

The *Fidāwiyyah* Assassins in Crusades and Counter-Crusades

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Abstract: *The Assassins have been the focus of serious study during this century in the West. Although the Assassins have left no insignificant impact on the Crusades and Counter-Crusades, this impact has not been properly studied. Scholars seem to have different, and at times, contradictory views on the subject. This paper maintains that the Assassins' activities during the Crusades and Counter-Crusades can only be comprehended in the context of their doctrines, because they acted in accordance with the latter and with the interests of their community. This article is an attempt to understand the motives of the Assassins for the policies that they pursued during the Crusades in the east, by comparing the findings of modern scholars on the subject against data collected from primary sources.*

The role of the Ismā'īlī sect, known among Muslim chroniclers as *Fidāwiyyah* and as Assassins among Western writers, during the Crusades and Counter-Crusades has been a subject of much controversy among historians. Initially, most of the hostile actions of the *Fidāwiyyah* were directed against the Muslims, not the crusaders. Later, however, the sect also adopted a more belligerent attitude towards the latter. Questions have arisen regarding the motives for their action, and the impact which these actions had on the outcome of the Crusades.

It is our contention that while the *Fidāwiyyah* regarded their actions as primarily motivated by their doctrine, they took hostile action against any party which they saw as a threat to the continued existence

and power of their sect. Initially, their activities aided the penetration of the Crusader in the near East and hindered Muslim attempts at defense. Later, the Crusaders too were adversely affected by the hostility of the *Fidāwiyyah* Assassins.

Ismā'īlī Beliefs and Origins

The scholars of the classical period agree unanimously that *Fidāwiyyah* (those who are ready to sacrifice themselves) were a sub-division of the Ismā'īlī Bāṭinī movement, which originated in the Shī'ite *Ghulāt* (extremist Shī'ites).¹

Ismā'īlīs hold that after the universe was created by the action of the Universal mind or the Universal Soul, history started to unfold itself in a series of cycles. There are seven cycles in all, and each cycle is dominated by a particular faith. The first cycle belonged to the Sabians, the second to the Hindus, the third to the Zoroastrians, the fourth to the Jews, the fifth to the Christians, and the sixth to the Muslims. These six periods are analogous to the six periods (*ayyām*) of creation mentioned in the Qur'ān. The seventh period is to be that of the *qā'im*, or the final imām. According to Ismā'īlī cosmology, each cycle closes, when the religion of the time has exhausted its potential, with a *qiyāmah* (resurrection) to mark the transition from one cycle to another. At the end, there will be the *qiyāmah al-qiyāmah* (resurrection of resurrections) to mark the end of all the seven cycles. At this time, a new era will dawn and Islam will be superseded by the *qā'im* who will have the power to annul the *shar'ah* (Islamic law).²

In Ismā'īlī cosmology, each cycle begins with the coming of an *Imām al-nāṭiq* (speaking imām), who is a prophet. The speaking imām is followed by a series of imāms who are *al-ṣāmit* (silent imāms).³ Each *Imām al-nāṭiq* delivers to his people a new *shar'ah*, the law he receives from an angel as revelation in the *zāhir* (outward, exoteric) form. His task is to establish the *zāhir* form of religion, so that the souls of the believers open up to their "first birth."

Next to arrive is the *waṣī* (guardian), also called *asās* (foundation of the imāmate). He establishes the *bāṭinī* (esoteric) aspects of the religion,⁴ teaching *ta'wīl*, or the esoteric meaning of the revelation brought by the prophet. He brings about the "second birth" of souls "by moulding them into the image of eternal forms."

After the *waṣī* comes the imām. The *waṣī* is actually the first of the imāms, but as the "foundation," he is distinct from them. The imām

becomes the authority in the community in an esoteric sense, and sometimes in an exoteric or temporal sense also.⁴ In each cycle, seven imāms, or several groups of seven imāms appear. The cycle is completed by the arrival of the *qā'im*, who closes it.⁵

According to Ismā'īlī beliefs, the earth cannot be without an imām for even a single day.⁶ If the imāmate ceases to exist, religion would become distorted and even the most pious believers would perish.⁷

Absolute submission to the dictates of the imām is justified in Ismā'īlī belief, because the imām is completely *ma'ṣūm* (inerrant). In this respect, the position of imām is above that of the prophets, as the *'iṣmat* (inerrancy) of the prophets is not total.⁸

The importance of the imām to the Ismā'īlīs is underlined by the belief that imāms cannot be in *ghaybah* (occultation, disappearing completely).⁹ There are cycles of "hidden" and "manifest" imāms, corresponding to times of persecution and relative freedom for the faith,¹⁰ but even if the imām is not "manifest" to the masses he is in contact with some chosen believers.¹¹ In order to protect himself in times of danger, the imām can give his imāmate temporarily to another person, usually a *dā'ī*. The *dā'ī* would then assume the titles and functions of the imām, while the imām would remain hidden. The "temporary" imām is known as the *imām mustauda'*.¹²

Some authors have suggested that Ismā'īlism was a proto-liberal movement, which was a reaction to the "extreme intolerance" of Muslim orthodoxy.¹³ However, it is evident that the Ismā'īlī attitude to those who did not accept their *ta'wīl* was hardly liberal. They believed that there are only two kinds of people in the world—the theologians who have mastered all religious knowledge, and their disciples who are in the process of mastering knowledge. The rest of the human race is an ignorant mob. Whosoever adhered to the *zāhir* while disregarding the *bāṭin* was regarded as spiritually dead,¹⁴ and had no better chance of salvation in the hereafter than those who disregarded the *zāhir*.¹⁵ According to them, the phrase *aṣḥāb al-yamīn*, used in the Qur'ān to refer to true believers, refers to the Ismā'īlīs only.¹⁶

However, the doctrine which divided the Ismā'īlīs from the Muslims and generated enmity between them more than any other, was that of *qiyāmah* (resurrection). In 561 A.H., Hassan II of Alamūt, the chief Ismā'īlī stronghold in Iran, declared that the time of *qiyāmah* had arrived, and therefore *shar'ah* was no longer necessary. All *shar'ah* laws were proscribed in Ismā'īlī-held areas, and people who persisted

in adherence to the *sharʿah* were persecuted.¹⁷

In Syria as well, it appears that the *qiyāmah* was instituted by Rashīd al-Dīn Sinān, the representative of Alamūt there. According to Kamāl al-Dīn's account, Sinān summoned his followers and instructed them to be sincere to each other and to share everything. They interpreted this as a license for debauchery, and proceeded to share women. They called themselves *al-Ṣufāt* (the sincere). However, Sinān turned against them later, and this led to the killing of quite a number of them.¹⁸ It seems that this reversal was largely due to the opposition of Muslims to their idea of *qiyāmah*. When word of the institution of *qiyāmah* spread, al-Malik al-Ṣāliḥ, the Ayyubid Sultan in Egypt, sent an army against them. Sinān disclaimed responsibility for the activities of the *Ṣufāt*, and requested the invading army to withdraw, pledging to deal with the *Ṣufāt* himself. After the army left, Sinān slaughtered the *Ṣufāt*. Lewis speculates that this may have been an attempt by Sinān to keep outside influence at bay. He denied Muslims the opportunity to intervene by suppressing the *Ṣufāt* himself. It is also possible that the events may be related to some internal sectarian conflict.¹⁹

Reversals in the institution of *qiyāmah* also took place in Alamūt. Hassan II's successors, at various times, announced the reinstatement of the *sharʿah*. This was done according to the conscience of the ruler, or when the Ismāʿīlī community needed to secure acceptance by Muslims for economic and political reasons.²⁰

The theological basis of *qiyāmah* was the priority accorded to the imāmāte.²¹ It is a logical development of the idea that only the imāms can teach "the real meaning" (*ḥaqīqah*) of the *sharʿah* in its correct form, free from perversions.²² Some 250 years before Hassan II declared *qiyāmah* at Alamūt, the doctrine that the *sharʿah* could be abrogated and "worship in spirit" substituted for ritual worship existed in some important Ismāʿīlī texts.²³

It is evident that the *qiyāmah* widened the gulf between the Ismāʿīlīs and the Muslims irreparably. Muslims felt that the idea of *qiyāmah* is an attack on the very fabric of society. For example, regarding the Persian Assassins, Juvaynī writes:

In order to spread doubt and confusion amongst the people they put a saying to the effect that in addition to the apparent (*ẓāhir*) meaning, the *sharʿah* bears also an inner (*bāṭin*) meaning, which is concealed from the majority of mankind. And in support of these lies, they adduced propositions that had come down to them from the Greek philosophers, and in which they also incorporated several

points from the tenets of the Magians...²⁴

According to Juvaynī, the *Fidāwiyyah* Assassins were dangerous heretics determined to destroy Muslim society, who used some of their doctrines, such as reverence for the *ahl al-bait*, to hide their real aims. In a Muslim society, where all persons must belong to a recognizable religious community and consent to be ruled by its laws, the presence of a group such as the Ismāʿīlīs, who held that laws could be interpreted allegorically or superseded altogether, threatened to undermine the consensus upon which the society was based. Moreover, the power given by the Ismāʿīlīs to their *imām* as the only legitimate authority constituted a challenge to the authority of the state. The Assassins carried these beliefs to their logical conclusion by establishing mini-states in territories controlled by them. Moreover, they not only wanted to separate themselves from the Muslim state, but also aimed to convert as many Muslims as possible to their cause.

These beliefs made armed conflict between the Assassins and the Muslims inevitable. When the *qiyāmah* was proclaimed and the Ismāʿīlī attitude to the *sharʿah* became clear to all, destruction of the Assassin states became an urgent necessity for the Muslims.

The Assassins and other Religious Communities

It appears that most of the early victims of the *Fidāwiyyah* Assassins were Muslims; attacks on Christians were few and comparatively late.²⁵ It has already been mentioned that some accused them of having, as Juvaynī puts it, "a fellow-feeling with the Magians."²⁶ It is also reported that the Ismāʿīlīs read Christian works such as the New Testament. They did *taʿwīl* of the New Testament and quoted verses from it in their religious works.²⁷ It is essential to understand the attitude of the *Fidāwiyyah* Assassins towards other religions in order to properly assess their role in the Crusades and Counter-Crusades.

Some authorities have argued that the *Fidāwiyyah* Assassins had syncretist tendencies and were tolerant of other religions. For example, Lewis quotes from the *Shawāhid* of Jaʿfar ibn Manṣūr al-Yaman that Jews, Christians, or people of any religion (who believe in God and in the after-life, do good and obey God) have a place in heaven.²⁸ However, he mentions that Ibn Rizām dismissed this idea as simply a device to facilitate *daʿwah* to as many groups as possible.²⁹

Lewis also mentions that, in general, Ismāʿīlī relations with non-Muslims were close. In Iran, a community of Jews lived under Ismāʿīlī

protection and always went to battle with them against their enemies.³⁰ The Fātimids had such good relations with the Jewish community that many Muslim scholars thought that they had Jewish origins.³¹

However, other sources do not indicate that the Assassins, or Ismāʿīlīs in general, were particularly tolerant of other religions. As has been mentioned, Ismāʿīlīs believed that all religions other than their own had been superseded, and that the followers of other religions were denying the truth and were, therefore, in error.

Another aspect of Ismāʿīlī teachings, to which Lewis does not pay sufficient attention, is that of jihād. Not only were violators of God's law inside the Ismāʿīlī community to be punished by the community,³² but jihād against "those who turn away from religion" was obligatory. Opponents of the faith were to be hated: "*Walāyah*, or support for ʿAli and love for him and his cause, is the greatest religious virtue...and hatred of all that opposes him is a necessary element of piety."³³

In sum, it seems that Ibn Rizām is probably correct in his estimation of Ismāʿīlī tolerance of other religions. The existence of some texts, such as the one to which Lewis refers and which are apparently proto-syncretistic, are not surprising in view of the above-mentioned tendency of Ismāʿīlī authors to distort or conceal beliefs from neophytes. One of the religious obligations was to "keep secret those things and that religious knowledge which are entrusted to them."³⁴ The Ismāʿīlīs tried to attract people from all communities to their faith. As a tiny, embattled minority, they had to gain as many adherents as possible if they were to survive. They could ill afford to antagonize any potential converts. Also, from a strategic perspective, it was advantageous to cultivate good relations with other minorities, which could render help in times of need. Lewis's example of the Persian Jews who fought alongside the Assassin community that ruled them bears this out. At least, by appearing sympathetic to other religious minorities, the Assassins could expect them not to be hostile.

However, the question of Assassin relations with the Crusaders is more complex. It is evident that they benefitted, at least initially, from the presence of the Crusaders. Between 1070 and 1079, the Seljuks conquered Syria and began a process of fragmentation which was completed by the Crusaders.³⁵ The resulting disorganization allowed the Assassins to establish themselves in Syria, and the threat of the Crusaders prevented the Muslim authorities from dealing decisively with them. Ṣalāḥ al-Dīn, in his letter to the Khalifah, complained that

he was fighting on three fronts at the same time: the Franks, the traitors, and the *Fidāwiyyah* Assassins.³⁶ This meant that he was unable to concentrate on eliminating any one of them. An example was the siege of Maşyāf, an Ismāʿīlī strong-hold which was besieged by Ṣalāḥ al-Dīn. The siege ended with a truce. Authors are divided on the reasons for this. However, Lewis quotes Ibn Abī Ṭayy, a scholar of the period, who comments that at that time there was a dangerous Frankish advance in the Biqā' Valley, and Ṣalāḥ al-Dīn had to leave Maşyāf hurriedly to check the Franks.³⁷

It is also evident that the Crusaders benefitted from the presence of the *Fidāwiyyah* Assassins. The latter had contributed to the success of the First Crusade by increasing confusion and disunity on the Muslim side. In particular, their assassination of Malik Shah irretrievably weakened the Seljuk empire, which was already unstable. With his death, his two sons fought each other. Nowell speculates that had the Crusaders faced a united Seljuk empire, they would not have been victorious.³⁸ Saunders considers it significant that it was only after the destruction of the power of the Assassins in Syria by Baybars in 1270 A.D. that the Crusaders could be totally removed from Syria. "But for the Assassins," he writes "the long survival of the crusading states in the Levant would be inexplicable."³⁹

These factors help explain the *Fidāwiyyahs'* reluctance to oppose the Crusaders, and their hostility to Muslim leaders (such as Ṣalāḥ al-Dīn al-Ayyūbī) who were attempting to drive out the Crusaders. They profited from the instability which was in part perpetuated by the presence of the Crusaders and, therefore, did not want to see them evicted from Syria.

However, the Assassins did carry out some assassinations of leading Crusaders such as Count Raymond of Tripoli and Conrad of Montferrat.⁴⁰ It is also reported that the Assassins attempted to murder Philip Augustus in 1192 A.D., and plotted against the life of King Louis. While the accounts of Assassin designs against Philip and Louis are controversial, and authorities as early as De la Ravalieri (1743) considered them to be apocryphal,⁴¹ the *Fidāwiyyah* did assassinate the first two. It is not clear what their motive was. In the case of Conrad, Abū Firās and Ibn al-Athīr, two Muslim scholars of the period, say that Ṣalāḥ al-Dīn incited the *Fidāwiyyah* to kill Conrad. However, ʿImād al-Dīn claims that Conrad's death came at a disadvantageous time for Ṣalāḥ al-Dīn. Lewis points out that his death was not contrary to Ṣalāḥ al-Dīn's ultimate interests.⁴²

However, in Assassin-Frankish relations the Assassins did not always have the advantage. In 1152, the Templars forced the Assassins to pay them a yearly tribute. Later, the Knights Hospitallers did likewise. The *Fidāwiyyah* Assassins sent a message to King Amoury I of Jerusalem, proposing that they convert to Christianity in exchange for no longer having to pay tribute. King Amoury was reportedly delighted at the offer and sent an envoy to the Assassins to inform them that the proposal had been accepted. However, the envoy was killed by the Templars on his way back to Syria, and the negotiations did not proceed further.⁴³

It seems that the Assassin offer was simply a ploy to escape paying tribute, or at least to curry favour with Amoury. However, it is evident that neither the Templars, who probably did not want to lose their tribute, nor the Assassins, who do not appear to have had any genuine interest in conversion, wanted to alter the *status quo*.

It is evident that while, for various doctrinal reasons, the Assassins had a hostile relationship with the Muslims, practical considerations induced them to adopt a more conciliatory attitude to neighbouring non-Muslim minorities, including the Crusaders.

The Move to Syria and Jihād

As has been mentioned, the Assassin movement originated in Persia and was directed from Alamūt, although the Ismāʿīlī movement in general originated among the Arabs and expanded to Western Syria.⁴⁴ According to Marco Polo, the Assassins tried to establish themselves in Kurdistan,⁴⁵ because many of the factors which had enabled them to be successful in Iran and Syria were present there as well. However, most sources are silent about Assassin activities there. Therefore, it is difficult to know how much credit can be given to Marco Polo's account, which is inaccurate in any case. It may be assumed that perhaps the *Fidāwiyyah* Assassins tried to establish bases there, which would have been strategically advantageous.

Syria was a logical area in which to expand, although it was rather far from other Assassin bases. It had just been conquered by the Seljuks, who were their main enemies. The terrain, rough and mountainous, was favourable to the establishment of bases. Syria also had a significant minority of extremist Shīʿā.⁴⁶ The spread of the Fātimid empire eastwards from North Africa had brought Syria under intermittent Fātimid rule in the late tenth and eleventh centuries (A.D.), and

had opened the land for Ismāʿīlī *daʿwah*. By the end of the ninth century, the Assassins had gathered sufficient local support to be able to make a bid for political power. As the power and prestige of the Fāṭimids declined, the Assassins appeared as an attractive alternative to many Syrian Ismāʿīlīs, and as the Seljuks and Crusaders laid waste to some parts of Syria, they appeared to many extremist Shīʿās as the only effective challenge. Many did, in fact, switch allegiances and started supporting the Assassins.⁴⁷ Finally, Syria was on the road to Egypt, the seat of the Fāṭimid Khilāfah and a main object of Assassin policy.⁴⁸ If they had been able to gain control of the Khilāfah, or at least to pressure the regime to turn away from the Mustaʿlian line of Khilāfah and reinstate the Nizārīs whom they supported, the power and resources of Assassin *daʿwah* would have been immeasurably strengthened.

It seems that the Assassins attempted to gain adherents in various ways, so as to appeal to as wide a spectrum of people as possible. The first Assassin leader, al-Ḥakim al-Munajjim, tried to establish a base in Ḥalab at the beginning of the twelfth century. Ḥalab had a large Shīʿā population and was also close to the extremist Shīʿā strongholds of Jabal Bohra and Jabal al-Summāq.

The ruler of Ḥalab, Ridwān, favoured the *Fidāwiyyah* Assassins, perhaps to compensate for his military weakness *vis a vis* his rivals. Significantly, a few years earlier he had proclaimed his allegiance to Fāṭimid Egypt, and had then reverted to his former allegiances when the political situation altered.⁴⁹ Attempts were also made to establish bases at places such as Shayzar, in western Syria. Similar alliances were struck with the rulers of Baniyas, Tyre, and the crusaders against Ṣalāḥ al-Dīn.⁵⁰

Opposition was dealt with by assassinations. Notable cases include Janah al-Dawlah of Ḥimṣ (496/1103),⁵¹ Maudūd of Moṣul (507/1113),⁵² and Buri of Dimashq (526/1131-2).⁵³ Buri had earned their enmity by suppressing them and executing their leader after they had murdered a notable, and the population had demanded that he take strong action against them.⁵⁴ They were not able to retain Ḥalab with the death of Ridwān and the succession of Alp Arslan, who moved to suppress them.⁵⁵ They were also evicted from Dimashq (Damascus).⁵⁶ The hostility of the Muslims was not the only difficulty; the Franks also sought possession of many of the strongholds which they had taken or were attempting to control. For instance, in 1152, they attacked Shayzar, but were driven off by the Assassins.⁵⁷ This development

probably explains the subsequent Assassin hostility towards the Franks at the time, and the killing of Raymond of Tripoli in 1152. However, the Franks retaliated violently and launched attacks against Assassin territories, with the result that the *Fidāwiyyah* Assassins desisted from further attacks for the next forty years.⁵⁸

Thirteen years after the murder of Raymond, Rashīd al-Dīn Sinān became head of Assassin activities in Syria. Lewis quotes Kamāl al-Dīn, a contemporary scholar, as saying that at first Sinān appeared as a pious person and gained adherents in this way.⁵⁹ His command brought the Assassins to the peak of their power and influence in Syria. At least two attempts were made on the life of Ṣalāḥ al-Dīn during this period, and Conrad of Montferrat was assassinated.⁶⁰

It appears that Sinān was not only a man of military ability, but also a charismatic leader, able to inspire fear and respect in friend and foe alike. Some of his followers, the Ṣufāt mentioned above, went to the extent of proclaiming Sinān a god.⁶¹ This coincidence of Sinān's leadership and the growth of the Assassin movement in Syria to the peak of its power is an indication of the centrality of charismatic leadership to the Assassin movement. With the death of Sinān in 1192 A.D., the movement gradually declined until its destruction by Baybars in 1273.⁶² The reduction of Assassin power to the point where they had to pay tribute to the Templars and the Hospitallers has already been mentioned. During this later period, Ibn al-Furāt mentions an assassination attempt on Baybars; it seems that by that time, the Assassins were no longer feared, even by the Muslims, as the Assassins in question were merely reproved and freed.⁶³

Assassination as a Political Weapon

The main role played by the Assassins in the Crusades was that of assassination. Some of the reasons for this have already been outlined.

One explanation, popular among many Western writers until recently, revolves around Marco Polo's story of "the Garden." According to him, the Old Man of the Mountain in Iran (presumably the head of the Assassins there) made a garden which he filled with palaces, trees, singing girls, and so forth. He would introduce young men to this garden in a drugged state, and tell them that they had reached Paradise. They would be removed from the Garden and, longing to return, would do whatever he wanted them to do. Moreover, "the Old Man sent two other Old Men of the Mountain to near Damascus and Kurdistan, where they behaved exactly as he did."⁶⁴ This

legend led some authorities to believe that the Assassins were motivated by *hashīsh* to murder their victims.

Nowell traces the garden story to report that fruit trees were planted and canals dug at Alamūt to enable the *Fidāwiyyah* Assassins there to withstand a siege. He remarks that tales of a garden of Paradise are unlikely, given the rigid austerity of the sect's early imāms in Alamut.⁶⁵ Setton also notes that the story of the garden is not confirmed by any Ismā'īlī source.⁶⁶

However, Nowell claims that the Assassins did use *hashīsh* to inspire their members to kill people, giving them a foretaste of paradise. He further adds that, as *hashīsh* addiction is debilitating, it could only have been administered occasionally to a select few. Also, he states that *hashīsh* alone could not sustain the assassination teams, who often waited in disguise for months before killing their victims.⁶⁷ However, this is mere speculation on his part.

Lewis rejects the notion of *hashīsh* use altogether, noting that there is no extant text referring to them as *hashīshīn* (*hashīsh*-addicts).⁶⁸ Moreover, the word *hashīshī* (from which "assassin" is derived) is uncommon in Muslim sources. He hypothesizes that *hashīshī* is in fact a Syrian colloquial term which was later picked up by the Crusaders. The word would have been a term of abuse, intended to convey that the Assassins were like mad men and were generally dissolute.⁶⁹

This hypothesis would appear to fit well with the accounts given by some Muslim chroniclers. Ibn al-ʿAdīm, for example, describes the Assassins of Jabal al-Summāq as people who were corrupt and evil, practising incest, holding mixed drinking-parties, and worshipping Sinān as a god.⁷⁰ Given what Nowell points out about the debilitating nature of *hashīsh* and the long duration of some assassination missions, the explanation of *hashīsh* use does not seem credible. Finally, Ibn Kathīr is the only Muslim scholar of the classical period, who refers to the Assassins as *hashīshyah*. Ibn Athīr, who lived during the age of the Assassins and who gives a detailed account of them, makes no reference to their use of *hashīsh*.⁷¹ Muslim chroniclers, however, are unanimous in referring to them as *Fidāwiyyah*, as mentioned earlier.

Another related explanation is that the Assassins were primarily killers for hire; their motivation was material gain. It has been mentioned that some believed that Ṣalāḥ al-Dīn had instigated the murder of Conrad of Montferrat. Similar questions arose with the killing of Janah al-Dawlah of Ḥimṣ; Ibn Athīr relates that it was said

that Ridwān of Halab had instigated his murder.⁷² In many cases, it is difficult, if not impossible, to gauge to what degree such claims are true. However, this explanation too does not seem to fit the pattern of many of the assassinations. Ibn al-Athīr himself, for example, describes the assassination of Conrad: two *Fidāwiyyah* disguised as monks had remained among the Franks for six months and had gained his confidence. When the time was favourable, they attacked him with knives.⁷³ Such a long period of preparation would seem to indicate that monetary returns were a secondary source of motivation at best. However, it is not unlikely that in many cases the *Fidāwiyyah* were willing to carry out assassinations for money if the victim was someone they wished to liquidate for reasons of their own.

One motivational factor that deserves mention is the fanatical devotion of the *Fidāwiyyah* to their leader. Kamāl al-Dīn, for example, narrates an incident when Sinān commanded a group of Assassins to throw themselves off a cliff; they did and they died.⁷⁴ As has been observed, for the Ismāʿīlīs, devotion to the imām and obedience to his commands is the most important duty of the believer.⁷⁵ They believed that those who died under the guidance of the imām would be rewarded in the after-life.⁷⁶

Sinān's letter to al-Malik al-ʿĀdil, the Ayyubid sultan, is particularly revealing. He states: "We are the oppressed and not oppressors, deprived and not deprivers... You know the outward aspect of our affairs and the quality of our men, the sort of food for which they long, and for which they offer themselves. 'Say, wish for death if you are truthful'." Ibn Khallikān states that he transcribed this letter from a copy of it, which was in the writing of al-Qadī al-Faḍil, Ṣalāḥ al-Dīn's trusted associate.⁷⁷ Kamāl al-Dīn's version is almost identical, but states explicitly that the Assassins "long for the intimacy of death."⁷⁸

As previously mentioned, it was the duty of the believer to undertake jihād against the enemies of the (Ismāʿīlī) faith, and the soul of the believer who died in this way would enjoy a special closeness to God. Another related motivation was the oath of allegiance which all believers had to take; among other things, the oath-taker swore to obey the imām. Anyone breaking this oath was considered to be disobeying God and would be "cursed and punished."⁷⁹

Of course, the continuation of this form of political activity would depend on a strong leader, who could not only inspire confidence in his followers that he was the imām, worthy to be obeyed to the death, but

also be able to control the community to the extent that reluctant followers could be effectively dealt with. The movement declined after the death of Sinān due to the absence of a strong leader. Gabrieli points out that by the time of Baybars, the Mongols had also weakened the *Fidāwiyyah* with their attacks.⁸⁰ Also, it could be objected that the Assassin doctrine of the after-life, in which the body does not survive and only the soul is eternal,⁸¹ is insufficient motivation for most to undertake assassination missions, in which they were very likely to be killed themselves. However, it has already been shown how the Assassins were able to establish themselves in Syria and expand under difficult military circumstances, despite setbacks in Ḥalab and Dimashq, in which they lost many of their members as well as their prestige, despite their doctrines concerning the after-life. The main difference between success and failure for them appears to be the imām.

One additional index of Sinān's ability as a leader is the claim, in some sources, that the *Fidāwiyyah* in Alamūt sent envoys to kill Sinān.⁸² Lewis states that the Syrian Ismā'īlīs were loosely controlled from Alamūt and that some of the assassinations in Syria were probably arranged by Alamūt. However, assassinations in Syria were not recorded in the "roll of honour" of assassinations kept in Alamūt. It is more probable that the Syrians decided their own local policies.⁸³

The Assassin Contribution to the Crusades

It is evident that the main contribution of the Assassins to the Crusades, apart from assassinations, was inspiring both sides, particularly the Muslim side, with fear and terror. This detracted from the latter's ability to confront the enemy.

The Muslims in particular suffered a great deal as a result of the assassinations, for their ability to resist the Crusaders was weakened. The accounts of the time make it evident how much the Assassins were feared before their decline.

Ousama ibn Mounkidh, a contemporary of Ṣalāḥ al-Dīn, writes of an incident in which an Assassin was lurking in the tower of his uncle's palace. A group of Muslim soldiers waited outside the tower, none daring to go in after him.⁸⁴

The Crusaders were also handicapped by a fear of the Assassins, albeit to a lesser extent. The murder of Conrad of Montferrat, in particular, seems to have affected their morale.⁸⁵ Poems appearing in

Europe between 1165 and 1230 A.D. mention the Assassins, using them as a figure of speech for undying devotion. The poets had heard of the Assassins through Latin historians such as William of Tyre, and from the stories of returning Crusaders.

It seems that the Assassins made a much greater impression on the Europeans than the small number of their hostile acts against them would warrant. This is indicated by the fact that Philip Augustus was able to claim that Richard of England had sent Assassins to kill him.⁸⁶ Another interesting aspect of the relations between the Crusaders and the Assassins, which deserves further study, is Nowell's claim that the Templars were influenced by Assassin methods of organization — an influence that extended even to their choice of garb. He says that the two groups made each others' acquaintance in Syria before the Templars' rules were written.⁸⁷ If this is correct, it would seem that the Assassins aided the Crusaders inadvertently by providing them with an effective method of organizing an elite fighting force.

In conclusion, it is evident that the main role played by the *Fidāwiyyah* in the Crusades and Counter-Crusades was that of assassination. While their activities were a menace to both the Muslims and the Crusaders, they were more hostile to the Muslims. In fact, most of their victims were Muslims. The primary motivation for their acts was doctrinal, relating particularly to their doctrine of the imāmate. The main effect of their killings was that, through the weakening of the Muslims, the Crusaders were relatively advantaged, though they too were weakened to some extent by Assassins attacks.

Notes

1. Abul-Faṭḥ Muḥammad bin °Abd al-Karīm al-Shahrastānī, *Kitāb al-mīlāl wa'l-niḥāl*, 2 vols., ed. M. Badrān (Cairo: al-Azhar Press, 1910)1:436; °Izz al-Dīn Ibn al-Athīr, *Tarīkh al-Kāmil*, 13 vols., ed. C. Torneryg (Beirut: Dār al-Ṣadr, 1966)10:313-14; °Abdul Raḥmān Ibn Khaldūn, *Tarīkh Ibn Khaldūn*, 6 vols., (Beirut: Dār al-Fikr Press, 1981) 5:31. This writer will refer to them in this paper as *Fidāwiyyah*, Assassins or more often as *Fidāwiyyah* Assassins.

2. Henry Corbin, *Cyclical Time and Ismā'īlī Gnosis* (London: Kegan Paul, 1983), 97; al-Shahrastānī, *Kitāb al-mīlāl*, 437.

3. Kenneth M. Setton, *A History of the Crusades* (Philadelphia: University of

- Pennsylvania Press, 1955), 102; al-Shahrastānī, *Kitāb al-milal*, 25-26.
4. Ibid., 90-91.
 5. Ibid., 95-96.
 6. W. Ivanow, *Studies in Early Persian Ismā'īlism* (Bombay: The Ismā'īlī Society, 1955), 136.
 7. W. Ivanow ed. and trans., *A Creed of the Fāṭimids /Tāj al-°Aqā'id* (Bombay: Qayyimah Press, 1936), 40.
 8. Muḥammad Aḥmad al-Khātib, *al-Ḥarakat al-Bāṭiniyyah fi al-°Ālam al-Islāmī* (Amman: al-°Aqṣā Press, 1984), 1-102; Corbin, *Cyclical Time*, 105.
 9. Ivanow, *A Creed of the Fāṭimids*, 40.
 10. Setton, *History of the Crusades*, 102.
 11. Ivanow, *A Creed of the Fāṭimids*, 40.
 12. Bernard Lewis, *The Origins of Ismā'īlism* (Cambridge: W. Heffer & Sons, 1940), 49-50.
 13. See for example Lewis, *Origins of Ismā'īlism*, 90-92.
 14. Ibid., 56.
 15. Ibid., 130.
 16. Ibid., 59.
 17. al-Shahrastānī, *Kitāb al-milal*, 436-37; Marshall S. Hodgson, *The Order of Assassins* (The Hague: Mouton & Co, 1955), 47.
 18. Bernard Lewis, "Kamāl al-Dīn's Biography of Rashīd al-Dīn Sinān" *Studies in Classical and Ottoman Islam* (London: Variorum Reprints), 230.
 19. Ibid., 241.
 20. Hodgson, *The Order of Assassins*, 23-24.
 21. Corbin, *Cyclical Time*, 117.
 22. Ivanow, *A Creed of the Fāṭimids*, 38.
 23. Ivanow, *Early Persian Ismā'īlism*, 110.
 24. °Alā al-Dīn °Aṭā al-Mulk Juvaynī, *The History of the World Conqueror*, trans. J. Boyle, (Manchester: University Press, 1958), 641.
 25. Lewis, "Assassins of Syria and Ismā'īlīs of Persia," 574.
 26. Juvaynī, *World Conqueror*, 641.
 27. Corbin, *Cyclical Time*, 135.
 28. Lewis, *Origin of Ismā'īlism*, 94-95.
 29. Ibid., 94.
 30. Ibid., 95.

31. al-Shahrastānī, *Kitāb al-milal*, 427.
32. Ivanow, *Early Persian Ismā'īlism*, 60.
33. *Ibid.*, p.51.
34. *Ibid.*, 43, 51-53.
35. Setton, *History of the Crusades*, 110.
36. J.J. Saunders, *Aspects of the Crusades* (Christchurch: Whitcombe and Tombs Ltd., 1968), 27.
37. B. Lewis, "Saladin and the Assassins," *Studies in Classical and Ottoman Islam* (London: Variorum Reprints), 240.
38. C.E. Nowell, "The Old Man of the Mountain," *Speculum*, 22, (1947): 502.
39. Saunders, *Aspects of the Crusades*. 27.
40. Bernard Lewis, "The Sources for the History of the Syrian Assassins", *Studies in Classical and Ottoman Islam*, 484-486.
41. *Ibid.*, 476.
42. Lewis, "Saladin and the Assassins," 244.
43. Nowell, "The Old Man of the Mountain," 506.
44. Hodgson, *The Order of Assassins*, 27.
45. Teresa Waugh, trans. *The Travels of Marco Polo* (New York: Facts on File Inc., 1984), 39.
46. Lewis, "Assassins of Syria and Ismā'īlis of Persia," 577.
47. Setton, *History of Crusades*, 110.
48. Lewis, "Assassins of Syria and Ismailis of Persia," 577.
49. Ibn Athīr, *al-Kāmil*, 10: 486-87.
50. *Ibid.*, 11:418-19.
51. Ibn al-Qalanisi, *Mudhayyal Tārīkh Dimashq* (Beirut: al-Aba' al-Yasu'in, 1958), 142.
52. *Ibid.*, 142.
53. *Ibid.*, 233.
54. *Ibid.*, 220-222.
55. Ibn Athīr, *al-Kāmil*, 10:56-58.
56. Ibn Qalanisi, *Mudhayyal*, 334.
57. *Ibid.*, 349.
58. Nowell, "The Old Man of the Mountain," 507.
59. Lewis, "Biography of Rashīd al-Dīn Sinān," 230; Ibn Athīr, *al-Kāmil*,

10:316-317.

60. Lewis, "The Sources for the History of the Syrian Assassins," 486; Ibn Athīr, *al-Kāmil*, 11:398.
61. Kamāl al-Dīn °Umar bin Aḥmad Ibn °Adīm, *Zubdat al-Ḥalab min Tarīkh Ḥalab*, ed., Sami Dahan, (Damascus, 1968), 777.
62. Lewis, "The Sources for the History of the Syrian Assassins," 486-488.
63. Francesco Gabrieli, *Arab Historians of the Crusades* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1969), 319.
64. *Travels of Marco Polo*, 38-39.
65. Nowell, "The Old Man of the Mountain," 499.
66. Setton, *History of Crusades*, 108-109.
67. Nowell, "The Old Man of the Mountain," 501-508.
68. Lewis, "The Sources for the History of Assassins of Syria," 477.
69. Lewis, "Assassins of Syria and Ismā'īlis of Persia," 575.
70. Ibn °Adīm, *Zubdat al-Ḥalab*, 777.
71. al-Ḥafiz Ibn Kathīr, *al-Bidayā wa al-Nihayā*, 13 vols. (Beirut: Dār al-Kutb, 1985)11:287.
72. Gabrieli, *Arab Historians*, 16.
73. *Ibid.*, 241.
74. Lewis, "Biography of Rashīd al-Dīn Sinān," 230.
75. Ivanow, *Creed of the Fatimids*, 43.
76. *Ibid.*, 59.
77. Ibn Khallikān, *Biographical Dictionary*, trans., B. MacGuckin de Slane (New York: Johnson Reprint Corporation, 1961), 340-341.
78. Lewis, "Biography of Rashīd al-Dīn Sinān," 235.
79. Ivanow, *Creed of the Fāṭimids*, 44.
81. Lewis, "Biography of Rashīd al-Dīn Sinān," 73.
82. Gabrieli, *Arab Historians*, 319.
83. Lewis, "Biography of Rashīd al-Dīn Sinān," 250.
84. Ousama ibn Mounkidh, *The Autobiography of Ousama*, ed., George Richard Potter (London: Routledge, 1929), 210.
85. Lewis, "Biography of Rashīd al-Dīn Sinān," 225.
86. F. M. Chambers, "The Troubadors and the Assassins," *Modern Language Notes*, 14 (1949)246-249.
87. Nowell, "The Old Man of Mountain," 504.