup> Ibid., 20.

<sup>504</sup> Ibid., 2.

<sup>505</sup> James F. Dobbins, *After the Taliban: Nation Building in Afghanistan*, (Sterling: Potomac Books Inc.), 2008, 2. Available at:

<https://books.google.com.pk/books?id=9tfDgbwlyXAC&printsec=frontcover&dq=taliban&hl=en&sa=X&ei=gdGrVLHoBoflUtu8hKAL&ved=0CEAQ6AEwBw#v=onepage&q=taliban&f=false>

<sup>506</sup> Alex Strick van Linschoten & Felix Kuehn, *An Enemy We Created: The Myth of the Taliban-Al Qaeda Merger in Afghanistan*, (New York: Oxford University Press), 2012, 219.

<sup>507</sup> Frank Shanty, *The Nexus: International Terrorism and Drug Trafficking from Afghanistan*, (Santa Barbara: Greenwood Publishing Group), 2011, 84-85.

<sup>508</sup> Ibid., 86.

December 13, 2014, when six Afghan soldiers and 12 civilians were killed in a suicide attack in Kabul<sup>509</sup>, and in another on December 20, 2014 seven police officers were killed<sup>510</sup>. Also on December 13, the Taliban assassinated the secretary of the Afghan Supreme Court<sup>511</sup>, showing their enmity for all governmental organizations.

### Allies and Splinter Groups

Since their formation, the Taliban have split into many splinter groups, including Tehrik-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP), which is their semi-autonomous Pakistani wing. The TTP have claimed responsibility of a number of terrorist attacks including, most lately, one on Army Public School (APS), Peshawar on December 16, 2014 which claimed the lives of 132 children and 9 staff members<sup>512</sup>. The same faction was involved in the assassination attempt on Malala Yousafzai in 2012<sup>513</sup>, and has recently claimed responsibility for the suicide attack on an *imambargah*<sup>514</sup> in Rawalpindi, Pakistan, which killed a minimum of eight people<sup>515</sup>. According to a report by a Pakistan daily, “The Nation”, out of 30 suicide attacks carried out in Pakistan in the year 2014, the TTP were responsible for a minimum of 10 – 7 more than any other terrorist outfit active in the country<sup>516</sup>. It is interesting to note that, despite the similarity in their

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<sup>509</sup> The New York Times, *Taliban Ramp Up Fatal Attacks in Afghanistan*, December 13, 2014, available at: [http://www.nytimes.com/2014/12/14/world/asia/gunmen-kill-supreme-court-official-in-kabul-afghanistan.html?\\_r=0](http://www.nytimes.com/2014/12/14/world/asia/gunmen-kill-supreme-court-official-in-kabul-afghanistan.html?_r=0)

<sup>510</sup> The Wall Street Journal, *Taliban Claims Responsibility for Deadly Attack on Police in Afghanistan*, December 21, 2014, available at: <http://www.wsj.com/articles/taliban-claims-responsibility-for-deadly-attack-on-police-in-afghanistan-1419148480>

<sup>511</sup> The New York Times, *ibid*.

<sup>512</sup> Dawn News, *Pakistan Mourns 141 Killed in Taliban School Carnage*, December 17, 2014, available at: <http://www.dawn.com/news/1151398>

<sup>513</sup> The Express Tribune, *TTP Group Involved in Attack on Malala Busted*, September 13, 2014, available at: <http://tribune.com.pk/story/761667/ttp-group-involved-in-attack-on-malala-busted/>

<sup>514</sup> Mosque for followers of the Shi'ite sect.

<sup>515</sup> Daily Times, *Rawalpindi Suicide Attack: TTP Faction Claims Responsibility*, January 11, 2015, available at: <http://www.dailytimes.com.pk/national/11-Jan-2015/rawalpindi-suicide-attack-ttp-faction-claims-responsibility>

<sup>516</sup> The Nation, *Year 2014 Witnessed Drop in Suicide Hits*, January 1, 2015, available at: <http://nation.com.pk/editors-picks/01-Jan-2015/year-2014-witnessed-drop-in-suicide-hits>



names, the TTP and the Afghan Taliban aren't always on the same page. For example, the Afghan Taliban reportedly<sup>517</sup> condemned the TTP's attack on APS, Peshawar, stating:

“The Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan (the given name of Afghanistan under Taliban rule) has always condemned the killing of children and innocent people at every juncture. The intentional killing of innocent people, women and children goes against the principles of Islam and every Islamic government and movement must adhere to this fundamental essence.”<sup>518</sup>

The statement was rather hypocritical of the Afghan Taliban, considering their own indifference for the lives of innocent civilians in their operations around Afghanistan, such as in the December 13 bomb blast, mentioned above, in which 12 civilians lost their lives<sup>519</sup>. However, their open condemnation of the TTP shows the lack of cohesion in various factions of the Taliban, and attests the semi-autonomous nature of each faction. Perhaps the only thing that holds all of these factions together is the fact that they both pledge allegiance to former ruler of Afghanistan, Mullah Omar<sup>520</sup>.

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<sup>517</sup> Dawn News, *Afghan Taliban Condemn Peshawar School Attack*, December 17, 2014, available at: <http://www.dawn.com/news/1151407>

<sup>518</sup> Ibid.

<sup>519</sup> The New York Times, *ibid.*

<sup>520</sup> Dawn News, *ibid.*

Another group that is allied to the Afghan Taliban through their allegiance to Mullah Omar<sup>521</sup> is the dreaded Haqqani Network<sup>522</sup>, which has allegedly taken shelter in Pakistan<sup>523</sup>. These terrorists' increasing trend for shifting their bases to Pakistan shouldn't come as a surprise since the first ever Taliban were also believed to be trained inside Pakistani madrassas in Peshawar<sup>524</sup>, possibly by the Pakistan Army's Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI)<sup>525</sup>. Jalaluddin Haqqani, the founder of the Haqqani Network, is also alleged to be an associate of former ISI chief, Hamid Gul<sup>526</sup>.

As far as terrorist attacks are concerned, the Haqqani Network seemingly works very closely with the Afghan Taliban, with one source suggesting that it is "also willing to allow the Taliban to take credit for its operations"<sup>527</sup>. The group was most famously associated with two hotel attacks: one on Serena Hotel, Kabul in January 2008 and another on Hotel Inter-Continental, Kabul on June 28, 2011<sup>528</sup>. On either occasion, armed gunmen stormed into the hotel and used gunfire and explosives to murder whoever came in their range. A BBC report suggests that in the latter attack, three gunmen had detonated bombs wrapped around their bodies, taking their own lives along with those of many others<sup>529</sup>. The same report suggests that the site of the attack, Hotel Inter-Continental, is popular with Westerners, which shows the attackers' intent to target foreigners. The report also suggests that the Afghan Taliban's Zabihullah

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<sup>521</sup> Vahid Brown & Don Rassler, *Fountainhead of Jihad: The Haqqani Nexus, 1973-2010*, (New York: Oxford University Press), 2013, 134.

<sup>522</sup> Rosemarie Skaine, *Suicide Warfare: Culture, the Military and the Individual as a Weapon*, (Santa Barbara: Praeger), 2013, 82.

<sup>523</sup> Dawn News, *Forces, Militants Heading for Truce*, June 23, 2006, available at: <http://www.dawn.com/news/198292/forces-militants-heading-for-truce>

<sup>524</sup> David Wright-Neville, *Dictionary of Terrorism*, (Cambridge: Polity Press), 2010, 188

<sup>525</sup> Mark Silinsky, *The Taliban: Afghanistan's Most Lethal Insurgents*, (Santa Barbara: Praeger), 2014, 20.

<sup>526</sup> Ibid.

<sup>527</sup> Brown & Rassler, *ibid.*, 134.

<sup>528</sup> Ashley Fantz, CNN, *The Haqqani Network, a Family and a Terror Group*, September 8, 2012, available at: <http://edition.cnn.com/2012/09/07/world/who-is-haqqani/>

<sup>529</sup> BBC, *Kabul's Intercontinental Hotel Attacked by Gunmen*, June 29, 2011, available at: <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-south-asia-13947169>

Mujahid said that the group was responsible for the attack, but it is likely that the Haqqani Network were the actual perpetrators and had let the Afghan Taliban take credit for the attack, like they did in January 2008<sup>530</sup>. It is also reported that the assassination attempt on ex-Afghan President Hamid Karzai was also arranged by the Haqqanis, despite the fact that the Taliban took credit for it<sup>531</sup>. This shows that the Haqqani Network and the Afghan Taliban work more or less as a single entity, and seem to have much more cohesion than the two Taliban namesakes.

### Targets and Methods

The Taliban, like al-Qaeda, usually take the suicide bombing route to achieve their goals, and, also like al-Qaeda, show a disregard for the lives of civilians. As far as the Afghan Taliban and the Haqqani Network are concerned, the enemy is largely foreigners and government personnel. The Tehrik-i-Taliban Pakistan, however, seems to be much more violent, intentionally targeting schools and mosques and murdering women and children, to actualize its dream – the restoration of the Shariah and expulsion of foreign influence from Muslim lands.

On the whole, there is a lot of similarity between the Taliban and al-Qaeda, despite their ethnic and religious differences: while al-Qaeda is mostly touted as an Arab organization, the Taliban are believed to be more Afghan; and while al-Qaeda practices Salafi<sup>532</sup> Jihad<sup>533</sup>, the Taliban are driven by Deobandi<sup>534</sup> beliefs<sup>535</sup>. Whether or not

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<sup>530</sup> Brown & Rassler, *ibid.*, 134-5.

<sup>531</sup> *Ibid.*, 135.

<sup>532</sup> Salafism is similar to Wahhabism, preached extensively in Saudi Arabia, which propagates a back-to-the-roots Islamic ideology.

<sup>533</sup> Assaf Moghadam, *ibid.*, 2.

<sup>534</sup> A fundamentalist group within Sunni Islam that promotes militant activities and a lifestyle strictly according to the Shariah.

<sup>535</sup> Mark Silinsky, *ibid.*, 13.

either of them show signs of the *Hashshāshīn*'s influence – the reason behind their inclusion in this research work – will be discussed in the concluding chapter. But before that: a look into the most recent entry to the world of Islamic fundamentalist terrorism.

## **al-Dawla al-Islāmīyah or The Islamic State**

Formerly known as the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) and also Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL), the self-proclaimed Islamic State is the latest militant movement initiated in the name of Islam. The group was formed when – amidst the anti-Sunni atmosphere created Iraq's Shi'ite regime – the terrorist groups "al-Qaeda in Iraq" and al-Qaeda announced their merger on April 9, 2013<sup>536</sup>. IS is a pan-Sunni and anti-Shi'ite military organization, whose goal is the formation of an Islamic Caliphate, which it has already declared<sup>537</sup>.

## **Terrorism and its Targets**

IS is notorious for its ruthless, indiscriminate killing. The group is especially known to target Shi'ites and other minorities, so much so that it has been accused of ethnic cleansing<sup>538</sup>. Incidents include the massacre of 670 Shi'ite prisoners in Mosul<sup>539</sup>, killing of Shi'ite pilgrims<sup>540</sup>, and the regular imprisoning, ridiculing and subsequently killing of Iraqi Shi'ite soldiers<sup>541</sup>. The group claimed to have had killed as many as 1,700 Iraqi

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<sup>536</sup> *Encyclopædia Britannica: Book of the Year 2014*, (Chicago: Encyclopædia Britannica, Inc.), 2014, 436.

<sup>537</sup> The Wall Street Journal, *ISIS Declares New Islamist Caliphate*, June 29, 2014, available at: <http://www.wsj.com/articles/isis-declares-new-islamist-caliphate-1404065263>

<sup>538</sup> The Guardian, *Isis Accused of Ethnic Cleansing as Story of Shia Prison Massacre Emerges*, August 25, 2014, available at: <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2014/aug/25/isis-ethnic-cleansing-shia-prisoners-iraq-mosul>

<sup>539</sup> Ibid.

<sup>540</sup> *Encyclopædia Britannica*, ibid., 434.

<sup>541</sup> The Independent, *Iraq Crisis the Footage that Shows Isis Militants Taunting and Killing Shia Soldiers*, June 16, 2014, available at: <http://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/middle-east/iraq-crisis-the-footage-that-shows-isis-militants-taunting-and-killing-shia-forces-9541929.html>

soldiers – mostly Shi'ite – by June 2014<sup>542</sup>. Apart from Shi'ites, Human Rights Watch reports that the IS is also involved in killing or forcefully converting minorities such as Christians, Turkmen, Yazidis and Shabaks<sup>543</sup>. HRW claimed in July, 2014, that the group was holding 200 people from these minorities and had killed 11<sup>544</sup>. Amnesty International believes that the situation is worse: the group is systematically cleansing Iraq of all religious – non-Sunni – and ethnic – non-Arab – minorities, and every time it attacks a village of minority population, it kills dozens of their men and make dozens of their women and children captives<sup>545</sup>. For instance, in a raid on August 3, 2014 in the village of Qinyieh, the IS killed 60 to 70 men, all possibly from the Yazidi sect<sup>546</sup>.

Apart from killing minorities, IS has indulged in various other brutal massacres, such as the murder of 150 Iraqi women in December, 2014, by a single militant named Abu Anas Al-Libi, because of their refusal to marry IS's "jihadists"<sup>547</sup><sup>548</sup>. 3,500 others – mostly from the Yazidi sect – were also kidnapped by the group<sup>549</sup>, which is known to make sex slaves out of their female captives<sup>550</sup>. The Islamic State's thirst for brutality

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<sup>542</sup> Time, *ISIS Claims Massacre of 1,700 Iraqi Soldiers*, June 15, 2014, available at: <http://time.com/2878718/isis-claims-massacre-of-1700-iraqis/>

<sup>543</sup> Human Rights Watch, *Iraq: ISIS Abducting, Killing, Expelling Minorities*, July 19, 2014, available at: <http://www.hrw.org/news/2014/07/19/iraq-isis-abducting-killing-expelling-minorities>

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<sup>549</sup> BBC News, *Islamic State: Yazidi Women Tell of Sex-Slavery Trauma*, December 22, 2014, available at: <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-30573385>

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is stronger and more inexplicable than that of any other terrorist group on the horizon in the modern world.

### Method

Unlike the Taliban and al-Qaeda, the Islamic State is rarely known to employ tactics of suicide bombing preferring, instead, to use car bombs<sup>551</sup>, mortar<sup>552</sup> and organized military raids, such as the one they made in Mosul in June, 2014<sup>553</sup>. The military raids are at times accompanied by looting, as shown by the Mosul raid during which IS robbed £250 million from a bank<sup>554</sup>, and captives are almost always taken. However, IS's style of terrorism shows a lot of difference from that of al-Qaeda and the Taliban. While the latter employs tactics of guerrilla warfare, the former employs tactics of battle warfare with a formal, organized military, which perhaps is why it does not feel the need for suicide bombing. This means that while al-Qaeda and the Taliban function more like bands of outlaws, the Islamic State functions, quite simply, as a sovereign *state* – hence, the name.

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<sup>551</sup> The Daily Star, *Car Bomb Near Syria Gas Plant Kills 9: Activists*, December 29, 2014, available at: <http://www.dailystar.com.lb/News/Middle-East/2014/Dec-29/282522-suicide-bombers-attack-syria-gas-facilities.ashx>

<sup>552</sup> The Guardian, *Isis Targets Baghdad with Wave of Car Bombs and Mortar Attacks Killing 150*, October 16, 2014, available at: <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2014/oct/16/isis-targets-baghdad-car-bombs-mortar-attacks>

<sup>553</sup> The Huffington Post, *ISIS Loots £250m From Mosul's Central Bank and Rockets Them Up Terror Rich List*, June 13, 2014, available at: [http://www.huffingtonpost.co.uk/2014/06/13/isis-terror-rich-bank-ira\\_n\\_5491156.html](http://www.huffingtonpost.co.uk/2014/06/13/isis-terror-rich-bank-ira_n_5491156.html)

<sup>554</sup> Ibid.

# **PART 3:**

# **Conclusion**

## **Conclusion: Answers to Research Questions**

In the preface to this research work I presented a few research questions, which, after presenting all the information I extracted from primary and secondary sources in the preceding chapters, I will now attempt to answer.

### **Question Number One: Were the *Hashshāshīn* “Holy Killers” who killed in the name of Islam?**

This question’s core problem was addressed in the sixth chapter of this research work, in which the *Hashshāshīn*’s assassinations were looked into and their motives evaluated. As the chapter shows, the *Hashshāshīn*’s targets varied in their religious affiliations and occupations. However, a vast majority of them were Muslims. Some were Muslim religious scholars, some military men, but most of them were political leaders, per se: lords, viziers, and caliphs. One known target – arguably the biggest “feat” of the Order – was a Christian, Conrad of Montferrat, the motive behind whose murder is not clear. Primary sources suggest that the Marquis was murdered at Salah-ud-Din’s behest, which makes it an incident of contract killing. This shows that the *Hashshāshīn* barely ever killed non-Muslims – at least according to the medieval records that are available to us, today.

Secondly, in the fifth chapter (p. 68) of this research work, an incident of a group of Syrian *Hashshāshīn* taking refuge in the Crusading Franks’ territory has been mentioned, which shows the lack of enmity – if not friendliness, certainly – between



the two groups. The fact that the Syrian Nizaris were expelled from their castles by Muslim Seljuks makes it even clearer whom the real adversary for the *Hashshāshīn* was.

A combination of these factors shows that the *Hashshāshīn*'s assassinations were not done for the cause of Islam, which, in turn, shows that the members of the Order were not Holy Killers or jihadists. Their assassinations were probably driven by political reasons, most likely as a measure against the persecution of their sect by the Sunni Seljuk sultanate. However, this cannot be declared as the ultimate truth – for we have lost the Nizari Isma'ilis' own literature of the period which could have thrown much more light on the motives behind their actions – but as the most likely interpretation of historical events.

**Question Number Two: Does primary historiography support the Assassin legends that are endorsed by contemporary scholars?**

The first to the sixth chapter of this research work record the history of the *Hashshāshīn* with the sole purpose of finding any evidence that proves Assassin legends as true. However, none of these were supported by primary historiography: no evidence of the *Hashshāshīn*'s use of hashish or a secret garden used to train *fida'is* – as alleged by Marco Polo's travelogue quoted in the sixth chapter – was found. The speculated connection between Nizam-ul-Mulk Tusi and Hassan bin Sabbah, as developed by Omar Khayyam in his fictional *Rubiyat* (chapter 3, p. 23-24), has also been proven to be highly unlikely. This means that no primary source that I have looked into – including Ata Malik Juvaini's *Tarikh-i-Jahangusha* – has mentioned any of the myths that are heavily associated with the *Hashshāshīn*. The conduits mentioned in Marco Polo's account (p. 113-115), however, are factual since archaeological evidence

recorded by Peter Willey shows the presence of large conduits and reservoirs in Alamut (chapter 4, p. 40). Their presence, nevertheless, does not imply that wine, milk or honey – as suggested by Marco Polo – ran through them or was stored in the reservoirs. It is most likely that they were used to draw water from nearby rivers.

Hence, no, primary historiography – as much as I have gone through – does not support the popular Assassin legends.

**Question Number Three: Based upon the answers to the abovementioned questions, is it justified to place the roots of modern, presumably Muslim suicide terrorism in the assassinations of the *Hashshāshīn*?**

The seventh and last chapter of this research work throws a cursory glance on the workings of three modern terrorist outfits that claim to be jihadists: al-Qaeda, Taliban and the Islamic State. A few pages, undoubtedly, are not enough to study these highly complex organizations or their terrorist activities, but, a brief discussion was enough to grab the gist of their operations – enough to make it possible to draw a comparison between their and the *Hashshāshīn*'s killings.

It cannot be denied that there are a few similarities between the *Hashshāshīn* and the modern terrorist outfits mentioned above. The biggest similarity between the two is their use of suicide attacks. The *Hashshāshīn*'s *fida'is*, naturally, did not strap bombs to their bodies and blow themselves up in a busy marketplace, but they, like modern terrorists, knew that death was imminent on their missions. Secondly, all of these organizations used murder to counter their adversaries, even if with different methods. While the *Hashshāshīn* chose to assassinate them, modern terrorist outfits target their infrastructure or murder their citizens to create a panic.

However, for those two similarities, there are plenty of dissimilarities. For instance, none of the three modern terrorist groups use the method of assassination, which is the single most well-known feature of the *Hashshāshīn*. The *Hashshāshīn* always picked out their targets and chose to assassinate them, while modern terrorist outfits barely ever kill their actual adversaries, choosing instead to mass murder common people and damaging infrastructure to weaken their enemies. It is true that the weaponry of the time did not allow them to kill many people at the pressing of a single button, but, if they wished, the *Hashshāshīn* could have saved the lives of their *fida*'s by deploying bands of fifty or sixty men to take their targets by surprise and killing them – along with whoever else came in their way – like they did when they raided caravans, and like modern terrorist outfits do when they detonate bombs fitted in cars. Another dissimilarity between the *Hashshāshīn* and modern terrorist outfits is the intentional killing of common people or, in modern terminology, civilians. IS is known for it, al-Qaeda has shown the tendency to kill civilians such as on 9/11, while Taliban's attacks – especially those of the TTP – have also claimed the lives of innocent people with the same intent. The *Hashshāshīn*, on the other hand, did not intentionally kill common people, apart from the times when they raided caravans and looted their goods, which was commonplace in the medieval world. Thirdly, the element of terror is different for both entities. In modern times, common people, more than political or military leaders, have a deep-seated fear of terrorists, because of one simple reason: common people are the biggest sufferers at the hands of modern terrorism. In the case of the *Hashshāshīn*, the fear was stronger, albeit, in the hearts of leaders and men of high rank, not so much in those of common people. Lastly, and most importantly, the difference between the motives behind the *Hashshāshīn* and modern terrorist outfits is substantial. While the

former most likely killed for political purposes – or for money – the latter claims to kill in the name of Islam.

Therefore, while there is a bit of similarity between modern terrorist groups and the *Hashshāshīn*, there are more differences. Besides, the two common features shared by the *Hashshāshīn* and modern terrorists are not very uncommon: they are factors that they share with other assassins, such as the Jewish Sicarii and the Hindu Thuggees, too. Does that lead us to believe that the *Hashshāshīn* were inspired by the Sicarii or that the Thuggees were inspired by the *Hashshāshīn*? No, because each of them had different motives behind their acts and different targets to murder. Murder has been known to man since pre-historic times, ever since there has been hate and the lust for power – how far back can we possibly try to trace their origins to?

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