



# Terrorism in the First Millennia and a little into the 2<sup>nd</sup>...

The History of Terrorism  
as a Strategy of Political  
Insurgency  
Section 2

[SubmitAndPray.com](http://SubmitAndPray.com)

# Tyrannicide and Regicide

*Aristotle wrote "Subjects attack their sovereigns out of fear or contempt, or because they have been unjustly treated by them"*

What can we infer from Aristotle's statement above?

- Political
- Violence
- Legality
- Symmetry of Power in the society
- Fear or intimidation

SubmitAndPray.com

The removal of an unjust ruler is often seen as justified, although there may be no legal method to do so.

In the absence of a legal recourse, assassination of tyrants and kings is well discussed throughout the ages, with Greeks and Romans discussing it at the dawn of western civilization, and modern philosophers still debating it.

The point of this slide is to first emphasize that the issues that drive people to use terrorist tactics are not new issues, and also to get some repetition into the discussion on factors or attributes that lead us to define an action as terroristic.

I would also emphasize that groups or individuals can use terror as a tactic, but if we label groups as simply terrorists, and do not understand what the groups grievances are, and why they, or often a sub group of the aggrieved group, choose terror as a tactic, we may not make much progress in dealing with the issues driving the tactic.

# The Zealots

The Zealots were a Jewish sect that sought both political independence and a return to religious and cultural purity for Judea

- Founded in 6 A.D.
- Politically Rome had taken direct control of the province
- Culturally Judea was increasing Hellenized
- Socially the Zealots were in conflict with other Jewish Sects over Hellenization
- Economically tax increases strained some purses
- Rivals to the Pharisees

[SubmitAndPray.com](http://SubmitAndPray.com)

The culture of Eastern Mediterranean was Hellenistic. The Greek City states had long traded in the area and had established numerous colonies throughout the area. In 334 BC, Alexander the Great conquered the area and it became increasingly Hellenistic under the successor states. With conquest and culture came conflict as the philosophies of Greece and the philosophical orientation of the Jews had some differences.

Greek Philosophy emphasized no revelation as ultimate, has a sense of reason, and appreciates the physical strength and beauty. Jewish Philosophy accepted an omnipotent God, a covenant with that god, and a belief in spirituality over physical form. Where things got really interesting was in the acceptance of Hellenistic values and culture by some Jews, much to the chagrin of more orthodox Jews.

Ruled by Syria, the culture clash heated up when word came that the Syrian leader Antiochus had been killed in Egypt. This set off a revolt in 163 BC by the more conservative Jewish sects, which included an effort to cleanse society of the Hellenistic trappings of a conquered state. And while at it, they also decided Hellenized Jews had to go to, and internecine fighting accelerated as Antiochus returned to Judea to try and force the conversion of all Jews to Hellenistic manners and culture.

The end of the conflict saw the Jewish Priest line of the Maccabees on top, and a

relative degree of independence was achieved by Judea, complete with coins and reconstruction. Originally a priestly hereditary succession, later on a more traditional hereditary kingship emerged as the priest roles was combined with the civil and military leadership roles. This movement away from the original ideology was contested by the Pharisees.

At around the same time, the Romans were vexed by Pirates in the Eastern Mediterranean, and dispatched a fleet under Pompeii to deal with them. The Pharisees requested their assistance, and in 63 BC the Romans came to stay, establishing the House of Herod as the new ruling family, subordinate to Rome.

And most of us remember at least one Herod who was not the most popular fellow and widely reviled as Rome's lackey (which he was).

# What happened?

## Ideological views intensified and led to the Sicarri taking direct action

- Low intensity conflict due to limited power
- Public assassination of Romans and Hellenized Jews
- Increased use of Guerilla tactics
- Civil War in 66 AD
- The Zealots “cleansed” any Jews who sought compromise
- Initial successes were reversed by the future Emperor Vespasian
- Jerusalem fell in 70 A.D.
- Masada fell in 73 A.D.
- Limited Terrorists activities continued until after 100 A.D.

SubmitAndPray.com

Onto this stage strode a new Jewish Sect, the Zealots in 6 AD. Catalyst for their formation was both the declaration of Judea as a Roman province, and an accompanying tax (or census, I have seen both cited). The Zealots were adamantly opposed to the pagan and polytheistic ways of the Romans, and the efforts to instill them upon the Jewish people. The Zealots sought to promote non-compliance and non-participation in Hellenistic ways as a method to resist acknowledging the rule of these Roman Pagans.

The history of this period was recorded by Flavius Josephus, a Jew who later became a Roman citizen and move to Italy. He was not entirely unsympathetic to their theological position, but was working for Rome so his history maybe a bit biased. The extreme wing of this group became known as the *Sicarri*, which is Greek for the Dagger Men, and references their favored strategy.

The strategy of the Sicarri was to kill a Roman, or a friend of Rome, in a public place. Slitting a Roman throat, or a collaborators throat, in a public market accomplished goals common to modern terrorist – it attracted attention, was violent, and intimidated the population while pursuing a political goals.

This low intensity struggle erupted into full blow civil war in 66 AD, allegedly after some Greeks sacrificed some birds in front of a synagogue. A Roman legion sent to reinforce the Romans in Judea was ambushed and defeated. This led to a much larger force under the future Emperor Vespasian, of 60,000 Roman and neighboring

armies, to march into Galilee first, eventually occupying the northern region completely by 68 AD.

The northern leaders of the revolt escaped, and went to join the southern resistance. At the same time, they advocated killing anyone who considered surrender. A brutal internal civil conflict resulted in the northern leaders eliminating all of the southern leaders, and with the Sicarri in control. The Romans continued to have success in the field though, and eventually the only hold out city was Jerusalem, which fell in 70 AD after 4 years of siege.

Masada, the last fortress held by the Zealots, fell in 73 AD, after 960 of the 967 defenders committed suicide to avoid being captured and enslaved by the Romans. The Zealots were not done yet though, and the Sicarri remained active into the first century AD. (Carlo Pisane would later refer to this as "Propaganda by Deed").

## What makes it possible to label them Terrorists?

Maybe I am pro-Greek and just do not like them!

Or, maybe there were some key traits that lead us to define them as such

- Ideological purity of the mission
- Individuals motivated to risk all
- Political Goals
- Organized
- Tactics reflect the asymmetrical power structure in the region
- Psychological as well as physical assault

[SubmitAndPray.com](http://SubmitAndPray.com)

The Zealots believed in the purity of the mission, and in its religious and ideological correctness. You were either with them, or against them.

The ability of religious belief to motivate behaviors that put the individual at complete risk

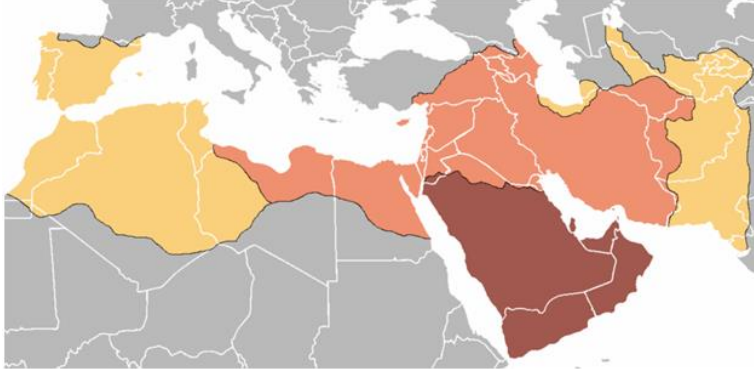
They had political goals.

They were an organization and active for over a century.

Their strategies of assassination and of some guerilla war prior to the Jewish Revolt were consistent with strategies used by the weak against the strong. They were designed to keep their more powerful adversary off balance, and to eliminate any sense of security.

The Sicarri, a sub-group of the Zealots, chose terror as a tactic.

# Rise of Islam



Dark Brown shows the expansion by Mohammed from 622 to 632  
The Orange shows the expansion under Rashidun from 632 to 661  
The yellow shows the expansion of the Umayyad from 661 to 750

SubmitAndPray.com

Ah, the Assassins. In my opinion, the coolest name for any bunch of bad guys, it just sound so chill.

Two guesses as what they did for kicks?

Teaching Point – one of the main things I would emphasize on this slide is just how explosive the growth of Islam was. This is why I wanted to show the map. With this growth came a tremendous amount of exposure to other thoughts, ideas and influences. It also brought Islam to non-Arab peoples, such as the Berbers, Persians, and Turks, which had major implications for the political and religious landscape afterward.



## Abbasid Dynasty 850

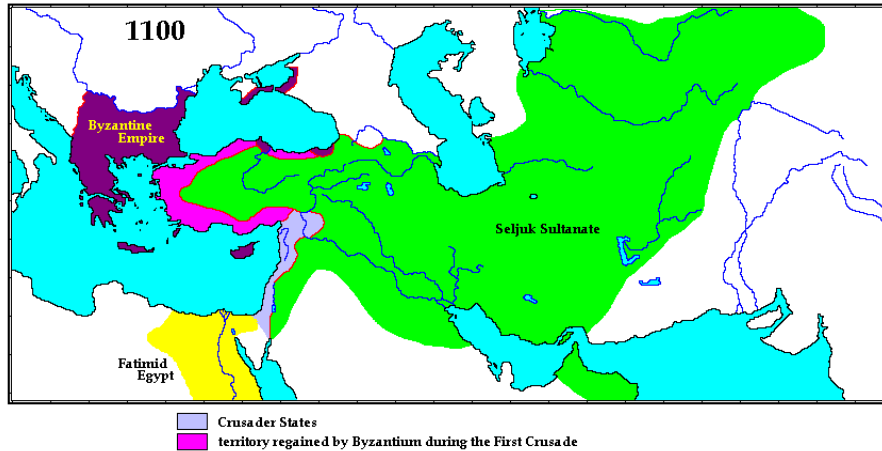


SubmitAndPray.com

The Abbasid Caliphate would retain religious authority until the 13<sup>th</sup> century, but effectively lost control of the military and political authority by the 10<sup>th</sup> century to the Seljuk Turks and various emirates

# The World of the Assassins

1092 to 1265 A.D.



SubmitAndPray.com

The Assassins, a sect of the Ismailis Shiites, existed from approximately 1092 to 1265 A.D. There were essentially two branches to the movement, one located in what is now present day Iran, and the second in Syria.

Some key events during this period:

- Islam had split into two major, competing branches, the Shiite and the Sunni.
- The Crusades began in 1095 and would continue until 1292.
- The Byzantine Empire was in accelerated decline, with Constantinople sacked by the Crusaders in 1204.
- Hellenistic culture and thought remained very strong philosophical influences.

At the time of the Assassins, the Ismailis were the largest branch of the Shiite practice. Shiites split from the Sunnis over the line of secession for the Caliphate, with the Shiites believing in a succession based on lineage from the Prophet Mohammed. This view centered on the cousin of Mohammed, Ali, and the contention that he should be both the political and spiritual leader of the community. The community in general favored a semi-democratic approach, and elected the successors to Mohammed as Caliph.

The split widened when the 3rd Caliph, a member of the Umayyad tribe, was martyred. Ali (a Hashemite) was selected as the 4th Caliph peacefully, but the situation deteriorated when the Umayyad tribe petitioned for blood retribution against those who martyred the 3rd Caliph and Ali sought a more peaceful resolution of the issue. After some fighting, the leadership of the Islamic Community was put before an arbitrator, who decided in Ali's favor.

The dynamics of the period were complicated by the Abbasid ascendancy (75- to 1258) in Baghdad, then again from (1261 to 1512 in Egypt), their movement of the Capitol to Baghdad, their use of Turks (Mamluks) as soldiers, their alienation of the Shiites, and the rise of the Fatimid Dynasty.

This led to a split within Ali's group, and the emergence of a rather violent sect called the Kharijites, who murdered Ali in 661 AD. Ali's son emerged as his successor (and it is a little unclear how directly this happened), but another political leader had a bigger army, so we see the separation of the Imamate from the Caliph role (spiritual and political roles became separate).

Later, Ali's family sought to regain some authority during a period when they saw rising persecution. It did not work out so well, and they were ultimately killed in battle at Karbala. It is this event that really split Islam, and reinforced the key Shiite belief that the political and spiritual leadership of the community rested with the Imam.

The Umayyad Dynasty lasted until 750 AD in the Middle East, and until 1031 in Spain.

# The Assassins

## Who were the Assassins?

- They were Ismailis Shiites
- Culturally sought traditional approach to Islam, but were also influenced by Greek philosophy
- Hasan-I Sabbah was their founder
- The order was established at Alamut in the northern mountains Persia
- They later expanded in a mountain region in Syria
- They became in some respects the Ismailis military wing
- The blade was their weapon of choice
- They were adept at manipulating the political and religious rivalries of their time

SubmitAndPray.com

The dynamics of the period were complicated by the Abbasid ascendancy (75- to 1258 ) in Baghdad, then again from (1261 to 1512 in Egypt), their movement of the Capitol to Baghdad, their use of Turks (Mamluks) as soldiers, their alienation of the Shiites, and the rise of the Fatimid Dynasty.

-The religious schism

-The speed at which the Arab and then Islamic power and territory moved

-The increased power of non-Arab Muslims (Turks, Berbers)

Into this turbulent era a sect devoted to assassination could certainly do well, and they did.

The Shiite/Sunni conflict, originally a power struggle, became an ideological struggle. The Ismailis, the majority wing of the Shiite faction at the time, came about when the sons of the 5<sup>th</sup> Imam Jafar split. The group that would become the Twelvers followed Musa, and the followers of Ismail became the Ismaili faction.

The Ismaili faction showed a great deal of respect for the traditions of Islam, but also borrowed heavily from Greek philosophy and ethics. The combination of religious piety and Greek political philosophy lacked only a military component to round it out, to create the third leg of the stool of power, and this is where the Assassins came in.

Hasan-I Sabbah was born in the son of a Yemeni Twelver Shiite who became an Ismaili. He was most likely born in Persia, and raised there. He travelled to Egypt as a young man where he acquired critical contacts within the Fatimid Caliphate (a Shiite dynasty, supported first by Berber soldiers than later to include Turks and Black African soldiers). His travels throughout the Islamic world led him to appreciate the more secluded areas, and it was this that led him to securing Alamut, a fort in northern Persia, in a mountainous region filled with independent and rugged peoples. From this base, through a variety of techniques (whatever worked, no need to be shy) he extended his power throughout the region.

Once secure enough, Hasan sent missionaries out in an attempt to bring more areas under his influence. An incident with the failed conversion of a muezzin (he said no, so they killed him, missionary style, their first assassination), the Vizier responded swiftly and proceeded to have the missionary's body dragged hither and yon, in a really gross display of why you do not mess around with the Sultan or his peeps.

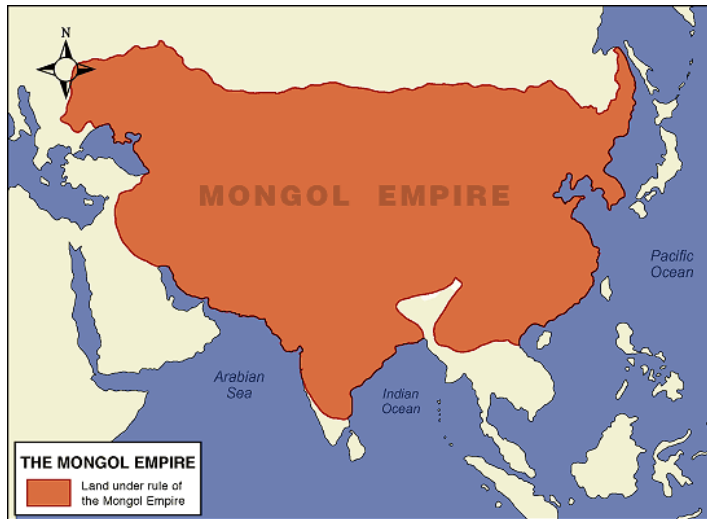
The Vizier had some suspicions about the assassins, perhaps fueled by his writings on the topic of unrest in his *Book of Government*, and undoubtedly tried to protect himself, but he was none the less assassinated in 1092. This assassination of perhaps the most famous figure in the Islamic world, the bureaucratic leader of the Seljuk Empire, was a great "brand builder" for the Assassins, and spread fear throughout the powerful classes. When you absolutely, positively, needed someone dead, dead, dead, you needed an Assassin!

During a Seljuk succession crisis in 1094, the Assassins pushed further and gained significant strategic territories. They did push their political agenda through terrorist actions in urban areas, propaganda, strategic conquests, and assassination of political leaders. After consolidating his holdings in Persia, Hasan expanded into Syria, a mountainous area receptive to their philosophy, adjacent to Crusader states which allowed them to extend their art to non-Muslim audiences. And while in the neighborhood, using the preferred, sacramental blade method, assassinations began in 1103.

Targeting public figures, and using the market place and other public areas as their stage, and Holy days as their time of choice, the Assassins gained the maximum publicity, with the impact of gaining the attention of various leaders in the region. With the support of a Seljuk Turk leader, and for their mutual convenience, they seized a fort in Syria, then lost it to the crusaders. They also sent assassins against the Fatimid Caliphate, with some success, but in general did not have much success until Rashid al-Din emerged as the Syrian wing's leader. He captured some additional territory and consolidated their power while challenging both Crusader and various Islamic groups, including Saladin, with whom they eventually reached some compromise.

In 1192 they assassinated the king of Jerusalem, the marquis de Montferrat, quite probably for payment. Later they would extract tribute and ransoms from both Christian and Muslim travelers. In Persia, the consolidation of the Assassins territory saw them to add some more traditional military methods to their strategies, but the arrival of the Mongols would end their time in Persia around 1220. While initially of some use to the Mamluk Sultan in his struggle with the Mongols in Syria, by 1271 they were significantly weakened and then dismantled completely in 1271.

## Then came the Mongols



Big, bad and ugly, they knew a bit about terror themselves! Not afraid to slaughter any population that resisted them, they destroyed Alamut, burned all the records, and drove the remnants into Syria. This occurred around 1220.

They were marginally useful to local Egyptian Mamluk rulers, but sometime between 1265 and 1271 they were finished there as well.

# What makes it possible to label them Terrorists?

They do seem to follow the pattern

- Use of violence
- Political objectives
- Fear
- Propaganda
- Victims
- Illegal (only state sanctioned violence is legitimate)
- Terror as a tactic when the power balance is asymmetrically aligned against them

[SubmitAndPray.com](http://SubmitAndPray.com)

Some concluding comments regarding the Assassins:

The Assassins were both a political and a religious movement. They established a political structure with a hereditary succession of power. The leaders maintained a strict religious orthodoxy, and the goal of installing the Imam as leader of the empire, which added legitimacy to their extreme actions. They were fully capable of switching allegiances as needed. They were never strong enough to topple the major empires of their time, but were also very difficult to eliminate. Working from a weak position, they used assassination to intimidate and to strike a psychological blow against their enemies.

# Sources

- Chaliand, Gerard and Blin, Arnaud, eds., *The History of Terrorism from Antiquity to Al Qaeda* Berkley: University of California Press, 2007
- Burman, Edward . *The Assassins*. Wellingborough: Crucible. 1987