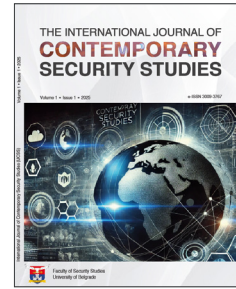


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Review article

Assassins and Modern Religious Terrorism: Historical Parallels, Theoretical Insights, and Lessons for Terrorism Studies

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ABSTRACT

This article presents a comparative historical analysis of the medieval Nizari Ismaili Assassins and contemporary religious terrorist organisations. Drawing on terrorism studies theory and historical accounts, the paper explores structural and strategic parallels in ideology, tactics, and objectives between the Assassins—an 11th–13th century sect renowned for targeted political killings—and modern religiously motivated terrorists. The introduction frames political violence as a recurring phenomenon and posits the value of examining historical cases like the Assassins to enhance understanding of modern terrorism. A review of literature on Religious Terrorism establishes definitions and theoretical context, particularly regarding Islamic terrorism. The article then provides a detailed historical overview of the Assassins, including their origins, methods of operation, and mythologisation in historical narratives. Against this backdrop, twelve key similarities between the Assassins and contemporary religious terrorists are analysed, including asymmetrical warfare strategy, clandestine organisation, recruitment and indoctrination, the use of martyrdom, and the communicative function of violence. Important differences—especially the Assassins’ relative avoidance of civilian targets—are also highlighted. The conclusion discusses how these comparisons reveal enduring patterns and a degree of strategic rationality in terrorist violence, underscoring the significance of historical analogies for developing a nuanced understanding of religious terrorism and informing future research in the field.

KEYWORDS

Assassins; Religious terrorism; Political violence; Asymmetric warfare; Historical analogy.

1. Introduction

Political violence, as a means of achieving ideological and political ends, has accompanied human history in a nearly continuous fashion. From ancient assassinations and conspiracies, through medieval religious conflicts, to modern forms of terrorism, violence has frequently served as a response by marginalized or subordinate groups against more powerful systems of authority. Within this framework, terrorism is often conceptualized as the “weapon of the weak” — a form of asymmetric warfare intended to generate fear, attract public attention, and both symbolically and materially undermine official power structures. Although religious terrorism today is frequently (and unjustifiably) reduced to contemporary Islamist movements, its origins are deeply rooted in history. One of the earliest manifestations of organised political violence with both ideological

and religious underpinnings is exemplified by the activities of the Assassins — a faction of the Nizari Ismailis active from the 11th to the mid-13th century.

This paper is grounded in the belief that understanding contemporary manifestations of terrorism benefits significantly from engaging with historical antecedents and the evolution of political violence. The case of the Assassins, although largely mythologized, offers a compelling historical framework for examining targeted assassinations, religiously motivated violence, and the symbolic power of political killing. The Assassins were not indiscriminate killers; rather, they were agents with clearly articulated political objectives, a defined organizational structure, and distinctive methods of executing political assassinations — often involving self-sacrifice and performative messaging. These features render them particularly relevant for comparison with modern terrorist actors.

This paper aims to draw analogies between the Assassins and contemporary terrorists to illuminate certain structural and strategic parallels that are crucial to understanding modern religious terrorism. To this end, the analysis will examine the historical context and the strategy of action that may be described as the Assassins' approach. Methodologically, the paper relies on a review of existing scholarship (to establish definitions and theoretical context), as well as a historical analysis comparing the Assassins as a historical phenomenon with present-day religious terrorists as a contemporary one. The article first outlines key concepts and debates about religious terrorism. Then it provides an overview of the Assassins' history and tactics, followed by an analysis of similarities between the Assassins and modern religious terrorists. The paper concludes by discussing the findings, their significance for the study of terrorism, and avenues for future research.

2. Religious Terrorism: Definitions and Theoretical Framing

In contemporary academic discussions, terrorism is defined not only as a mere act of violence, but also as a means of achieving political goals and as a specific form of communication with an audience through the spread of fear. Alex Schmid (2011), for example, offers a so-called consensus definition of terrorism as “a method of combat in which the threat of violence or an act of violence is used against non-selective targets, to achieve political change through intimidation, coercion, or propaganda.” In this light, terrorism can be viewed as a performative act whose effects go beyond physical destruction and enter the realm of symbolic meaning.

David C. Rapoport had already examined religiously motivated terrorism in the mid-1980s (Rapoport, 1984), which later enabled him to develop his influential “four waves of modern terrorism” theory, providing a useful framework for understanding how terrorism has evolved in distinct ideological eras. According to Rapoport, modern terrorism has occurred in waves, each lasting approximately a generation (around 40 years) and characterised by a dominant motivating ideology (Rapoport, 2004, p. 47). The first three waves were Anarchist (1880s–1920s), Anti-Colonial (1920s–1960s), and New Left (1960s–1980s), all of which were largely secular in motivation. In 1979, a fourth wave – the “Religious Wave” – emerged, marked predominantly by terrorism motivated by religious ideology (Rapoport, 2004, p. 47). Rapoport identified several events in 1979 as triggers: the Iranian Revolution, the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan, and the Egypt–Israel Peace Treaty, all of which galvanised Islamist militancy (Rapoport, 2022, p. 52). He hypothesized that if the wave pattern holds, this religious wave could wane by around 2025 (Rapoport, 2022, p. 55).

In Rapoport's conception, the religious wave is distinct because, unlike previous waves driven by political and nationalist aims, it is motivated primarily by religion (Rapoport, 2004, p. 53). The ideological energy of this wave has been overwhelmingly fueled by Islamic terrorism, which Rapoport considers its most significant element (Rapoport, 2022, p. 54). The ultimate aims of many groups in this wave are transnational and theologically framed – for example, building a new society based on a religious identity, such as establishing a Caliphate governed by Islamic law (Sharia) (Rapoport, 2022, p. 55). This contrasts with earlier waves where goals were typically secular (e.g. anarchist revolution, national independence, Marxist liberation). Rapoport and others note that because these religious terrorists see their mission in sacred terms, their campaigns often exhibit a sense of divine imperative and a perceived cosmic timeline rather than an immediate political concession (Rapoport, 2022, p. 55).

Religious terrorism is generally defined as terrorist violence justified or inspired by faith-based ideologies and objectives. Mark Juergensmeyer offers a broad definition: acts of terrorism “for which religion ... provides the motivation, the justification, the organization, and the world view” are considered religious terrorism (Juer-

gensmeyer, 2003, p. 58). In other words, if an extremist group's guiding ideology, legitimation for violence, organizational structure, and ultimate vision are grounded in religious doctrine, it falls within this category. Such terrorism is a form of political violence but with the distinctive feature that perpetrators invoke religion as the primary driver of their actions and goals (e.g. establishing a theocracy or fulfilling a divine prophecy).

Bruce Hoffman, another key scholar, emphasizes the distinct ethos and lethality of religiously motivated terrorism. Hoffman notes that for religious terrorists, violence is not merely a strategic means to an end but "first and foremost a sacramental act or divine duty" carried out in response to some theological mandate (Hoffman, 1993, p. 11). Because they view their acts as obedient to God's will, religious terrorists often lack the earthly constraints that restrain secular terrorists. As Hoffman writes, their violence "assumes a transcendental dimension," removing normative limits; thus they may employ more indiscriminate destruction and be less amenable to negotiation (Hoffman, 1993, p. 12). This observation led scholars in the 1990s to describe a "new terrorism" phenomenon: religiously inspired groups (like jihadist cells or millenarian cults) tended to be more lethal and apocalyptic, unconstrained by the political or moral moderation that influenced earlier secular terrorist movements.

Scholars like Heather S. Gregg have sought to delineate what truly sets religious terrorism apart, cautioning against monolithic assumptions. Gregg argues that it is not simply the presence of scripture or pious rhetoric that makes terrorism "religious," but rather the unique goals pursued (Gregg, 2014, p. 37). In her analysis, religious terrorists characteristically fight for one or more of three goals: (1) fomenting an apocalypse, (2) creating a religious government, or (3) "cleansing" a state or territory of impure elements to achieve religious purity (Gregg, 2014, p. 38). These goals reflect maximalist, otherworldly ambitions (e.g. ushering in end-times or establishing a Sharia-based state) that differ from the more limited political objectives of secular terrorists (such as policy change or nationalist secession) (Gregg, 2014, p. 39). Gregg and others also note that much discourse on religious terrorism focuses on extreme cases (e.g. doomsday cults), which can skew perceptions; not all religious militants are irrational or bent on total war, and many do have concrete political grievances intertwined with their religious aims.

Within the religious wave, Islamic terrorism – often termed "Islamist" or "jihadist" terrorism in academia – has received by far the most attention. The label generally refers to terrorist acts perpetrated by groups or individuals who invoke Islamic tenets or identity as a primary justification for violence. In the late 20th century, as geopolitical conflicts in the Middle East and elsewhere took on religious overtones, the term "Islamic terrorism" became commonplace in both policy and scholarship (Jackson, 2014, p. 500). Classic examples include organizations like Al-Qaeda, which frames its war against the West and secular Muslim regimes as a defensive jihad mandated by faith, or ISIS, which sought to establish an Islamic caliphate. Scholars have offered formal definitions: for instance, Shmuel Bar defines Islamic terrorism as violence emanating from an interpretation of Islam that sees holy war (jihad) as a divine command, fueled by an absolutist ideology that often rejects modern territorial nationalism in favor of a pan-Islamic order (Bar, 2004, p. 30). In such ideologies, religion is both motive and justification – terrorism is sanctified as necessary to defend or spread the faith.

However, the concept of "Islamic terrorism" has also been hotly debated and refined over time. Many analysts prefer the term "Islamist terrorism" to distinguish political ideology from the religion itself: Islamism refers to a modern political ideology that seeks to order government and society according to (a particular interpretation of) Islamic law. Not all Islamist movements are violent, but those that do employ terror (e.g. Egypt's al-Jihad, or Boko Haram in Nigeria) are often classified as Islamist terrorists. Another common term is "jihadist terrorism," referring specifically to Sunni extremist networks inspired by the notion of global jihad. This terminology underscores that the violence is driven by an extremist interpretation of Islam (often Salafi-jihadi) rather than Islam as a whole. Indeed, scholars like Reuven Paz have provocatively asked "Is there an 'Islamic' terrorism at all?," noting that the phenomena lumped under that label are diverse and deeply political (Paz, 1998). By the 2010s, critical scholars such as Richard Jackson argued that the prevailing discourse on "Islamic terrorism" had become "highly politicized and intellectually contestable" (Jackson, 2014, p. 505). After examining hundreds of texts, Jackson concluded that the concept was often used in sweeping ways that essentialize Muslims and could harm community relations. He and others in Critical Terrorism Studies urge caution in the usage of the term, pointing out that Muslim-majority societies contain varied actors and that violent extremism by Islamists often overlaps with local political conflicts, not just theology (Jackson, 2014, p. 506). Reflecting these concerns, even institutions like the EU have debated dropping phrases like "Islamic terrorism" in favor of more specific terms.

A central question in the literature is how and to what extent religion (and specifically Islam) motivates terrorism, as opposed to serving as a post-hoc justification or mobilizing tool for other grievances. On one side, scholars underscore ideational or theological motives: for example, Salafi-jihadist ideology explicitly teaches that violence is a divinely sanctioned tool to purify society and avenge perceived attacks on the faith. These scholars point to the sermons, fatwas, and communiqués of jihadist leaders brimming with Qur’anic references and apocalyptic imagery. They argue that religious beliefs about martyrdom and reward in the afterlife “can strongly compel individuals to commit extreme violence” (such as suicide bombings) that might seem irrational in secular terms (Hoffman, 1993, p. 13). Assaf Moghadam describe how groups like Al-Qaeda developed a “cult of martyrdom” where dying for Allah became the highest valor; thus religion provides not just moral cover but active incentive (Moghadam, 2007; 2009). In this vein, religion is framed as a primary cause – the driver that shapes terrorists’ worldviews and goals (e.g. re-establishment of an Islamic Caliphate or fulfillment of a prophesied holy war). Indeed, as mentioned, Juergensmeyer and Rapoport both view the religio-ideological worldview as fundamental: holy terror is qualitatively different because the perpetrators see themselves as God’s agents, fighting a cosmic struggle rather than a conventional political battle.

On the other side, many scholars emphasize the structural and political contexts in which Islamic terrorism has arisen, suggesting that religion often operates more as a rallying banner or justification for underlying grievances. Extensive research indicates that contemporary Islamist terrorism frequently germinated in settings of political oppression, foreign occupation, social marginalization, and civil conflict. For example, political scientist Robert Pape’s analysis of suicide terrorism found that campaigns (including those by Islamist groups) were usually driven by strategic objectives like ending military occupation, with religious rhetoric layered atop these worldly aims. Similarly, Olivier Roy argues that the wave of jihadist terrorism in the West is less a product of deep religious revival than of youth nihilism and rebellion finding an Islamic narrative. Roy famously contends that we are witnessing “not a radicalization of Islam, but the Islamization of radicalism” (Roy, 2017, p. 13). By this he means disaffected individuals with typical profiles of radicals (often second-generation immigrants, petty criminals, or otherwise alienated youth) are adopting Islamist militant ideology as a vehicle to express their anger and quest for meaning. In this view, the root causes of their violence lie in sociopolitical alienation and conflict (identity crises, Western foreign policy in Muslim lands, wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, etc.). At the same time, religion provides a legitimizing script and recruitment mechanism. Other researchers, like Scott Atran (2021) and Marc Sageman (2021), echo that social networks, group dynamics, and political grievances often drive young Muslims into extremist circles more than theological indoctrination does. They note, for instance, that many ISIS recruits had scant formal religious knowledge; their interpretations of Islam were superficial but emotionally charged, suggesting that belonging and glory were as important as belief.

Scholars also differ on whether religious terrorism is inherently more dangerous than secular terrorism. While early analysts (and many policymakers) portrayed religiously inspired terrorists as especially intransigent and prone to mass-casualty attacks, recent empirical studies urge nuance. Some statistical analyses (e.g. by Martha Crenshaw, Gary LaFree and others) find that certain Islamist groups have caused higher average fatalities. In contrast, others note that context (like the availability of weapons or theater of conflict) can explain lethality as much as ideology. Moreover, as scholar Karen Armstrong observes, secular ideologies have been responsible for extraordinarily deadly violence in modern history (world wars, genocides under secular totalitarian regimes), so “religion per se is not uniquely violent” (cited in Dawson, 2024, p. 9). What emerges from the literature is that religious (especially Islamic) terrorism is a complex phenomenon: it blends sincere ideological motives with strategic and material calculations. The role of Islam in terrorism is best framed along a spectrum – from being the central causal engine of a terrorist’s actions, to being one factor among many (political, ethnic, economic) that shape a conflict, to even being incidental or instrumental (a narrative adopted by essentially political actors).

Over the past few decades, the scholarly understanding of religious terrorism – and Islamic terrorism in particular – has continually evolved toward greater complexity and nuance. Early frameworks like Rapoport’s religious wave highlighted the rise of faith-driven violence as a defining feature of late 20th-century terrorism. Subsequent definitions by Juergensmeyer, Hoffman, Gregg, and others have fleshed out what sets religiously motivated terrorism apart: its absolutist ideology, transcendental justifications, and ambitious goals of societal transformation. When it comes to Islamic terrorism, scholars have charted its ideological foundations in radical Islamist thought and its justifications in concepts like jihad. Yet they have also debated its true drivers, weighing ideational motives (such as religious doctrine and apocalyptic zeal) against contextual factors (such as historical grievances, geopolitical struggles, and social alienation). The consensus in contemporary research is

to avoid one-dimensional generalizations: religion can be both a genuine motivator and a convenient rationalization. In the case of Islamist terrorism, Islam's role is best understood through a layered analysis — acknowledging that extremist interpretations of Islam provide powerful moral rationale and identity to militants, while also recognizing that these movements emerge from temporal political conditions (like wars, occupations, and revolutions). In sum, the academic discourse has moved toward a more refined theoretical framing of religious terrorism: one that sees it as a fusion of ideology and context, where sacred objectives intermingle with profane politics. This approach allows for a nuanced understanding of Islamic terrorism not as an inherent quality of a particular religion, but as a complex interplay between religious ideas and the worldly environments in which violence is deployed.

3. The Assassins: Historical Origins and Methods

In the 11th century, a Shiite Islamic order known as the Nizari Ismailis emerged as a significant—albeit numerically small—adversary to the much more powerful Sunni establishments of the time (composed predominantly of Seljuk Turkish and Egyptian forces) in what is today Syria and Iran. Under its leader Hasan-i Sabbah (Hassan-i Sabbah), the order entered into open conflict with the Seljuk Sunni sultanate, seizing a series of key mountain fortresses. Foremost among these was the stronghold of Alamut, located in the northern mountains of Persia (modern-day Iran), which Sabbah, according to legend, seized without a fight through cunning negotiations and political intrigue. After securing these hard-to-reach locales, Sabbah integrated them into a tightly organised network of strongholds, while transforming his followers into a rigidly hierarchical brotherhood characterised by religious fanaticism, military discipline, and a high level of training. The members of this order — known as the Assassins (from Persian *Asāsiyyūn*), but often derisively called “hashashins” or “hashish-eaters” due to the alleged use of hashish during their indoctrination — lived in celibacy and carried out the commands of their spiritual and political leader with absolute obedience.

What made this militant Shiite organisation particularly intriguing, however, was not merely its specific way of life or the ideological goals it pursued, but above all, the methods by which those goals were realised. In contemporary terrorism studies, it is often emphasized that the Assassins, from the late 11th to the mid-13th century, earned a reputation as ruthless perpetrators, known for the targeted political murders of high-ranking figures across the Middle East. How these killings were carried out — their carefully elaborated *modus operandi* — not only instilled deep fear among potential targets, but simultaneously generated narratives and legends that further mystified these “cold-blooded killers.”

Donathan Taylor and Yannick Gautron note that the assassinations carried out by the Assassins were carefully planned, often executed publicly, and imbued with pronounced symbolism. According to them, the *fidā'īs* (Assassin operatives) not only physically eliminated political opponents but also acted within a ritualised framework aimed at achieving maximal psychological impact on both the enemy and the broader community (Taylor & Gautron, 2015, pp. 35–36). This mode of assassination deliberately produced a spectacle of violence, thereby transcending mere political murder and entering the realm of profound psychological effect — namely, the instillation of fear in a wider audience, especially among potential victims. This is an important parallel with contemporary terrorist practices. Along these lines, J. Bowyer Bell further conceptualizes such an act of killing as a form of political communication, emphasizing that “the murder of a leader becomes a message by the very act (and manner of execution), not just by its outcome” (Bell, 2005, p. 21). This spectacular dimension, Bell argues, shows that political assassination in this context served to destabilize the system and create an acute sense of insecurity within the hierarchy of power.

The Assassins employed a specific and highly effective tactic of infiltration in carrying out their missions. They would typically infiltrate the immediate vicinity of a target individual and there — sometimes for years — live under a false identity, patiently waiting for the ideal moment to strike. When it came time to execute the mission, they would most often kill their target with a dagger, delivering a precise stab to the heart. What further contributed to their terrifying reputation was that, as a rule, they did not attempt to flee the scene; instead, the Assassin would remain by the victim's body, passively awaiting capture and execution, convinced that for his sacrifice he would be rewarded in the afterlife. Their unconditional loyalty and willingness to die in the course of completing their task made them precursors to what would later in Islamic culture be termed the *fedayeen* (Arabic: *fidā'iyyīn*, referring to those who are willing to consciously sacrifice themselves for a higher cause).

Taylor and Gautron particularly emphasize that this willingness to die was not merely the result of religious indoctrination, but also part of a carefully orchestrated moral spectacle. The *fidā'īs* did not simply kill – they died publicly, often without attempting to escape, thereby sending a message of unwavering faith and dedication to their cause (Taylor & Gautron, 2015, p. 36). Such acts also served as a ritual demonstration of power, creating in society a sense of helplessness in the face of a cold-blooded killer who does not fear death. For this reason, Bell compares this method of carrying out assassinations – essentially “death as message” – with contemporary suicide attacks, noting that in both cases violence is ritualized to send a clear ideological signal to the public (Bell, 2005, p. 149), a point to which we will return later.

This extreme level of dedication and self-sacrifice raises the question of how Hasan-i Sabbah, and later his successors, managed to cultivate such a degree of discipline, obedience, and willingness to die among their followers. One explanation frequently mentioned in historical accounts and legends is that of an extraordinarily sophisticated system of psychological manipulation. According to these narratives, Sabbah drugged his followers with hashish and then, while they were in a state of stupefaction, led them into a carefully constructed garden resembling a vision of *al-Jannah*. There they were exposed to musical and visual stimuli, an abundance of food, symbolic fountains of milk and honey, and—most importantly—the presence of alluring young women with whom they could engage in sensual pleasures. These experiences were then interpreted as a fleeting glimpse of the promised Garden of Paradise, which further reinforced the Assassins’ belief in the rewards that awaited them after death. In this way, the leader of the order instilled in his followers a deeply rooted conviction that their self-sacrifice guaranteed eternal bliss, thereby ensuring their readiness to carry out even the most complex and dangerous tasks, including suicidal missions (Nahid, 1995; Lewis, 2003; Hodgson, 2005; Waterson, 2008).

Thanks to these distinctive features, the Assassin order can be viewed as a complex and unique constellation of religious, political, organizational, and violent elements. Gérard Chaliand and Arnaud Blin underscore this perspective by arguing that the Assassins were the first to systematically integrate religiously motivated political murder as an institutionalized strategy – not only as a means of eliminating individuals, but also with the goal of destabilizing entire political orders (Chaliand & Blin, 2007, pp. 55–78). According to these authors, assassination in the case of the Assassins had both a military and a symbolic dimension, which ensured a long-lasting psychological effect and the diffusion of fear into the broader community, but primarily into the centers of power.

4. Similarities between the Assassins and Contemporary Religious Terrorists

This comparative approach motivates a focused examination of the key characteristics of the Assassins alongside the *modus operandi* of modern terrorist organizations, on the premise that highlighting their similarities can contribute to a more complete understanding of the contemporary threat. With this in mind, twelve structurally and functionally significant parallels have been identified to illuminate similarities in strategy, organization, recruitment, and the ideological justifications that legitimize violence in both contexts. (*Note: Point 8 below is explicitly a difference, not a similarity, in targeting practices.*)

1. Asymmetric Warfare Strategy: The first major similarity between the Assassins and modern terrorist organizations concerns the choice of strategy based on an asymmetrical form of conflict. As a numerically and militarily inferior group, the Assassins were forced to confront far more powerful adversaries, chief among them the Seljuk, Arab, and Fatimid (Egyptian) forces, as well as the European armies of the Crusaders. In such circumstances, conventional open-field battle was doomed to failure from the outset. Instead of frontal confrontation, Hasan-i Sabbah developed a tactical model centered on selective assassination – eliminating key figures in enemy power structures (rulers, generals, and other political authorities) with the aim of strategically destabilizing the opponent (a so-called “decapitation” strategy). This strategy rested on the premise that removing the leadership cadre would create a power vacuum, sow disorganization, and demoralize enemy ranks, often yielding far-reaching political and military consequences. In this sense, each individual Assassin operative was dispatched on a clearly defined mission – the targeted killing of a specific high-value individual – whose death was intended to produce a political effect far exceeding the impact of a single act of violence.

A similar logic is evident among contemporary terrorist organizations which, when faced with vastly superior state militaries and intelligence apparatuses, also resort to asymmetric warfare strategies. Modern

terrorists typically cannot defeat state forces in open combat, so they adopt tactics that maximize impact despite limited resources. By relying on surprise attacks, ambushes, and symbolic targets, these groups seek to offset their structural weakness and achieve outsized political or psychological effects. Accordingly, in security doctrine terrorism is often described as a form of “asymmetric threat,” and the tactics employed (from guerrilla-style assaults to bombings and assassinations) fall under “asymmetric warfare.” Both the medieval Assassins and today’s terrorists demonstrate that a numerically inferior actor can leverage asymmetry to challenge a stronger foe through targeted violence.

2. Clandestine Organization and Secrecy: A fundamental prerequisite for successful asymmetric tactics in both contexts is strict operational secrecy. The Assassins operated as a covert network of fortified enclaves and hidden agents. Secrecy was enforced not only toward outsiders but even within the group’s internal hierarchy on a need-to-know basis. Assassin devotees were strictly forbidden from revealing any information about upcoming missions except to their immediate handlers. This secrecy served multiple functions: concealing the true disparity of power between the Assassins and their enemies, preventing the compromise of operatives and plots, and preserving the broader network for future strikes. In the modern context, the same principle holds for terrorist cells that function under conditions of extreme conspiracy, often organized in decentralized, autonomous units with limited knowledge of each other’s operations. This compartmentalization – seen, for example, in underground jihadist cells or insurgent networks – ensures that if one cell is captured, it cannot easily betray the others, thereby safeguarding the overall organisation’s continuity.

Within such a secretive mode of operation, the Assassins perfected the tactic of deploying “sleeper” agents long before the term existed. They would infiltrate a trusted position in the vicinity of a target – joining the retinue of a potentate or the garrison of a castle – and then live innocuously, sometimes for years, awaiting the order to strike. This deep-cover approach allowed them to execute an assassination with minimal hindrance when activated. Comparably, contemporary terrorist groups have employed sleeper cells or lone agents who lead seemingly ordinary lives, integrate into their local communities, and remain inactive until called upon. This tactic, whether used by jihadist networks or other extremist organizations, poses a grave challenge for security services, as it enables meticulously timed attacks with minimal warning. Both the Assassins and modern terrorists illustrate how deep cover and patience can magnify the impact of an eventual attack while evading preemption.

3. Recruitment of New Members: Beyond clandestine operations, recruitment has been a crucial mechanism for the survival and continuity of both the Assassin order and modern terrorist groups. The Assassins, bound by vows of celibacy (which prevented natural generational growth), had to continuously recruit new members from outside. Veteran members who might not themselves participate in assassinations often took on roles as missionaries, teachers, and recruiters, indoctrinating promising youths into the ranks. These mentors identified potential recruits, vetted their loyalty, and gradually exposed them to the sect’s radical teachings and secretive lifestyle. Similarly, contemporary terrorist organizations place strong emphasis on targeted recruitment to replenish their ranks. Whether through direct personal contact, grassroots networks, religious congregations, or increasingly via online propaganda and social media outreach, groups like Al-Qaeda and ISIS have developed sophisticated recruitment strategies. In both cases, recruitment is not only about adding manpower but also about spreading an ideology and creating a committed in-group. By drawing new adherents into a narrative of shared struggle (historically, the Assassins’ fight against impious rulers; today, perhaps a jihad against perceived oppressors), both the Assassins and modern terrorists ensure that their movement persists beyond the individual lifespan of any single operative.

4. Training and Professionalization: Closely linked to recruitment is the training and preparation of operatives. The Assassins placed great emphasis on cultivating highly skilled devotees. Recruits (often brought into the order as adolescents) underwent years-long training regimens that encompassed both intellectual and physical dimensions. They received religious education—studying the Qur’an and Ismaili doctrine—alongside learning languages, stealth, and the arts of disguise. Critically, they were trained in combat skills essential for assassination missions: knife-fighting, swordsmanship, poison handling, and escape tactics (though escape was seldom their plan). Historical accounts suggest that they also practised endurance and discipline, for instance, by training to stay calm when facing death. This intensive grooming produced operatives who were singularly capable of carrying out high-risk missions against hardened targets. In modern terrorist organisations, we observe analogous training processes. Recruits often pass through clandestine training camps where they learn to use firearms and explosives, practice infiltration and communications

security, and harden themselves physically and psychologically. For example, militant Islamist groups have operated training camps in remote areas (Afghanistan, the Sahel, etc.) to teach weapons handling, guerrilla tactics, and ideological indoctrination. Such training transforms raw recruits into operatives who can execute complex attacks. Counter-terrorism officials today analyse the skill sets exhibited in terrorist operations (such as sophisticated bomb construction or coordinated assaults) to assess the level of training and even identify particular “terrorist academies” or instructors. In both medieval and modern contexts, thorough training is essential for operational success and the ability to effectively challenge stronger adversaries.

In addition to combat training, the Assassins placed heavy emphasis on ideological indoctrination and radicalisation as part of shaping their members. Young initiates were systematically exposed to doctrines that redefined their perception of reality, justified violence against designated enemies, and directed them toward self-sacrificial obedience. The goal was to mould unquestioningly loyal operatives who viewed Hasan-i Sabbah (and his successors) as infallible and who were willing to give their lives at a word of command. By all accounts, this indoctrination was effective: historical chronicles describe Assassin followers accepting missions that were certain to end in their deaths. In the contemporary context, terrorist groups likewise engage in intensive ideological conditioning of their recruits. Radicalisation processes blend religious, political, and identity narratives in a way that resonates with recruits’ grievances (be it a sense of injustice, humiliation, or longing for belonging). Over time, these processes can transform ordinary individuals into extremists who not only accept the use of violence but embrace the prospect of dying for the cause. Whether through in-person mentorship or online content, modern recruiters instil the belief that martyrdom is honourable and that violence against enemies is either divinely or historically sanctioned. The result is often a cadre of extremists prepared to undertake suicide bombings or other lethal missions with little regard for self-preservation. In both eras, the combination of training and indoctrination produced operatives who were highly capable and utterly committed.

5. Martyrdom and the Promise of Paradise: Within the indoctrination processes of both the Assassins and modern Islamist terrorists, the manipulation of religious beliefs about the afterlife has played a pivotal role. According to medieval legends, Hasan-i Sabbah used an ingeniously staged vision of Paradise to bind his followers to him. As described earlier, recruits were allegedly given a potent dose of hashish and led into a hidden garden designed to simulate the Qur’anic vision of Jannah (Heaven), complete with flowing streams, fruits, and *houri* maidens. After experiencing this rapturous environment, the youth were told that they had tasted Paradise and that unwavering obedience and martyrdom would ensure their permanent return to it. This story, whether apocryphal or embellished, illustrates the perceived importance of otherworldly incentives in motivating the Assassins’ extreme sacrifices. The very term “Assassin” in popular lore became entwined with this image of drugged devotees chasing a promised paradise.

In contemporary jihadist movements, we see a strikingly similar emphasis on heavenly rewards for martyrs. Recruits — especially those groomed for suicide missions — are often promised that dying in jihad will guarantee them immediate entry into Paradise. Jihadist propaganda and recruiters frequently invoke Qur’anic imagery of martyrdom: the martyr’s sins are forgiven, he will dine in Paradise and be wed to *hours*, etc. Many suicide bombers go into their missions with a firm belief in these rewards, sometimes even chanting “Allāhu Akbar” and other prayers as they carry out attacks, reinforcing their conviction that they are on a holy path. Thus, both the medieval and modern actors harness a powerful idea: that sacrificing one’s life in a sanctioned act of violence is not a loss but an ultimate gain, exchanging earthly existence for eternal bliss. This belief fundamentally alters the cost-benefit calculus for the perpetrators, making suicidal tactics not only thinkable but desirable.

In this light, the famous maxim that novelist Vladimir Bartol attributed to Hasan-i Sabbah in *Alamut* — “Nothing is true; everything is permitted” — takes on symbolic weight. Though a fictional embellishment, this statement can be read as capturing the Assassins’ radical rejection of ordinary moral constraints and their embrace of a reality defined solely by their leader’s vision. In effect, within their doctrine, conventional boundaries between right and wrong were transcended by a higher calling. Similarly, contemporary terrorist groups foster a narrative in which normal ethical limits are suspended: killing innocents, normally abhorrent, becomes permissible or obligatory in service of the cause; the militants inhabit an ideological world where acts of extreme violence are sanctified. Both the Assassins and modern jihadists promulgate a worldview in which the end not only justifies the means but glorifies it as divinely or philosophically ordained.

As a result, tactics like suicide attacks are portrayed as the ultimate expression of faith and commitment, a heroic and just act within their moral universe.

6. Self-Sacrificial Tactics (Suicide Missions): The willingness of operatives to sacrifice themselves in the course of killing their targets is perhaps the most stark and emblematic parallel between the Assassins and contemporary religious terrorists. The Assassins' operations often amounted to suicide missions, even if not in the modern sense of a bomb detonated by the attacker. Assassin *fidā'is* typically expected to die during or immediately after completing their mission — they made no attempt to escape and fully anticipated being killed by the target's guards or executed afterwards. This conscious trade of one's life to ensure the target's death is closely mirrored by the tactics of modern suicide bombers, who detonate explosives that kill themselves along with their victims. In both cases, the operative's death is a central aspect of the attack, not an unintended side effect.

These self-annihilating operations have potent effects. Psychologically, they instil deep fear in their opponents: a ruler targeted by the Assassins knew that those coming for him did not care about survival, making them nearly impossible to deter. Likewise, security forces today find suicide attackers particularly daunting because such attackers cannot be easily stopped by traditional means (e.g. threats of force are meaningless to someone determined to die). There are also pragmatic advantages: a suicide attacker need not plan an escape, which simplifies the operation and reduces opportunities for interception. The act itself demonstrates total commitment, sending a powerful signal to both the enemy and potential supporters of how far the group is willing to go. After an Assassin's strike, the surviving leadership (e.g., other enemy princes) would be left in dread, knowing an implacable foe was willing to pay the ultimate price to eliminate them. After a modern suicide bombing, governments and citizens alike are left shaken by the realisation that the attackers value their cause over their own lives, suggesting that standard deterrence or negotiations may have limited effect. In both eras, suicidal tactics serve as a form of *propaganda for the deed: they dramatically advertise the perpetrators' devotion, potentially inspiring recruits and sympathisers* while eroding the morale of their enemies.

7. Strategic Target Selection and Planning: Another parallel between the Assassins and modern terrorists is the strategic selection of targets and the thorough planning of attacks to maximise impact. The Assassin leadership was highly selective in choosing its victims. They focused on political and military leaders whose elimination would yield significant advantages: for instance, removing a particularly effective general to slow an enemy campaign or killing a vizier whose counsel was key to a ruler's policy. This careful targeting was intended to destabilise adversaries and, at times, to forestall larger wars. Each operation was preceded by extensive intelligence-gathering on the target's habits, movements, routines, and security arrangements. Assassins often spent months or years in reconnaissance and preparation, including placement of their operatives in the target's vicinity, as noted. They also meticulously prepared disguises, escape routes (for those not intending to die), and even the timing and setting of the attack to achieve surprise or symbolic effect (e.g. striking during a public gathering for added impact).

Modern terrorist organisations similarly engage in comprehensive planning and target analysis. Whether it's choosing to attack a military barracks, a diplomatic embassy, or a marketplace, terrorist planners today weigh the symbolic and practical consequences. They often prefer targets that are symbolic of the enemy regime or ideology (such as the World Trade Center representing global capitalism for Al-Qaeda or a government building representing state authority). Like the Assassins, contemporary terrorists conduct surveillance and gather intelligence to find security gaps and optimal timing. Complex plots like the September 11, 2001 attacks or the coordinated strikes in Mumbai in 2008 involved months of preparation, training, and rehearsal to ensure success. Even lone actors often conduct online research about their targets. In both medieval and modern scenarios, this dedication to planning ensures that attacks are not random but purposefully designed to create a maximum strategic (and psychological) effect with limited resources.

It is worth noting a critical difference in target selection criteria that accompanies this similarity: the Assassins, for all their ruthlessness, generally avoided killing civilians or bystanders. Their missions were assassinations in the literal sense — aimed at specific individuals. Collateral damage was usually minimal; the Assassin would approach the victim directly (often even face-to-face in a crowd) and use a dagger, minimising risk to others. In contrast, many contemporary terrorists deliberately target civilians or at least do not discriminate, aiming to kill as many people as possible. This shift marks a profound change in ethical stance and strategy. The Assassins' selective violence versus modern terrorism's frequent indiscriminate violence

delineates a boundary between two eras. We will return to this difference shortly, as it reflects the evolution of moral norms and objectives in the context of terrorism.

8. Ethical Constraints and Target Discrimination (Key Difference): Despite the many operational similarities, one of the key differences between the Assassins and present-day religious terrorists lies in their approach to targeting non-combatants. The Assassins, operating within a medieval Islamic framework of warfare and sectarian struggle, mostly refrained from attacking ordinary civilians. Their killings were targeted at those with political, military, or religious authority (e.g., enemy sultans, generals, governors, and high clergy). This selectivity suggests the Assassins observed a certain pragmatic or ethical threshold: violence was used pointedly to eliminate adversaries whose removal would have a clear tactical or strategic payoff, and wanton slaughter was not their method. In effect, a line was drawn between legitimate targets (enemy leaders or agents of oppression) and illegitimate ones (innocent bystanders).

Modern terrorists, especially in the religious wave, have often erased this line. Many jihadist groups and other extremist organisations intentionally massacre civilians as part of their strategy. For them, civilians are targets—either because they belong to an out-group (e.g., infidels or citizens of an “enemy” nation whose deaths are meant to terrorise the broader population) or simply because attacking them garners more publicity and instils generalised fear. Locations for attacks are frequently chosen for their high civilian presence and symbolic resonance, such as marketplaces, public transportation hubs, places of worship, and schools. The underlying message of such terrorism is that no one is safe; the violence is meant to terrorise an entire society, not just decapitate its leadership.

This fundamental divergence in targeting reflects a shift in the strategic paradigm. The Assassins practised targeted violence aimed at concrete political ends (often to coerce certain policies or truces by demonstrating reach). Contemporary religious terrorists, in many cases, employ indiscriminate violence as a tool to create mass fear and chaos. By maximising civilian casualties, they aim to pressure governments (through public panic and outcry), destabilise social order, and polarise communities along religious or ethnic lines. The result is an atmosphere of pervasive insecurity: anyone could be a victim at any time. Modern media amplifies this effect, broadcasting images of carnage worldwide and often inadvertently serving the terrorists’ goal of spreading fear. Citizens, in turn, demand that their leaders “do something,” which can either lead to overreaction (excessive repression, which may fuel further radicalisation) or concessions to terrorist demands. This contrast in attitudes toward civilian life is one of the clearest lines separating the historical Assassin phenomenon from modern terrorism. It highlights how the moral framework of terrorist violence can evolve, with contemporary groups frequently abandoning restraints that earlier ones observed.

9. Use of Fear as a Core Tactic: In both the Assassins’ campaign and modern terrorism, the systematic generation of fear is not a side-effect but a central objective. Both understood that terrorising one’s foes multiplies the impact of physical acts of violence. The Assassins’ targeted killings sent waves of fear through the ruling echelons of their enemies. Medieval chronicles note that figures like the great Sultan Saladin were forced to take elaborate precautions and even negotiate with the Assassins after attempts on their lives, so great was the dread of their reach. Simply knowing that Assassin agents could be hiding among one’s closest servants created an atmosphere of paranoia in enemy courts. In that sense, the Assassins wielded fear as a psychological weapon that often achieved what direct force could not: it kept enemies off balance and sometimes made them alter their policies (some leaders allegedly ceased persecuting the Ismailis or paid tribute to the Assassins to avoid being targeted).

Modern terrorists likewise see terror (fear) as a primary tool. By staging brutal and unpredictable attacks, they aim to pressure governments and societies into making concessions or into paralysis. For instance, jihadist groups might hope that by bombing civilian centres, they can incite the public to demand withdrawal from a conflict region or to turn against a minority community (thus aiding the terrorists’ narrative of an inevitable clash). While contemporary terrorists also sometimes target political leaders (as the Assassins did) – for example, the assassination of Egyptian President Anwar Sadat in 1981 by Islamist militants or various failed attempts against other heads of state – they have expanded the cast of those meant to feel fear to include virtually entire populations.

It should be noted, however, that modern terrorists still occasionally employ selective assassinations reminiscent of the Assassins. There have been instances where jihadists or other groups kill specific officials (military officers, local governors, journalists, etc.) to intimidate a government. In these cases, the logic is

very much what the Assassins used: remove or threaten key players to alter the enemy's behaviour. But even then, the surrounding context is usually far bloodier (the same groups might concurrently slaughter civilians, something the Assassins did not do).

Thus, in both eras, fear is weaponised: for the Assassins, it primarily affected the elites (who had to consider appeasing or at least respecting the Assassins to avoid personal doom), whereas for modern terrorists, fear permeates down to the average citizen (who then pressures their leaders, potentially advancing the terrorists' goals or at least sowing social turmoil). Modern societies' mass media and instant communication magnify the reach of terror – a suicide bombing in one city can immediately cause heightened anxiety in cities across the globe. The Assassins relied on slower-travelling rumours and reputation, but remarkably, their “brand” of fear spread across the Middle East and even to Europe (where tales of the “Old Man of the Mountain” and his assassins became legends). In summary, creating a psychological climate of insecurity has been a shared aim of the Assassins and contemporary terrorists, albeit executed in different scopes and against different target groups.

10. Political Objectives of Violence: Both the Assassins and modern religious terrorists use violence not as an end in itself but as an instrument to achieve political objectives. Terrorism, in both contexts, is a form of political communication or coercion. The Assassins' campaign was deeply political: they were fighting for the survival and autonomy of the Nizari Ismaili community in a hostile Sunni environment. Their murders of particular viziers or generals were calibrated to protect their territories, weaken hostile powers, or sometimes influence succession crises in enemy courts (by removing a key figure, they might tilt the balance of power). Some historians argue that the Assassins harboured an ideological vision as well: perhaps a theocratic ideal or, at the very least, a desire to be recognised as legitimate by other Muslims. Regardless, their violence was purposeful and tied to concrete goals like territorial consolidation, undermining the legitimacy of rival (Sunni) authorities, and compelling opponents to pause aggression.

Likewise, modern religious terrorists, despite often being dismissed as nihilistic, usually articulate clear political or religio-political aims. Al-Qaeda's leadership, for instance, issued manifestos demanding the removal of U.S. forces from Muslim lands, the overthrow of apostate regimes, and the unification of Muslims under a Caliphate. ISIS famously declared statehood in its captured territory. Even groups motivated by apocalyptic or millenarian beliefs often have interim political goals (e.g., provoking a showdown with a state or enforcing their version of divine law in areas they control). In both cases, the violent acts – whether assassination or bombing – are means to an end: they are intended to produce outcomes such as policy change, weakening of enemy morale, rallying of the faithful, or deterring adversaries.

An illustrative parallel is that both the Assassins and some modern jihadists have, at times, entered into pragmatic alliances or served the interests of other political actors if it aligned with their goals. Historical records suggest that outside rulers occasionally contracted the Assassins to eliminate a rival (effectively acting as proxy assassins for someone else's political gain). Similarly, in the modern era, states have sometimes sponsored terrorist proxies to hit enemies (for example, Iran's support of Hezbollah or Pakistan's erstwhile support of certain jihadist groups). This shows that, far from irrational berserkers, these actors can be quite calculated, integrating into the larger political chessboard.

11. State Sponsorship and Political Instrumentalisation: Notably, the Assassins occasionally served as a political instrument of third parties at certain points. For instance, there are accounts that rival Muslim princes, or even Crusader factions, might have quietly encouraged or benefited from an Assassin plot against a mutual enemy. This indicates that the Assassins' actions could be entangled in broader power struggles; they were one force among many in the region's geopolitics. In a similar vein, modern terrorist groups have often been entangled in the geopolitical strategies of states. During the Cold War and after, various countries sponsored insurgent or terrorist organisations to weaken opponents (e.g., the use of Mujahideen by the U.S. and Saudi Arabia against the Soviets in Afghanistan or Iran's support for Shiite militant groups). Some extremist groups today act as de facto proxies – for example, certain Shia militias backed by Iran in the Middle East or Sunni jihadist groups that have received funding from state sympathisers. The pattern is that states can instrumentalise terrorism to achieve what they cannot do openly, much as medieval power-brokers might have covertly leveraged the Assassins. This similarity underscores that terrorism is embedded in political contexts; it's not always a standalone phenomenon but part of larger conflicts and strategies.

12. Strategic Rationality in Terrorist Violence: Finally, reviewing all these parallels, it becomes evident that strategic rationality underlies both the Assassins' campaign and many contemporary terrorist campaigns. Despite the often extremist and absolutist rhetoric (whether invoking millennial Islamic prophecies or, in the Assassins' case, a utopian Shiite vision), there is a discernible logic to their actions. For the Assassins, each act of violence was chosen and timed to maximise political leverage under conditions of power asymmetry. For modern terrorists, their violence often follows a calculated logic of asymmetry, communication, and coercion, even if couched in religious terms. It is difficult, therefore, to maintain that such terrorist behaviour is simply "irrational" or purely fanatical madness. The tactics of suicide bombing or high-profile assassination, brutal as they are, have an internal strategic consistency: they are designed to achieve results that conventional military methods cannot.

By identifying and analysing these similarities, we see that factors such as power disparity, concrete political aims, psychological impact, recruitment needs, and even ideological narratives (martyrdom and reward) all contribute to a planned and considered approach to violence in both contexts. The narratives that glorify martyrdom and promise otherworldly rewards serve to reinforce this strategy by ensuring a supply of willing perpetrators and by providing moral and emotional justification for extreme methods. In this sense, even ideas that sound fanatical (e.g. "God will reward you for killing yourself and the enemy") are harnessed in service of a strategy – they are tools to motivate cadres and intimidate enemies.

Thus, however irrational terrorist acts may appear from a humanitarian perspective, for the actors themselves, these acts possess a consistent and functional logic. For the Assassins and modern jihadists, self-sacrificial terror can be a rational choice given their goals, constraints, and worldview. Recognising this does not excuse the brutality, but it is analytically important: it means that terrorism can be studied and understood in terms of strategy and objectives, rather than being dismissed merely as incomprehensible evil. This understanding is crucial if one is to formulate effective responses to terrorist threats across time.

5. Conclusion

The comparative analysis between the historical phenomenon of the Assassins and the phenomenon of contemporary religious terrorism reveals an extraordinarily complex, multi-dimensional relationship between religious ideology, political objectives, and violent methods. By carefully examining the organisational principles, tactical patterns, and ideological constructs that shaped the Assassins' operations, we can recognise key parallels with modern forms of terrorist violence. Whether we consider strategies of asymmetric warfare, clandestine infiltration and sleeper agents, recruitment and training practices, intensive indoctrination (including manipulation of religious visions of paradise), or selectivity versus non-selectivity in target choice, it is clear that certain patterns of behaviour and operational logic transcend specific historical and cultural contexts.

At the same time, the differences identified – especially those regarding the treatment of civilian populations and the ethical constraints on violence – point to important moral and strategic shifts in modern terrorism. Unlike the Assassins, who almost exclusively targeted specific political and military figures, many contemporary terrorist organisations deliberately weaponise civilian victims as a means of producing mass fear, thereby erasing the line between "legitimate" and "illegitimate" targets. This marks a significant evolution in terrorist strategy and morality, reflecting how modern terrorists often pursue maximalist intimidation at the expense of any constraints, a contrast to the more focused (if still brutal) approach of the Assassins.

The value of a historical-theoretical comparison such as this lies in its ability to provide a deeper understanding of the fundamental mechanisms of terrorism as a political and psychological strategy. By exploring an early case of religiously motivated political violence alongside present-day manifestations, we gain insight into the enduring logic that can underlie terrorist acts. This, in turn, opens space for formulating more effective security and policy responses that move beyond one-dimensional portrayals of terrorism as merely irrational or solely religiously driven. On the contrary, both historical and contemporary examples demonstrate that behind terrorist acts, there often lies a structured logic of power, control, and messaging – a logic which, despite its brutality, demands systematic analysis and rational response.

Understanding that groups like the Assassins and modern religious terrorists share certain strategic rationales helps demystify terrorism. It challenges us to recognise patterns (such as the instrumental use of fear and the calculated pursuit of political ends) and to address those conditions that enable such patterns to recur.

For scholars and practitioners in terrorism studies, this comparison highlights the importance of a historical perspective: today's "new" terrorism may have antecedents that date back centuries, and learning from these can enrich our understanding of contemporary threats. For policymakers, appreciating the parallels in terrorist *modus operandi* across time can encourage strategies that address root causes and exploit the predictabilities in terrorist behaviour (for example, understanding the importance of leadership decapitation but also the potential for an overreaction that plays into terrorists' hands).

Finally, this study suggests avenues for future research. One could extend the comparative lens to other historical groups (such as the Zealots/Sicarii of the 1st century or militant movements in other religious traditions) to further explore how terrorism evolves and what constants persist. Additionally, further investigation into how mythologised narratives of groups like the Assassins influence modern extremist ideologies could be fruitful. Indeed, groups today sometimes consciously draw on historical legacies to legitimise themselves. By continuing to bridge the past and present in terrorism research, we can deepen our understanding of this form of violence and enhance our ability to respond to it in an informed, nuanced manner.

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