



LOOKING AT ALAWITES

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Abstract

This paper aims to provide some original discussion on the traditional Alawite religion, looking at current historical narratives of the Alawites during the French Mandate period in what in 1936 became the Syrian Republic. The paper also considers conceptions of identity in the modern era and perceptions of the Syrian civil war a Sunni-Shi'a conflict. Finally, it examines the position of Alawites in the current civil war in Syria, and discusses future options for the community.

The Alawite Religion: Considering Metempsychosis

Since unrest began in March 2011 in Syria, the status of the Alawite minority has come to the forefront of media attention. Given concerns about sectarian dynamics underlying the conflict, there has naturally been much speculation on the nature of traditional Alawite beliefs. That the Alawite faith is syncretic cannot be doubted.¹ That, however, is not the Alawites' only peculiarity.

The question that arises is whether the Alawites are an offshoot of Shi'i Islam (specifically, with an origin in the Iraqi Shi'a *ghulat* sects that attributed divine qualities to Ali and his descendants who became the twelve Imams of Shi'ism²); or whether, ultimately, the Alawites are a religious group predating the advent of Islam to the Levant. The latter hypothesis is presented in popular form by Diana Darke, in her travel guide to Syria. Darke describes the Alawites as follows:

They appear to be the descendants of the people who lived in this region at the time of Alexander the Great, and when Christianity flourished here the 'Alawis, isolated in their little mountain communities, clung to their own pre-Islamic religion. After hundreds of years of Shi'a Isma'ili influence, they

¹ Comprehensive studies of the Alawite religion- including an examination of medieval texts- can be found in *The Nusayri-'Alawis* by Yaron Friedman (Brill: 2010) pp. 67-173; *The Nusayri-'Alawi Religion* by Meir M. Bar-Asher and Aryeh Kofsky (Brill: 2002), and *Extremist Shiites: The Ghulat Sects* by Matti Moosa (New York: 1987), pp. 311-408

² This is the view expounded by Moosa.



*moved closer to Islam, but contacts with the Byzantines and Crusaders added Christian elements to their religion.*³

Darke's description has an air of romanticism about it rather than serious analysis. As scholars have increasingly looked into Alawite texts from the medieval period, the notion of an origin in the *ghulat* sects has become consensus. Puzzles still remain however as to the origins of specific doctrines. Here I intend to examine *metempsychosis*.⁴

Various explanations have been forwarded. Without offering any elaboration, Moosa simply states: "Metempsychosis is not an Islamic dogma, and was most likely borrowed from Buddhism."⁵ Friedman allows for a similar hypothesis, stating that the "doctrine of transmigration is a central doctrine in the Hindu religion and infiltrated into Persian culture. In that case, the belief could have arrived in Iraq through Persian Manicheism."⁶ Friedman also notes the hypothesis of transmission through Greek philosophy.⁷

I reject the thesis of transmission via Buddhism or Hinduism through Manichaeism. Had this actually been the case, we would surely have seen some special reverence for Mani—the founder of Manichaeism—and some figures from Hinduism and Buddhism among the Alawites. On the other hand, we do find particular honors accorded to Greek philosophers, including Socrates, Plato and Aristotle.⁸ This suggests an ultimately Greek origin for *metempsychosis* as expounded among Alawites. Below are some possible Greek precedents:

Empedocles: There are numerous parallels between Alawite expositions of the doctrine of *metempsychosis* and the mystical poetry of the pre-Socratic philosopher Empedocles, whose works, which now only survive in fragmentary form, were not only widely circulated in the Hellenistic world and even among the last pagan Neoplatonists such as Simplicius (with excerpts faithfully quoted in the original Greek),⁹ but were also known in Arabic.¹⁰ Yet on a prefatory note, it should be emphasized that the specific details presented are not uniformly

³ Diana Darke, *Syria: The Bradt Travel Guide* (2006), p. 217

⁴ In its most basic form, *metempsychosis* is the belief in the transmigration of souls.

⁵ Moosa (1987), p. 174

⁶ Friedman (2010), p. 103

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Ibid., p. 225

⁹ Incidentally, Simplicius, who travelled around the Eastern Mediterranean, was from Cilicia in southeastern Asia Minor, where there is an Alawite community today that goes back at least to the 18th century.

¹⁰ See the following article on the transmission of Empedocles in Arabic works by Daniel De Smet: <http://www.brill.nl/files/brill.nl/specific/downloads/24186-Empedocles.pdf>



consistent in Alawite texts, even as the same basic structure is preserved. Variations will be indicated in the footnotes.

The most noteworthy, striking resemblances are as follows. In the traditional Alawite theology, men were once beings in the divine realm of light but fell from grace on account of transgression. Similarly, according to Empedocles, men were once *daimones* in the divine realm but were expelled for the transgressions of bloodshed and swearing false oaths, “νείκει μαινομένωι πίσυνος” (“trusting in raging Strife”).¹¹ In Empedocles’ worldview, Strife is the force opposed to Love (variously termed *Philotes* or *Aphrodite*).¹²

On account of the transgression, the *daimon* “τρίς μιν μυρίας ὥρας ἀπὸ μακάρων ἀλάλησθαι” (“is to wander in exile for thirty thousand seasons from the blessed”),¹³ and during this time, it may be incarnated in the forms of various mortal things;¹⁴ but if humans lead righteous lives, they can be reincarnated in higher forms of being before the *daimones* within them return to the divine realm:

εἰς δὲ τέλος μάντεις τε καὶ ὕμνοπόλοι καὶ ἰητροὶ
καὶ πρόμοι ἀνθρώποισιν ἐπιχθονίοισι πέλονται,
ἔνθεν ἀναβλαστοῦσι θεοὶ τιμῆισι φέριστοι.¹⁵

(“Finally they become prophets, singers of hymns, doctors, and leaders for men on earth; from there they rise up as gods greatest in honors”).

There is a clear doctrine of transmigration here, and it is a well-established part of traditional Alawite religion, such that, as Gisela Procházka-Eisl and Stephan Procházka note, “it is one of the very few principles of the dogma which Alawis do not keep secret.”¹⁶ Matti Moosa correctly points out that the Alawite belief in

¹¹ Empedocles B115. Friedman (2010), p. 97, draws attention to an early tradition of the fall related in the *Umm al-Kitab*, which was originally written in Arabic but now only survives in Persian translations. It is not an Alawite text, but it contains the idea of the fall of creatures of the realm of light into a darker and inferior material world. As with Empedocles, there were two transgressions, but in the *Umm al-Kitab* the sins are doubt about God’s presence and haughtiness.

¹² In the Golden Age of the dominance of Love, there was no bloodshed. See Empedocles B128

¹³ Empedocles B115

¹⁴ *Ibid.*; cf. Empedocles B117, where the philosopher says that at different times he has been a “κοῦρος τε κόρη τε θάμνος τ’ οἰωνός τε καὶ ἐξ ἄλος ἔμπορος ἰχθύς” (“boy, a girl, a bush, a bird and a fish that travels in the sea”).

¹⁵ Empedocles B146; this will certainly be the fate of those who attend to the mystic’s “πρὸς κέρδος ἀταρπός” (“path to success”: B112).

¹⁶ Gisela Procházka-Eisl and Stephan Procházka, *The Plain of Saints and Prophets* (Harrassowitz Verlag: 2010), p. 82



metempsychosis is linked to “the concept of reward and punishment,”¹⁷ so while the souls of evil men¹⁸ will be reincarnated in the forms of beasts, the righteous will attain higher forms of human being in subsequent lives, just like Empedocles’ doctrine as illustrated in fragment B146 that is quoted above.

Nonetheless, as with Empedocles’ concept of 30,000 seasons of exile from the blessed realm, there appears to be a set period of exile from the divine realm of light in Alawite theology, entailing a “number of revolutions” of purification through *metempsychosis*, “as many as twenty-one, each lasting for 1,077 years,” after which the Alawites’ souls will return to the world of light.¹⁹

Owing to these similarities, it may be reasonable to suppose that the ultimate origin of these ideas in Alawite theology lies in the philosophy of Empedocles. Concerning the debate on the origins of the Alawites, there are two ways to read the observations. First, one can go with the notion of a pre-Islamic religion heavily influenced by this Greek philosophy, which is somewhat along the lines of Darke’s description. Alternatively, one can postulate direct or indirect transmission via Arabic sources and retain the hypothesis of the origins of the Alawite sect in the *ghulat* groups that arose around Kufa in modern-day Iraq.

The problem with the former hypothesis is that Empedocles’ fragments can be divided into two main types: his ‘physics’ and the mystical ‘purifications’. The fragments noted above derive from the latter and are not found in Simplicius’ works. In fact, they mainly survive in the writings of Christian heresiographers like Hippolytus of Rome, who was active in the late second and early third centuries.

In Arabic, Empedocles was known as Anbaduqlis, but essentially a ‘Pseudo-Empedocles’ arose in Arabic works pertaining to “doxography, history of philosophy, Shi’i-Isma’ili theology, Sufism, heresiography, and magic.”²⁰ According to this Pseudo-Empedocles, “The human soul is part of the universal soul fallen into matter. Through the teaching of divine messengers, the soul may remember its celestial origin, be purified of the corruption of the material world,

¹⁷ Moosa (1987), p. 365

¹⁸ When it comes to the designation of ‘evil,’ it should be understood that the reference is to unbelievers. Thus, a common motif in Alawite sources is the transmigration of Jewish souls into monkeys, which is derived from Qur’an 2:60 that alludes to punishment against violators of the Sabbath by transformation into apes. See Bar-Asher and Kofsky (2002), p. 65 (footnote 131).

¹⁹ Moosa (1987), p. 366. The tradition related here comes from an early Alawite text known as the *Kitab al-Haft* and the *Kitab al-Mashyaka*. Friedman (2010), p. 107 notes that al-Khasibi, who was an early Alawite jurist and leader, wrote that faithful Alawite mystics must endure transmigration eighty times before salvation.

²⁰ See footnote 5.



and survive after the death of the body.”²¹

Yet absent from Pseudo-Empedocles is the concept of a set period of exile for the souls of the righteous with cycles of purification through reincarnation into higher forms of, and transmigration of souls into inferior, non-human forms of being as punishment for wickedness in this life. Indeed, the presentation of Empedocles’ original work here is at best only in very garbled form, and it would be difficult to argue that the Alawite teachings on this matter derived from Pseudo-Empedocles in Arabic sources.

Plato’s Timaeus: In the *Timaeus*, each soul has been assigned to a star. Righteous behavior means that after death, the soul will be united with its star, but evil conduct means that the soul will be reincarnated in inferior forms of being like wild beasts.²² However, the *Timaeus* does not contain notions of a fall from the divine realm and transmigration as part of a period of exile. In addition, the righteous soul can immediately return to its companion star after death.

Plato’s Phaedrus: This work, in the form of a dialogue between Socrates, Phaedrus and Lysias, expounds on *metempsychosis* in what is conventionally known as the ‘Chariot Allegory.’ In this allegory, a soul that cannot follow God falls to Earth through the sins of forgetfulness and wickedness. There are nine levels of human existence that a fallen soul can assume, forming a hierarchy much like Empedocles’ conception of transmigration. In descending order, we have: the philosopher, the law-loving king, a bureaucrat, a doctor, the mystic, a poet, a workman, a sophist/demagogue, and a finally a tyrant.²³

A soul that lives a righteous life can attain a higher form of being, and the opposite is true for unrighteous souls. Only the soul of the philosopher can return to its original state in the third period of a thousand years after it has chosen the life of a philosopher three times. Other souls must wait for 10,000 years. During this time, they are judged after their first life and either dwell in Heaven or Hell for 1000 years, after which they may pass into the body of a beast or a man.²⁴

In his *Enneads*, which were known in Arabic through a partial paraphrase translation known as the “Theology of Aristotle,” the Neoplatonist Plotinus discussed *metempsychosis* in the broad sense of fall from the divine realm into a human body but with the possibility of return to the divine, noting precedents in Empedocles and Plato’s *Phaedrus*, but rejecting the former’s poetry for detailed

²¹ Ibid.

²² Plato, *Timaeus*, 41e and 42c-e.

²³ Plato, *Phaedrus* 246a-254e. Relevant parts in translation at: http://sacred-texts.com/gno/th1/th147.htm#fn_1408

²⁴ Ibid., 249b



discussion on the grounds of supposed obscurity.²⁵

Of the three Greek precedents outlined above, it is the philosophy of Empedocles that appears to be closest to Alawite views on the matter of *metempsychosis*. A distinction that sets apart the Alawite theology from all three is the belief in eventual resurrection and Day of Judgment—reflecting a clear Islamic influence—that must preclude a conception of time as never-ending cycles, which is at least strongly implied in Empedocles' poetry.²⁶

Elsewhere in Islamic thought, *metempsychosis* was advocated by some of the Mut'azilites, who flourished in Iraq at the same time as the *ghulat* sects. However, the rationale for this doctrine in their thought is something quite alien to Alawite thinking. That is, it was invoked as a kind of theodicy: "God's justice necessitates another life before or after the actual life, in order to explain the suffering of the innocent and the pleasure of the evildoers."²⁷ The system of *metempsychosis* according to Fadl al-Hadathi—a pupil of the Mut'azilite al-Nazzam—is as follows:

In another world God created animals mature and wise, bestowed on them innumerable blessings, and conferred on them many sciences too. God then desired to put them to a test and so commanded them to offer thanks to Him for His gifts. Some obeyed His command and some did not. He rewarded His thankful creatures by giving them heaven and condemned the ungrateful ones to hell. There were some among them who had partly obeyed the divine command and partly not obeyed it. They were sent to the world, were given filthy bodies, and, according to the magnitude of their sins, sorrow and pain, joy and pleasure. Those who had not sinned much and had obeyed most of God's commands were given lovely faces and mild punishment. But those who did only a few good deeds and committed a large number of sins were given ugly faces, and were subjected to severe tribulations. So long as an animal is not purified of all its sins, it will be always changing its forms.²⁸

Based on all the above data, I would suggest that rather than transmission through the Mut'azilites, the forerunners of the Nusayri/Alawite sect either got hold of the writings of Plato (most likely, the *Phaedrus*) and/or Empedocles on *metempsychosis* in translation (now lost to us,) or had learnt of the ideas from

²⁵ Plotinus, Ennead IV (<http://www.ellopos.net/elpenor/greek-texts/ancient-greece/plotinus/enneads-4b.asp?pg=51>)

²⁶ Empedocles, B17

²⁷ Friedman (2010), p. 103

²⁸ Mir Valiuddin, A History of Muslim Philosophy, "Mut'azilism" (ch. 10): <http://www.muslimphilosophy.com/hmp/13.htm>



interaction with Gnostic groups in the Mesopotamia and Syria regions,²⁹ or even Christians who might have had access to the relevant texts in the original Greek or in Syriac translation.

In this context, it should be noted that there is a clear concept of what Friedman terms “Gnostic mystical elevation” relating to the Alawite system of *metempsychosis*. It is not enough simply to identify as an Alawite if one is to return to the divine realm of light. Rather, one also needs to undergo a process of mystical initiation and study of secret knowledge with the “guidance of the shaykh who has gained an exalted degree of gnosis.”³⁰ Similar notions, noted above, are to be found in Empedocles, with the idea of a secret ‘path to success’ of which the mystic holds knowledge.

On a concluding note, however, it should be pointed out that the concept of the fall from the divine realm on account of transgression through God’s testing in the Mut’azilite story above is present in the Alawite tradition. The notion of God testing men is a repeated theme in the Qur’an (e.g. 2:155, 3:140, 23:30, 29:2 and 57:25), and one could well posit common development of the idea from the Qur’an.

The French Mandate

The French Mandate over what is now Syria has garnered a considerable degree of media attention, because this period saw the establishment of an Alawite State on the northwestern coastline around the port city of Latakia. This enclave was first proclaimed in 1922, following a drawn-out Alawite revolt against French rule beginning in December 1918 and led by Sheikh Ahmad Salih al-Ali.³¹ After the Alawite State was established, the Alawite community’s leaders, who were well aware of the discrimination and persecution Alawites had suffered under various Sunni Muslim rulers, supported the continuation of the French Mandate, and thus generally did not back the Arab nationalist revolt centered in Damascus against French rule in 1925-6.³²

It is at this point that we now must turn to narratives in media. Writing in *The National Interest*, Franck Salameh contrasts what he sees as French appreciation for the ethno-religious diversity of the Levant with “British designs” for “new

²⁹ The main Gnostic group in Mesopotamia today is the Mandaean sect that reveres John the Baptist. Conversion of the non-Muslim populations in the region to Islam was a gradual process over centuries, not decades.

³⁰ Friedman (2010), p. 115

³¹ Moosa (1987), pp. 282-4

³² *Ibid.*



unitary, Arab-defined creations.”³³ He therefore places the blame on the British for an artificial unification of the territories that now comprise Syria. Of course, Salameh is right that the British supported the ideology of pan-Arabism, something that effectively became British policy in World War Two.³⁴

Nevertheless, a look at the record will show that the British cannot be blamed for the eventual dissolution of the Alawite State in 1936. The problem for the French was that throughout the late 1920s and early 1930s, nationalist sentiment pushing for the unification of Syria was growing, and this potential source of great unrest could not simply be ignored. Although the Alawite leaders had sent a delegation in April 1933 to Beirut to make it clear that they opposed any unification of the Alawite State with Syria, the French began negotiating with Syrian nationalists in Paris in March 1936, and so Alawite leaders with members of the council of the government in Latakia (the capital of the Alawite State) submitted several memoranda in an attempt to guarantee their separation from any independent Syria.³⁵

It was in this context that a memorandum to Léon Blum—the the Jewish Prime Minister of France—was submitted in June 1936, with one of the signatories being no less than Suleiman al-Assad, the grandfather of Syria’s current president. Its contents are particularly striking and have garnered considerable media attention since unrest began in Syria.³⁶ Indeed, it was the culmination in the series of memoranda seeking to maintain an independent Alawite State. The following excerpts are noteworthy:

The Alawis refuse to be annexed to Muslim Syria because, in Syria, the official religion of the state is Islam, and according to Islam, the Alawis are considered infidels... Do the French leaders want the Muslims to have control over the Alawi people in order to throw them into misery? The spirit of hatred and fanaticism embedded in the hearts of the Arab Muslims against everything that is non-Muslim has been perpetually nurtured by the Islamic religion. There is no hope that the situation will ever change. Therefore, the abolition of the Mandate will expose the minorities in Syria to the dangers of death and annihilation, irrespective of the fact that such abolition will annihilate the freedom of thought and belief. We can sense today how the Muslim citizens of Damascus force the Jews who live among them to sign a document pledging that they will not send

³³ Franck Salameh, “The Arab Westphalia,” *The National Interest*, March 7, 2011 (<http://nationalinterest.org/commentary/the-arab-westphalia-4949>)

³⁴ cf. Martin Kramer, “Don’t Absolve the Great Powers,” *Middle East Quarterly*, Winter 2000 (<http://www.meforum.org/117/dont-absolve-the-great-powers>)

³⁵ Moosa (1987), pp. 285-6

³⁶ See, for example, Robert Mackey, “Syria’s Ruling Alawite Sect,” *The Lede* (New York Times blog), June 14, 2011 (<http://thelede.blogs.nytimes.com/2011/06/14/syrias-ruling-alawite-sect/>)



provisions to their ill-fated brethren in Palestine. The condition of the Jews in Palestine is the strongest and most explicit evidence of the militancy of the Islamic issue vis-à-vis those who do not belong to Islam. These good Jews contributed to the Arabs with civilization and peace, scattered gold, and established prosperity in Palestine without harming anyone or taking anything by force, yet the Muslims declare holy war against them and never hesitated in slaughtering their women and children, despite the presence of England in Palestine and France in Syria. Therefore, a dark fate awaits the Jews and other minorities in case the mandate is abolished and Muslim Syria is united with Muslim Palestine. The union of the two countries is the ultimate goal of the Muslim Arabs.

We appreciate the noble feeling which motivates you to defend the Syrian people and your desire to realize the independence of Syria. But at present, Syria is still far off from the noble goal you are trying to achieve...You may think that it is possible to ensure the rights of the Alawis and the minorities by a treaty. We assure you that treaties have no value in relation to the Islamic mentality in Syria. We have previously seen this situation in the Anglo-Iraqi treaty, which did not prevent the Iraqis from slaughtering the Assyrians and the Yezidis.³⁷

There are several things to be noted about this memorandum. First, it explicitly and vehemently marks off the Alawites as separate from the Muslims, indicating that the identification of Alawites as a mainstream Muslim sect is a product of the modern era, as noted above. Second, the references to Jews are clearly aimed at Léon Blum's Jewish identity and what the signatories believed was his sympathy with the Zionist movement. The apparent Alawite solidarity with the Jews expressed here should not necessarily be taken as sincere.

In fact, there is a conspicuous strand of anti-Jewish thought in Alawite theology. For example, in the *Kitab al-Usus* (Book of Foundations)—an early Alawite theological treatise—not only are the Jews characterized as “archetypes of heresy,”³⁸ but also the work concludes with an exhortation for the reader not to practice the customs of Judaism, “for there is not a single perfect man to be found among the Jews and God has no elect in their midst.”³⁹

Coming back to the memorandum, the signatories were correct that there existed at the time an ideological trend seeking to unify the territories of Palestine with Syria, considering the former to be ‘southern Syria.’⁴⁰ While the Syrians continued to maintain an interest in incorporating Palestine throughout

³⁷ Quoted in Moosa (1987), pp. 287-8

³⁸ Bar-Asher and Kofsky (2002), p. 69

³⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 73

⁴⁰ cf. Daniel Pipes, “Palestine for the Syrians?”, *Commentary*, December 1986 (<http://www.danielpipes.org/174/palestine-for-the-syrians>)



the period into the Palestinian revolt of 1936-9 and well into the 1940s, the enthusiasm had been somewhat dampened among the Palestinians following the French capture of Damascus in July 1920, but still commanded a degree of popular support in the 1930s.⁴¹ As for the massacre of Assyrians to which the signatories allude, the reference is to the mass killings in August 1933 of 600-3000 Assyrians in Nineveh by the Iraqi army and local Arabs and Kurds, known at the time as the Simele massacre.⁴²

Ultimately, the Alawite community leaders failed in their attempt to convince the French to maintain an independent Alawite State. Not only had the French come to perceive the pressure of Syrian nationalists as too great, but there was also the reality that the leaders of the four Alawite clans—the Haddadin, al-Khayyat, al-Kalbiyya and al-Matawira (comprising the Latakia council)—had begun to lose influence among the new, younger generation of Alawites who had access to better education and were more sympathetic to the Syrian nationalists than their parents.⁴³

Realizing that the push to maintain Alawite independence under French protection had failed, the Alawite leaders then sought a union with Lebanon. Some attractions of this initiative for the Alawites were noted by Moosa: namely, the existence of already strong economic ties with Lebanon, and similar legal systems, as well as the prospect of a country of minorities with a population of 1.2 million, as opposed to Syria's population of 1.7 million.⁴⁴

In my view, however, Moosa overlooks the force of the traditional sense of solidarity and affinity Alawites have felt with Christians. In the *Kitab al-Usus*, Christian priests and monks are idealized,⁴⁵ and traditionally, feast days with Christian roots have been observed (e.g. commemorating the birth of Jesus).⁴⁶ Among the Alawite community in Cilicia, the notion of Christians as natural allies against the Sunni Islamists appears to be particularly strong.⁴⁷ In Syria itself, strong relations between the Melkite, Greek Orthodox and Alawite communities have emerged, especially since the ascent of the Assad dynasty.⁴⁸

Nonetheless, the Alawite requests for a union with Lebanon were passed on to

⁴¹ Ibid.

⁴² An early account can be found in Lt. Col. R.S. Stafford, *The Tragedy of the Assyrians* (George Allen and Unwin Ltd.: 1935), pp. 159-208

⁴³ Moosa (1987), pp. 289-90

⁴⁴ Ibid., pp. 290-1

⁴⁵ Bar-Asher and Kofsky (2002), pp. 66-7

⁴⁶ Procházka-Eisl and Procházka (2010), p. 102

⁴⁷ Ibid., p. 82

⁴⁸ See, for example, Augin Kurt Haninke, "The Difference Between Christians and Christians in Syria," *Assyrian International News Agency*, June 6, 2012 (<http://www.aina.org/news/20120606111526.htm>)



the Maronite patriarch and president of Lebanon, but no response was forthcoming,⁴⁹ and so the last attempt to preserve some form of Alawite autonomy failed.

Modern Alawite Faith and Religious Identity

Traditionally, Alawites were known as 'Nusayris', called after Mohammed ibn Nusayr, the reputed founder of the sect. This identity entailed a 'neither Sunni nor Shi'a' position, as reflected in the Alawite tradition attributed to Imam al-Baqir that one should learn religion from a man who would be accused by Sunnis of heresy and excommunicated by the Shi'a.⁵⁰

Beginning in the 1920s, the long-accepted designation of the Alawites as 'Nusayriyya' was abandoned by the sect's community leaders,⁵¹ such that for many Alawites today the word 'Nusayri' has similar negative connotations to the word 'Negro' for black people in the English language, or the word 'rafidi' for a Shi'i in Arabic. The obvious connotation of Alawite as pertaining to Ali was probably supposed to convey an image of Alawites as just another sect of Islam within the bounds of the mainstream.

The tendency towards self-presentation as non-heretical Muslims is also apparent in the Alawite community in Cilicia, where as regards *metempsychosis*, the sheikhs are known to highlight Qur'an 2:243 in an attempt to prove that the doctrine does not constitute heresy.⁵²

The status of the traditional Alawite religion in Syria has been increasingly moribund since the formation of the modern state in 1946, particularly following the rise of the Ba'ath Party in 1963 and the ascent of the Assad dynasty in 1970. For example, a report by the *Los Angeles Times* quoted a Syrian Alawite blogger living in Japan called Yazan Badran as follows: "Many Alawites nowadays consider themselves outright atheists but are still within the cultural sphere of Alawis and are accepted into the sect and treated like any other (myself, included)."⁵³ Thus, for Alawites like Badran, the identity is no more than one of bloodline and culture, as is the case with many secularist Jews, even if they regard actual belief in the religion as something ridiculous. John Myhill, a professor of linguistics at Haifa University, reports the existence of the same

⁴⁹ Moosa (1987), p. 291

⁵⁰ Ibid., p. 208

⁵¹ Ibid., p. 235

⁵² Procházka-Eisl and Procházka (2010), p. 82

⁵³ Emily Alpert, "What does it mean to be Alawite in Syria, and why does it matter?", *Los Angeles Times*, February 7, 2012

(http://latimesblogs.latimes.com/world_now/2012/02/syrian-president-alawite-what-does-that-mean-and-why-does-it-matter.html)



phenomenon among the small community of Alawites in Israel and in exile in Europe and North America.⁵⁴

Going further back in time, there is one particularly salient case to note. On April 25, 1967, an article appeared in the Syrian Army's newspaper, written by a young Alawite officer called Ibrahim Khalas, who called for liberation from "God, religion, feudalism, capitalism, colonialism, and all the values that prevailed under the old society": values that were derided by Khalas as "mummies in the museums of history."⁵⁵ The article provoked outrage from Muslim clergy and some Christian religious leaders in Damascus, Aleppo, Homs and Hama,⁵⁶ but there is no evidence of anger emanating from the Alawite community.

In addition, as Joshua Landis points out, when Hafez al-Assad became president in 1970, he pursued a policy of *de facto* "Sunnification" for the Alawite community.⁵⁷ Hence, while he declared Alawites to be Twelver Shi'a Muslims, he "forbade Alawite Shaykhs to venerate Ali excessively, and set the example for his people by adhering to Sunni practice. He built mosques in Alawite towns, prayed publicly and fasted and encouraged his people to do the same."⁵⁸ His son and successor Bashar has set the same ostensible example of orthodox Muslim piety.⁵⁹

However, it should be noted that the identification of Alawites as Twelver Shi'ites is not the theological consensus in Najaf even today, which in fact does not deem them to be Muslims at all, despite earlier attempts by Najaf clergymen like Ayatollah Muhsin al-Hakim in 1947 and Muhammad Rida Shams al-Din in 1956 to establish contact with the Alawite community in Syria and promote the teachings of Jafari jurisprudence among them.⁶⁰ Any reciprocal validation has mainly come from the ruling of Imam Musa al-Sadr (an Iranian-Lebanese cleric with extensive ties to Qom, a key center of Twelver Shi'ite religious learning) in 1973, something that gave the new Assad regime a face of Islamic legitimacy amid Sunni claims that the regime was being led by heretics and apostates from Islam.

⁵⁴ Based on my own discussions with John Myhill

⁵⁵ Quoted in Line Khatib, *Islamic Revivalism in Syria: The Rise and Fall of Ba'athist Secularism* (Routledge: 2011), p. 46

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 46-7

⁵⁷ Joshua Landis, "Asad's Alawi dilemma," *Syria Comment*, October 8, 2004 (<http://faculty-staff.ou.edu/L/Joshua.M.Landis-1/syriablog/2004/10/asads-alawi-dilemma.htm>)

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*

⁵⁹ See, for example, "President al-Assad Performs Eid al-Adha Prayer at Manjaq Mosque," Syrian Arab News Agency, November 18, 2010 (<http://www.jpnews-sy.com/en/news.php?id=2553>)

⁶⁰ Martin Kramer, "Syria's Alawis and Shi'ism," in Martin Kramer (ed.), *Shi'ism, Resistance and Revolution*, (Boulder, Colorado: Westview Press, 1987) p. 244



That said, it does not follow that there are no Iraqi Shi'a who regard the Alawites as fellow Shi'a. In fact, as Dr. Hassan Nadhem (a one-time lecturer at the Islamic College in London) pointed out to me, many of those Shi'a who have worked in Syria have come to identify Alawites as co-religionists, but the pejorative notion of Alawites as *ghulat* (i.e. guilty of extremism in reverence for Ali) is still very much apparent.

A Perceived Sunni-Shi'a Conflict?

The promotion of an ostensible Shi'ite identity has proven to be a double-edged sword, for the effect of Imam Sadr's ruling, together with the ties to Iran established by Hafez al-Assad after the 1979 revolution, has been that the present conflict in Syria is increasingly perceived as a Sunni-Shi'a conflict, both by Middle Eastern and North African observers outside Syria and opponents of the Assad regime within Syria. Thus, the Assad dynasty's upholding of the image of Alawites as Shi'ites has only succeeded in inflaming Sunni Arab resentment against the regime. For instance, on Youtube, one can find many videos where those perceived to be regime supporters have been tortured by rebel fighters into confessing that they are supposedly Shi'a.⁶¹ In addition, there are sermons by Sunni clerics outside Syria attacking the Assad regime in the same terms.⁶² Among ordinary Iraqi Arabs, one generally finds that stances of support for or skepticism about the opposition to Assad can be determined on the basis of a Sunni or Shi'i sectarian affiliation respectively.

Note the emphasis here on *Sunni Arab*, because in the Islamic world outside of the Middle East and North Africa, a perception of a Sunni-Shi'a conflict with support or opposition divided on a sectarian basis does not necessarily hold. For example, according to an observer in Peshawar, Pakistan with whom I spoke, the general popular sentiment in Pakistan appears to sympathize with the Assad regime as a victim of a Western conspiracy. The observer added that there were similar views in Pakistan regarding the uprising against Gaddafi in Libya, during which there was a NATO intervention on behalf of the rebels.⁶³

There are two points that may explain the existence of these sentiments in Pakistan. First, the Pakistani public is not subject to the broadcasts of *al-Jazeera's*

⁶¹ See, for example,

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3szZilJmJXg&feature=plcp>

⁶² See, for example, this sermon by Sheikh Muhammad al-Arifi:

http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hkPSrb3ZmFo&feature=player_embedded
(note from around 3:55 onwards).

⁶³ Cf. Aymenn Jawad Al-Tamimi, "The Syrian Civil War," National Review Online, September 17, 2012 (<http://www.nationalreview.com/articles/320912/syrian-civil-war-aymenn-jawad-al-tamimi>)



Arabic channel, which is devoting much effort to covering the conflict from an anti-Assad perspective, or *al-Arabiya*, the pro-Saudi news channel. Second, populist politicians and pundits in Pakistan have done much to stir up anti-Western sentiment (anti-American in particular), exploiting civilian casualties caused by drone strikes against Taliban and al-Qa'ida militants in the northwest. Any internal conflict in a Muslim country in which the West is thought to be involved will therefore entail sympathy for whoever is perceived to be opposing the West.

In turn, it is worth noting that while Bangladesh and Afghanistan voted in favor of a recent UN General Assembly resolution sponsored by Saudi Arabia to condemn the Syrian regime for using heavy weapons against civilian areas and committing human rights violations (while deploring the UN Security Council's failure to take action,) Pakistan took the decision to abstain from voting.⁶⁴ In his opinion piece, Najmuddin A Shaikh argues that reasons for the decision to abstain include concerns over calls for direct foreign intervention in Syria and the Assad regime's ties with the Pakistan People's Party.⁶⁵ I would add that popular Pakistani belief in a conspiracy against Syria, as well as a desire not to antagonize China and Iran, played a part.

Indeed, further evidence demonstrates that the concerns of a foreign conspiracy against Assad extend to the ranks of the Pakistani government. Speaking to the Pakistani newspaper *The Nation*, spokesman for the Foreign Office Muazzam A Khan indicated: "Pakistan wants territorial integrity of Syria [sic: understand "preserved"] and is seeking peaceful resolution of the conflict."⁶⁶ Government sources speaking to the newspaper on the issue of Pakistan's abstention from the UN General Assembly vote maintained that "efforts were underway to install a new government in Syria which they believed would lead to further instability in the entire region and eventually other Muslim counties [sic: "countries"] might face the same fate."⁶⁷

While the abstention contrasts with a vote by Pakistan in favor of a UN General Assembly Resolution condemning Syria back in February, Pakistani officials have constantly emphasized a stance that strongly denounces foreign involvement in the Syria crisis, stressing that any solution should be led and carried out by Syrians alone and that both sides should lay down their arms, with respect "for the principles of independence, sovereignty, unity and territorial integrity of

⁶⁴ Najmuddin A Shaikh, "Syria and Kurdish Goals," *DAWN.COM*, August 8, 2012 (<http://dawn.com/2012/08/08/syria-and-kurdish-goals/>)

⁶⁵ Ibid.

⁶⁶ Maqbool Malik, "Pakistan cautious over Syria divide," *The Nation*, August 7, 2012 (<http://www.nation.com.pk/pakistan-news-newspaper-daily-english-online/national/07-Aug-2012/pakistan-cautious-over-syria-divide>)

⁶⁷ Ibid.



Syria.”⁶⁸

Alawites, The Uprising and The Future

As has been noted above, that the conflict has increasingly assumed an image of a Sunni-Shi'a conflict to Syria's neighboring observers and to many rebels is undeniable. Among many Alawites in Syria, numerous reports have attested to a zero-sum mentality of 'kill or be killed.' For example, an article in *The Independent* in February quoted a middle-class Alawite living in Homs identified as one Wafaa Ahmad, who said, "If you are a killer, you have to be killed. It's you or me – what do I think? It's a case of existence: your life or my life. I'm not a killer, but I'm ready to be armed and kill if this will end what is happening."⁶⁹ In a similar vein, Abu Ahmed, an Alawite interviewed by *Reuters*, estimated that a third of Alawites from Homs had fled to the port city of Tartous in the northwest amid fears of ethnic cleansing.⁷⁰

Even for Alawites who have chosen to side with the opposition, there are clear concerns about a sectarian dynamic behind the conflict. Nir Rosen is one of the few reporters to have spent extensive time interacting with Alawites in Syria. For one of his reports for *al-Jazeera English*, Rosen interviewed Alawites who had joined the protests and were open critics of the Assad regime. One of these was an Alawite professor of political science from Homs, identified only as Ahmed. While making no secret of his criticisms of the Syrian government, he nonetheless indicated that he believes the opposition is dominated by Sunni Islamists: "Who leads the street? Mosque sheikhs without degrees. If the leaders were doctors and engineers, I would be very calm, but they are not."⁷¹

Meanwhile, Alawites who have joined the opposition have been subject to harassment from other Alawites. For instance, Dima, an Alawite student from Damascus, told Rosen that Alawite students and staff at Damascus University

⁶⁸ "UN condemns Syria, urges Assad to quit; Pak wants Syrian-led solution," *The Nation* (Pakistan), February 17, 2012 (<http://www.nation.com.pk/pakistan-news-newspaper-daily-english-online/international/17-Feb-2012/un-condemns-syria-urges-assad-to-quit-pak-wants-syrian-led-solution>)

⁶⁹ "Syrians flee their homes amid fears of ethnic cleansing," *The Independent*, February 18, 2012 (<http://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/middle-east/syrians-flee-their-homes-amid-fears-of-ethnic-cleansing-7079802.html>)

⁷⁰ Erika Solomon, "As Syrians flee Homs, sectarian faultlines deepen," *Reuters*, February 22, 2012 (<http://www.reuters.com/article/2012/02/22/us-syria-displaced-idUSTRE81L1JS20120222>)

⁷¹ Nir Rosen, "Syria's Alawites Stuck In The Middle," *Al-Jazeera English*, March 8, 2012 (<http://www.aljazeera.com/indepth/features/2012/03/201237101424192726.html/>)



attacked protestors in the medical faculty last November, singling out for assault an Alawite student protestor originally from Tartous.⁷²

Conversely, Alawites who have tried to join the opposition risk facing distrust if they make their identity openly known. Thus, Ali, a young Alawite banker in Damascus, told Rosen that he rarely told others about his Alawite identity for fear of being mistrusted, despite his eager efforts to demonstrate participation by Syria's minorities in protests.⁷³ He then took Rosen to meet Abu Hameed, a Sunni opposition leader in Barzeh, a northern suburb of Damascus. When asked whether Alawites were taking part in demonstrations in Barzeh, he declared: "There is no honorable Alawite in Syria. The Alawite sect hates every other sect...They [the protestors] would suspect he [a potential Alawite demonstrator] was a spy."⁷⁴

The evidence gathered by Rosen should not be neglected as isolated examples, but it is also important not to overplay the sectarian paradigm of analysis. If the regime did not command a significant degree of Sunni support from the outset and even now, it would not have been able to survive for so long. It has been widely noted that Assad has his supporters among the Sunni urban classes of Aleppo and Damascus, and in the former city, it is clear that even now, many of the residents do not welcome the rebels,⁷⁵ a large number of whom have come from rural areas.⁷⁶

In contrast, many Alawite residents in Homs, where, "after months of fighting, only the shabbiha-guarded Alawite enclaves like Zahra are relatively unscathed," have ambiguous feelings about the imposition of a protection tax on them by pro-regime militiamen, deeming their services necessary on the one hand while

⁷² Ibid.

⁷³ Ibid.

⁷⁴ Ibid.

⁷⁵ Erika Solomon, "Aleppo residents have mixed reactions to Syria rebels," *Reuters*, July 31, 2012 (<http://www.reuters.com/article/2012/07/31/us-syria-crisis-aleppo-scene-idUSBRE86U0BR20120731>). Cf. Aymenn Jawad Al-Tamimi, "Analyzing Aleppo," *American Spectator*, October 8, 2012 (<http://spectator.org/archives/2012/10/08/analyzing-aleppo>)

⁷⁶ Hadeel Al-Shalchi, "Aleppo fight a journey into unknown for rural rebels," *Reuters*, August 5, 2012 (<http://www.chicagotribune.com/news/sns-rt-us-syria-crisis-missionbre8740a8-20120805,0,4996811.story>). It should be noted that this report corroborates the 'periphery-to-center' analysis of the progress of the revolt very well. For further reading, see Aymenn Jawad Al-Tamimi and Oskar Svadkovsky, "Demography is Destiny in Syria," *The American Spectator*, February 6, 2012 (<http://www.meforum.org/3170/syria-demography>)



considering their demand for payment extortionist on the other.⁷⁷

Furthermore, one should not overstate the role that Alawites play in the security forces. Yes, the very best of the élite divisions—namely the Republican Guard and the Fourth Armored Division—are dominated by Alawites (also true of the highest echelons of government,) but the fact is that opposition propaganda has created a distorted picture of mass defections by Sunni rank-and-file soldiers and higher-rank officers,⁷⁸ and given the misleading impression that somehow the main security forces left defending the regime are Alawite or Christian.

Of course, the Sunni support base in both the armed forces and among residents across Syria has been eroding over time, but the pace of that erosion has too often been exaggerated. It is much slower than often supposed. In fact, it should also be noted that most of the country's air-force pilots are Sunni,⁷⁹ and it is likely that the recruitment base has been drawn from the middle-class Sunnis of Aleppo. Indeed, it is no coincidence that the air-force academy is located just outside Aleppo.⁸⁰

On a similar note, the characterization of *shabiha* militiamen as Alawites pumped on steroids is too much of a caricature. For example, the *GlobalPost* featured an interview back in June 2012 with an Alawite *shabiha* member identified only as Abu Jaafar, who was described as someone with “massive, tattooed muscles, shaved head, bushy black beard and trademark white trainers.”⁸¹ Oddly, this picture exactly resembles photos released by the *Daily Mail*,⁸² whose credibility was seriously thrown into doubt when *al-Bawaba* (hardly a pro-Assad

⁷⁷ “Fearful Alawites pay sectarian militias in battered Homs,” *Reuters*, September 25, 2012 (<http://www.reuters.com/article/2012/09/25/us-syria-shabbiha-extortion-idUSBRE8800QD20120925>)

⁷⁸ “Defections harry Syria regime, but core intact: Analysts,” *Agence-France Presse*, August 9, 2012 (<http://tribune.com.pk/story/419680/defections-harry-syria-regime-but-core-intact-analysts/>)

⁷⁹ See, for example, Rick Gladstone and Alan Cowell, “Syrian Pilot Granted Asylum in Jordan,” June 21, 2012 (http://www.nytimes.com/2012/06/22/world/middleeast/syrian-warplane-is-reported-missing.html?_r=0)

⁸⁰ Rick Francona, “Syrian astronaut defects- who knew?”, *Middle East Perspectives*, August 5, 2012 (<http://francona.blogspot.co.uk/2012/08/syrian-astronaut-defects-who-knew.html>)

⁸¹ Hugh Macleod and Annasofie Flamand, “Syria: Shabiha Militia Member Tells It Like It Is,” *GlobalPost*, June 15, 2012 (http://www.pbs.org/newshour/updates/world/jan-june12/syria_06-15.html)

⁸² Lee Moran, “Revealed: Syria’s steroid-mad ‘Ghost’ Killers who keep Assad in power by slaughtering women and children,” *Daily Mail*, June 11, 2012 (<http://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-2157518/Syria-massacre-The-steroid-mad-Ghost-killers-Assad-power.html>)



propaganda outlet) revealed that the guns in the photos were fakes.⁸³ On the other hand, the Aleppo Governorate has seen many Sunnis join the *shabiha* militias.⁸⁴

To round off, it is worth pondering the future of the Alawite community in Syria. There has been much speculation on whether Assad has in mind to try to create a new Alawite State around Latakia as a 'Plan B' in the event that his regime collapses.⁸⁵ Given Assad's dependence on a Sunni support base, there is insufficient evidence, pace the claims of Tony Badran, that the regime has been putting this plan into effect for months now.⁸⁶ The main problem with such an initiative is that it would lack international recognition and legitimacy. Turkey above all would almost certainly try to hinder any plans to create an independent Alawite enclave.

Moreover, any notion of an Alawite State would require substantial ethnic cleansing of the Sunni populations in Latakia and Tartous, and would cut off the rest of Syria from access to the sea. If some sort of central government succeeds Assad's regime, there is no reason to suppose it would tolerate either of these potential developments. What also would become of the Alawites—including Bashar al-Assad—who have chosen to intermarry with Sunnis?

One should not underestimate the pull of ideology. The repeated regime statements about 'crushing' the rebels are no rhetorical farce.⁸⁷ Rather, the

⁸³ "Toy guns and doctored videos: What's really going on in Syria?", *Al-Bawaba* (Jordan), June 13, 2012 (<http://www.todayheads.com/0world/0middle-east/toy-guns-and-doctored-videos-whats-really-going-on-in-syria/>)

⁸⁴ Aymenn Jawad Al-Tamimi and Oskar Svadkovsky, "Understanding the Situation in Syria," *The American Spectator*, 19 July, 2012 (<http://spectator.org/archives/2012/07/19/understanding-the-situation-in/>)

⁸⁵ See, for example, Loveday Morris, "Formation of a breakaway Alawite state may be Assad's 'Plan B' if he loses control of Syrian capital Damascus," *The Independent*, August 8, 2012 (<http://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/middle-east/formation-of-a-breakaway-alawite-state-may-be-assads-plan-b-if-he-loses-control-of-syrian-capital-damascus-8022469.html>)

⁸⁶ Tony Badran, "Alawistan," *Foreign Policy*, July 27, 2012 (<http://www.foreignpolicy.com/articles/2012/07/27/alawistan?page=0,0>). Badran's main problem is that he does not distinguish between the actions of forces under direct regime control and those of pro-regime Alawite irregulars, who may well have plans for an Alawite State and were the most likely perpetrators of the Houla Massacre. Thanks to Jonathan Spyer for bringing this point to my attention.

⁸⁷ See, for example, "Syria Vows To 'Crush' Rebels, Launches New Attacks," Associated Press, October 6, 2012 (<http://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=162416366>)



Syrian government really does appear to believe that it can reassert itself over the entire country.

One factor that could facilitate the formation of a *de facto* autonomous or independent Alawite entity is the existence of deep internal divisions and tensions within rebel factions.⁸⁸ However, such a rump state would not become an ally of Israel as Mordechai Nisan and others have hoped.⁸⁹ If anything, Alawites who back the regime have thoroughly bought into Arabist ideology that pins blame for the unrest on a Zionist and American conspiracy.⁹⁰ Therefore, it is reasonable to conclude that any Alawite State in the near future will depend on support from Iran. Indeed, Israeli hopes of a new minority alliance in the Levant remain ever elusive.

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⁸⁸ See, for example, Erika Solomon, "Insight- Syria rebels see future fight with foreign radicals," *Reuters*, August 8, 2012

(<http://uk.reuters.com/article/2012/08/08/uk-syria-crisis-insight-idUKBRE87701S20120808>), which notes that even native Syrian Islamist fighters envision future conflict with foreign *mujahideen* who have joined the fight against Assad. Cf. Tamimi and Svadkovsky, "Demography is Destiny in Syria."

⁸⁹ Aymenn Jawad Al-Tamimi and Phillip Smyth, "Can my enemy's enemy be my friend?," *Haaretz*, March 30, 2012 (<http://www.meforum.org/3201/israel-friend-enemy>)

⁹⁰ Nir Rosen, "Assad's Alawite: An entrenched community," *Al-Jazeera English*, October 12, 2011

(<http://www.aljazeera.com/indepth/features/2011/10/20111011154631737692.html>). See also his report in the *London Review of Books* of September 27, 2012, where he notes the devotion among active pro-regime Alawites to the "old Ba'athist ideals of Syrian and Arab nationalism": <http://www.lrb.co.uk/v34/n18/nir-rosen/among-the-alawites>