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Author(s): Daniel Pipes

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The Alawi Capture of Power in Syria

Daniel Pipes

For many centuries, the Alawis were the weakest, poorest, most rural, most despised and most backward people of Syria. In recent years, however, they have transformed themselves into the ruling elite of Damascus. Today, Alawis dominate the government, hold key military positions, enjoy a disproportionate share of the educational resources, and are becoming wealthy. How did this dramatic change occur? When did the Alawis manage to escape their traditional confines, and what was the mechanism of their rise?

Sunnis and others unsympathetic to the regime of Hafiz al-Asad answer this question by accusing the Alawis of an elaborate and long-term conspiracy to take power in Syria. Annie Laurent suggests that 'determined to get their revenge' after the failure of a rebel leader, Sulayman Murshid, 'the Alawis put into effect a strategy of setting up cells in the army and the Ba'th Party, and this won them power in Damascus'.¹ Adherents of this view date the Alawi ascent to 1959, the year that the Military Committee of the Ba'th Party was formed. Why, they ask, did leaders of this group keep its existence secret from the party authorities? This furtiveness suggests that the Military Committee from the beginning had a sectarian agenda. Matti Moosa argued that 'it is almost certain that the officers were acting not as Baathists, but as Nusayris [Alawis], with the intent of using the Baath and the armed forces to rise to power in Syria. The formation of the military committee was the beginning of their plan for a future takeover of the government'.²

This speculation is confirmed by the 1960 clandestine meeting of Alawi religious leaders and officers (including Asad) that reportedly took place in Qardaha, Asad's home town. 'The main goal of this meeting was to plan how to forward the Nusayri officers into the ranks of the Ba'th Party. They would then exploit it as a means to arrive at the rule in Syria'.³ Three years later, another Alawi meeting in Homs is said to have followed up the earlier initiatives. Among other steps, it called for the placement of more Alawis in the Ba'th Party and army. Further secret meetings of Alawi leaders appear to have taken place later in the 1960s.⁴

Analysts better disposed to Asad tend to discount not just these meetings and a premeditated drive for power, but the sectarian factor more generally. John F. Devlin, for example, denies that the disproportion of Alawis in the army implies Alawi dominance of Syria. He would resist seeing 'every domestic disagreement in terms of a Sunni-Alawi clash'. For him, the fact that Alawis are in power is basically accidental: 'The Ba'th is

a secular party, and it is heavy with minorities'.⁵ Alasdair Drysdale calls it 'reductionist' to focus on ethnicity, arguing that this is one of many factors – geography, class, age, education, occupation – that define the ruling elite.⁶ According to Yahya M. Sadowski, 'sectarian loyalties play an insignificant role in the Ba'th, and even confessional bonds are only one among many avenues by which patronage is extended'.⁷

The truth lies between conspiracy and accident. The Alawis did not 'plan for a future takeover' years in advance, nor was it mere chance that the Ba'th Party was 'heavy with minorities'. Alawi power resulted from an unplanned but sectarian transformation of public life in Syria. Michael van Dusen explains: 'From 1946 to 1963, Syria witnessed the gradual erosion of the national and eventually subnational political power of the traditional elite, not so much through the emergence of new and especially dynamic elites but rather by internal conflict'.⁸ Translated from the jargon of political science, van Dusen is saying that internal divisions caused non-Ba'th civilian Sunnis to lose power. This provided an opening that Ba'thist officers of Alawi origins exploited.

How these processes occurred is my subject here. First, however, some background on the Alawis and their place in traditional Syrian society, followed by a sketch of their ascent.

THE ALAWI HERESY TO 1920

People and Faith

'Alawi' is the term that Alawis (also called Alawites) usually apply to themselves; but until 1920 they were known to the outside world as Nusayris or Ansaris. The change in name – imposed by the French upon their seizure of control in Syria – has significance. Whereas 'Nusayri' emphasizes the group's differences from Islam, 'Alawi' suggests an adherent of Ali (the son-in-law of the Prophet Muhammad) and accentuates the religion's similarities to Shi'i Islam.⁹ Consequently, opponents of the Asad regime habitually use the former term, supporters of the regime use the latter.

Alawis today number approximately 1.3 million, of whom about a million live in Syria. They constitute some 12 per cent of the Syrian population. Three-quarters of the Syrian Alawis live in Latakia, a province in the north-west of Syria, where they make up almost two-thirds of the population.

Alawi doctrines date from the ninth century and derive from the Twelver or Imami branch of Shi'i Islam (the sect that predominates in Iran). In about 859, one Ibn Nusayr declared himself the *bab* ('gateway to truth'), a key figure in Shi'i theology. On the basis of this authority, Ibn Nusayr proclaimed a host of new doctrines¹⁰ which, to cut a long story short, make Alawism into a separate religion. According to Ibn Kathir (d. 1372), where

Muslims proclaim their faith with the phrase: 'There is no deity but God and Muhammad is His prophet', Alawis assert 'There is no deity but Ali, no veil but Muhammad, and no *bab* but Salman'.¹¹ Alawis reject Islam's main tenets; by almost any standard they must be considered non-Muslims.

Some Alawi doctrines appear to derive from Phoenician paganism, Mazdakism and Manichism. But by far the greatest affinity is with Christianity. Alawi religious ceremonies involve bread and wine; indeed, wine drinking has a sacred role in Alawism, for it represents God.¹² The religion holds Ali, the fourth caliph, to be the (Jesus-like) incarnation of divinity.¹³ It has a holy trinity, consisting of Muhammad, Ali, and Salman al-Farisi, a freed slave of Muhammad's. Alawis celebrate many Christian festivals, including Christmas, New Year's Day on 1 January, Epiphany, Easter, Pentecost and Palm Sunday. They honor many Christian saints: St. Catherine, St. Barbara, St. George, St. John the Baptist, St. John Chrysostom, and St. Mary Magdalene. The Arabic equivalents of such Christian personal names as Gabriel, John, Matthew, Catherine and Helen are in common use. And, Alawis tend to show more friendliness to Christians than to Muslims.

For these reasons, many observers – missionaries especially – have suspected the Alawis of a secret Christian proclivity. Even T. E. Lawrence described them as 'those disciples of a cult of fertility, sheer pagan, anti-foreign, distrustful of Islam, drawn at moments to Christianity by common persecution'.¹⁴ The Jesuit scholar Henri Lammens unequivocally concluded from his research that 'the Nusayris were Christians' and their practices combine Christian with Shi'i elements.¹⁵

The specifics of the Alawi faith are hidden not just from outsiders but even from the majority of the Alawis themselves. In contrast to Islam, which is premised on direct relations between God and the individual believer, Alawism permits only males born of two Alawi parents to learn the religious doctrines. When deemed trustworthy, these are initiated into some of the rites at 16 to 20 years of age; other mysteries are revealed later and only gradually. Religious secrecy is strictly maintained, on pain of death and being incarnated into a vile animal. Whether the latter threat is made good, mortals cannot judge; but the first certainly is. Thus, the most renowned apostate from Alawism, Sulayman Efendi al-Adhani, was assassinated for divulging the sect's mysteries. Even more impressive, at a time of sectarian tension in the mid-1960s, the suggestion that the Alawi officers who ran the country publish the secret books of their religion caused Salah Jadid to respond with horror, saying that, were this done, the religious leaders 'would crush us'.¹⁶

Women do most of the hard labor; they are prized 'precisely because of the work they do that men will not do except grudgingly, finding it incompatible with their dignity'.¹⁷ Women are never inducted into the mysteries ('Would you have us teach them whom we use, our holy faith?');¹⁸

indeed, their uncleanness requires their exclusion from all religious rituals. Females are thought to retain the pagan cult of worshipping trees, meadows and hills, and to have no souls.¹⁹ In all, females are treated abominably; but one consequence of this disrespect is that they need not be veiled and enjoy greater freedom of movement than Muslim women.

Unveiled women and several other Alawi practices – in particular, permitting wine drinking, and holding some ceremonies at night – long excited Muslim suspicions about Alawi behavior. Then too, the obsessive secrecy inherent to the religion suggested to many Sunnis that the Alawis had something to hide. But what? Over the centuries, the Sunnis' imaginations supplied a highly evocative answer: sexual abandon and perversion.

Thus, the theologian al-Ash'ari (874–936) held that Alawism encourages male sodomy and incestuous marriages, and the founder of the Druze religious doctrine, Hamza ibn Ali (d. 1021), wrote that Alawis consider 'the male member entering the female nature to be the emblem of their spiritual doctrine'.²⁰ Accordingly, Alawi men freely share their wives with co-religionists. These and other accusations survived undiminished through the centuries and even circulated among Europeans.²¹ A British traveler of the early 1840s, who was probably repeating local rumors, wrote that 'the institution of marriage is unknown. When a young man grows up he buys his wife'.²² Even Alawis believed in the 'conjugal communism' of their religious leaders.²³ Such calumnies remain a mainstay of the anti-Alawi propaganda circulating in Syria today.

Although the charges are false, Alawis do reject Islam's sacred law, the Shari'a, and therefore indulge in all manner of activities that Islamic doctrine strictly forbids. Alawis ignore Islamic sanitary practices, dietary restrictions, sexual mores and religious rituals. Likewise, they pay little attention to the fasting, almsgiving, and pilgrimage ceremonies of Islam; indeed, they consider the pilgrimage to Mecca a form of idol worship. 'Spiritual marriages' between young (male) initiates and their religious mentors probably lie at the root of charges of homosexuality.

Most striking of all, Alawis have no prayers or places of worship; indeed, they have no religious structures other than tomb shrines. Prayers take place in private houses, usually those of religious leaders. The fourteenth-century traveler Ibn Battuta described how they responded to a government decree ordering the construction of mosques: 'Every village built a mosque far from their houses, which the villagers neither enter nor maintain. They often shelter cattle and asses in it. Often a stranger arrives and goes to the mosque to recite the [Islamic] call to prayer; then they yell to him, "Stop braying, your fodder is coming"'.²⁴ Five centuries later another attempt was made to build mosques for the Alawis, this time by the Ottoman authorities; despite official pressure, these were deserted, abandoned even by the religious functionaries, and once again used as barns.

Beyond specific divergences, non-conformity to the Shari'a means that

Alawi life follows its own rhythms, fundamentally unlike those of other Muslims. Alawis do not act like Sunni Muslims; rather, they resemble Christians and Jews in pursuing a wholly distinct way of life. Moosa notes that, 'like the other extremist Shi'ites . . . the Nusayris had total disregard for Muslim religious duties'.²⁵ Ignaz Goldziher puts it succinctly: 'This religion is Islam only in appearance'.²⁶ It is important to make this point very clear: Alawis have never been, and are not now, Muslims.

Yet, as Ibn Battuta's account suggests, there is a permanent inconsistency in the Alawi wish to be seen as Muslim. In his case, it was mosques built and then neglected; at other times it is some other half-hearted adoption of Islamic ways. Alawis have a long history of claiming Islam when this suits their needs and ignoring it at other times. In short, like other sects of Shi'i origins, Alawis practice *taqiya* (religious dissimulation). This might mean, for example, praying side by side with Sunni Muslims but silently cursing the Sunni caliphs. The apostate Alawi, Sulayman Efendi al-Adhani, recounted having been sworn to dissimulate about his religion's mysteries.²⁷ An Alawi saying explains the sentiment behind *taqiya*: 'We are the body and other sects are but clothing. However a man dresses does not change him. So we remain always Nusayris, even though we externally adopt the practices of our neighbors. Whoever does not dissimulate is a fool, for no intelligent person goes naked in the market'.²⁸ Another Alawi phrase expresses this sentiment succinctly: 'Dissimulation is our righteous war!' (*al-kitman jihadna*).²⁹

A British traveler observed in 1697 that the Alawis are:

of a strange and singular character. For 'tis their principle to adhere to no certain religion; but camelion-like, they put on the colour of religion, whatever it be, which is reflected upon them from the persons with whom they happen to converse. . . . No body was ever able to discover what shape or standard their consciences are really of. All that is certain concerning them is, that they make much and good wine, and are great drinkers.³⁰

A hundred and fifty years later, Benjamin Disraeli described the Alawis in a conversation in the novel *Tancred*:

Are they Moslemin?

It is very easy to say what they are not, and that is about the extent of any knowledge we have of them; they are not Moslemin, they are not Christian, they are not Druzes, and they are not Jews, and certainly they are not Guebres [Zoroastrians].³¹

Al-Adhani explained this flexibility from within:

They take on the outward practices of all sects. If they meet [Sunni] Muslims, they swear to them and say, 'We are like you, we fast and we

pray'. But they fast improperly. If they enter a mosque with Muslims, they do not recite any of the prayers; instead, they lower and raise their bodies like Muslims, while cursing Abu Bakr, Umar, Uthman, and other [major figures of the Sunni tradition].³²

Taqiya permitted Alawis to blow with the wind. When France ruled, they portrayed themselves as lost Christians. When Pan-Arabism was in favor, they became fervent Arabs.³³ Over 10,000 Alawis living in Damascus pretended to be Sunnis in the years before Asad came to power, only revealing their true identities when this became politically useful.³⁴ During Asad's presidency, concerted efforts were made to portray the Alawis as Twelver Shi'is.

Relations with Sunnis

Mainstream Muslims, Sunni and Shi'i alike, traditionally disregarded Alawi efforts at dissimulation; they viewed Alawis as beyond the pale of Islam – as non-Muslims. Hamza ibn Ali, who saw the religion's appeal lying in its perversity, articulated this view: 'The first thing that promotes the wicked Nusayri is the fact that all things normally prohibited to humans – murder, stealing, lying, calumny, fornication, pederasty – is permitted to he or she who accepts [Alawi doctrines]'.³⁵ Abu Hamid al-Ghazali (1058–1111), the Thomas Aquinas of Islam, wrote that the Alawis 'apostatize in matters of blood, money, marriage, and butchering, so it is a duty to kill them'.³⁶

Ahmad ibn Taymiya (1268–1328), the still highly influential Sunni writer of Syrian origins, wrote in a *fatwa* (religious decision) that 'the Nusayris are more infidel than Jews or Christians, even more infidel than many polytheists. They have done greater harm to the community of Muhammad than have the warring infidels such as the Franks, the Turks, and others. To ignorant Muslims they pretend to be Shi'is, though in reality they do not believe in God or His prophet or His book'. Ibn Taymiya warned of the mischief their enmity can do: 'Whenever possible, they spill the blood of Muslims . . . They are always the worst enemies of the Muslims'. In conclusion, he argued that 'war and punishment in accordance with Islamic law against them are among the greatest of pious deeds and the most important obligations' for a Muslim.³⁷ From the fourteenth century on, Sunnis used the term 'Nusayri' to mean pariah.

Alawis had had no recognized position in the *millet* (sectarian) system of the Ottoman Empire. An Ottoman decree from 1571 notes that ancient custom required Alawis to pay extra taxes to the authorities and justified this on the grounds that Alawis 'neither practice the fast [of Ramadan] nor the ritual prayers, nor do they observe any precepts of the Islamic religion'.³⁸ Sunnis often saw food produced by Alawis as unclean, and did not eat it. According to Jacques Weulersse, 'no Alawi would dare enter a

Muslim mosque. Formerly, not one of their religious leaders was able to go to town on the day of public prayer [Friday] without risk of being stoned. Any public demonstration of the community's separate identity was taken as a challenge [by the Sunnis]'.³⁹

Sunnis were not alone in reading Alawis out of Islam – mainstream Shi'is did likewise. And Alawis in turn saw both groups as deficient.

Sunni heresiographers excoriated Alawi beliefs and viewed the Alawis as disbelievers (*kuffar*) and idolators (*mushrikun*). Twelver Shi'i heresiographers were only slightly less vituperative and regarded the Alawis as *ghulat*, 'those who exceed' all bounds in their deification of Ali. The Alawis, in turn, held Twelver Shi'is to be *muqassira*, 'those who fall short' of fathoming Ali's divinity.⁴⁰

There was one exception to this consensus that Alawis are not Muslims. Toward the end of the nineteenth century, as Christian missionaries began taking an interest in the Alawis, Ottoman authorities tried to bring them into Islam. The French already had special ties to their fellow Catholics, the Maronites, and the authorities in Istanbul feared a similar bond being created with the Alawis. So they built mosques in the Alawi areas, schools to teach Islam, pressed Alawi religious leaders to adopt Sunni practices, and generally tried to make the Alawis act like proper Muslims. This isolated case of Sunnis reaching out to Alawis came to an end after a few decades and had very little impact on Alawi behavior.

The Islamic religion reserves a special hostility for Alawis. Like other post-Islamic sects (such as the Baha'is and Ahmadis), they are seen to contradict the key Islamic tenet that God's last revelation went to Muhammad, and this Muslims find utterly unacceptable. Islamic law acknowledges the legitimacy of Judaism and Christianity because those religions preceded Islam; accordingly, Jews and Christians may maintain their faiths. But Alawis are denied this privilege. Indeed, the precepts of Islam call for apostates like the Alawis to be sold into slavery or executed. In the nineteenth century, a Sunni shaykh, Ibrahim al-Maghribi, issued a *fatwa* to the effect that Muslims may freely take Alawi property and lives; and a British traveler records being told, 'these Ansayrii, it is better to kill one than to pray a whole day'.⁴¹

Frequently persecuted – some 20,000 were massacred in 1317 and half that number in 1516⁴² – the Alawis insulated themselves geographically from the outside world by staying within their own rural regions. Jacques Weulersse explained their predicament:

Defeated and persecuted, the heterodox sects disappeared or, to survive, renounced proselytism. . . . The Alawis silently entrenched themselves in their mountains. . . . Isolated in rough country, surrounded by a hostile population, henceforth without communications with the outside world, the Alawis began to live out their solitary

existence in secrecy and repression. Their doctrine, entirely formed, evolved no further.⁴³

E. Janot described the problem: 'Bullied by the Turks, victim of a determined ostracism, fleeced by his Muslim landlord, the Alawi hardly dared leave his mountain region, where isolation and poverty itself protected him'.⁴⁴ In the late 1920s, less than half of one per cent lived in towns: just 771 Alawis out of a population of 176,285.⁴⁵ In 1945, just 56 Alawis were recorded living in Damascus⁴⁶ (though many others may have been hiding their identity). For good reason, 'the name Nusayri became synonymous with peasant'.⁴⁷ The few Alawis who did live away from their mountain routinely practiced *taqiya*. Even today, Alawis dominate the rural areas of Latakia but make up only 11 per cent of the residents in that region's capital city.

Centuries of hostility took their toll on the Alawi psyche. In addition to praying for the damnation of their Sunni enemies, Alawis attacked outsiders. They acquired a reputation as fierce and unruly mountain people who resisted paying the taxes they owed the authorities and frequently plundered Sunni villagers on the plains. John Lewis Burckhardt observed in 1812 that those villagers 'hold the Anzeyrys [Ansaris] in contempt for their religion, and fear them, because they often descend from the mountains in the night, cross the Aaszy ['Asi, or Orontes River], and steal, or carry off by force, the cattle of the valley'.⁴⁸

Matters seemed to be even worse in 1860 when Samuel Lyde added that 'nothing is thought of thus killing a Mussulman as a natural enemy, or a Christian as an unclean thing'.⁴⁹ Writing about the same time, a British travel-guide writer warned of the cool reception to be expected from the Alawis: 'They are a wild and somewhat savage race, given to plunder, and even bloodshed, when their passions are excited or suspicion roused'. With wonderful understatement, the guide author concluded, 'their country must therefore be traversed with caution'.⁵⁰

Alawis retreated to the mountains because of persecution; they then remained there, shielded from the world at large, lacking political power beyond their region's confines, isolated from the larger polities around them, almost outside the bounds of historical change. The survival well into the twentieth century of archaic practices made the Alawi region, according to Weulersse, a 'fossile country'. Little changed in that country because 'it is not the Mountain that is humanized; man, rather, is made savage'. Alawis suffered as a result: 'the refuge they had conquered became a prison; though masters of the Mountain they could not leave'.⁵¹

Governments had difficulty subduing the Alawi territory; indeed, it only came under Ottoman control in the late 1850s. Pacification of the region then led to Sunni economic inroads and the formation of an Alawi underclass. As badly educated peasants lacking in political organization or

military strength, Alawis typically worked farms belonging to Sunni Arab landlords, receiving but a fifth of the produce. Ottoman agents would often exact double or triple the taxes due in the Latakia region.

Alawis were so badly off after the First World War that many of the youth left their homeland to work elsewhere. Sons left to find menial labor or to join the armed forces. Daughters went off at the age of seven or eight years to work as domestics for urban Sunni Arabs. Because many of them also ended up as concubines (one estimate holds that a quarter of all Alawi children in the 1930s and 1940s had Sunni fathers),⁵² both Muslims and Alawis saw this practice as deeply shameful. Some daughters were even sold. It is no exaggeration to say, as one indigenous historian does, that Alawis 'were among the poorest of the East'.⁵³ The Reverend Samuel Lyde went even further, writing in 1860 that 'the state of [Alawi] society is a perfect hell upon earth'.⁵⁴

The political effects of poverty were exacerbated by the nature of these divisions, which followed geographic and communal lines. Sunnis who lived in the towns enjoyed a much greater wealth and dominated the Alawi peasants. Weulersse described in 1934 how each community 'lives apart with its own customs and its own laws. Not only are they different but they are hostile . . . the idea of mixed marriages appears to be inconceivable'.⁵⁵ In 1946, he added that 'the antagonism between urban and rural people goes so deep that one can almost speak of two different populations co-existing within one political framework'.⁵⁶ A generation later, Nikolaos van Dam observed, 'Urban-rural contrasts were sometimes so great that the cities seemed like settlements of aliens who sponged on the poverty-stricken rural population. . . . In the course of time, the Alawi community developed a strong distrust of the Sunnis who had so often been their oppressors.'⁵⁷ This Alawi resentment of Sunnis has proved enormously consequential in recent years.

THE RISE OF THE ALAWIS, 1920–70

The Alawis' ascent took place over the course of half a century. In 1920, they were still the lowly minority just described; by 1970, they firmly ruled Syria. This stunning transformation took place in three stages: the French mandate (1920–46), the period of Sunni dominance (1946–63), and the era of Alawi consolidation (1963–70).

The French Mandate, 1920–46

According to Yusuf al-Hakim, a prominent Syrian politician, the Alawis adopted a pro-French attitude even before the French conquest of Damascus in July 1920. 'The Alawis saw themselves in a state of grace after hell; accordingly, they were dedicated to the French mandate and

did not send a delegation to the [General] Syrian Congress'.⁵⁸ So intensely did they oppose Prince Faysal, the Sunni Arab ruler of Syria in 1918–20 whom they suspected of wanting to dominate them, that they launched a rebellion against his rule in 1919, using French arms. According to one well-informed observer, the Alawis cursed Islam and prayed 'for the destruction of the Ottoman Empire'.⁵⁹ General Gouraud received a telegram in late 1919 from 73 Alawi chiefs representing different tribes, who asked for 'the establishment of an independent Nusayri union under our absolute protection'.⁶⁰

Two years later the Alawis rebelled against French rule under the leadership of Salih al-Ali, an event that the Asad government proudly points to as an anti-imperialist credential. But a close look⁶¹ suggests that the revolt had more to do with the fact that the Isma'ilis had sided with France and, given the state of Isma'ili-Alawi relations, this led to hostilities between the Alawis and the French. As soon as the French authorities granted autonomy to the Alawis, they won Alawi support.

Indeed, the establishment of French rule after the First World War benefited the Alawis more than any other community. French efforts to co-operate with the minorities meant that Alawis gained political autonomy and escaped Sunni control; the state of Latakia was set up on 1 July 1922. They also gained legal autonomy; a 1922 decision to end Sunni control of court cases involving Alawis transferred these cases to Alawi jurists.⁶² The Alawi state enjoyed low taxation and a sizeable French subsidy. Not surprisingly, Alawis accepted all these changes with enthusiasm. As an anti-Alawi historian later put it, 'At the time when resistance movements were mounted against the French mandate, when Damascus, Aleppo, and the Hawran witnessed continuous rebellions on behalf of Syrian unity and independence, the Nusayris were blessing the division of the country into tiny statelets'.⁶³

In return, Alawis helped maintain French rule. They turned out in large numbers when most Syrians boycotted the French-sponsored elections of January 1926.⁶⁴ They provided a disproportionate number of soldiers to the government, forming about half of the eight infantry battalions making up the *Troupes Spéciales du Levant*,⁶⁵ serving as police, and supplying intelligence. As late as May 1945, the vast majority of *Troupes Spéciales* remained loyal to their French commanders. Alawis broke up Sunni demonstrations, shut down strikes, and quelled rebellions. Alawis publicly favored the continuation of French rule, fearing that France's departure would lead to a reassertion of Sunni control over them. Henri de Jouvenel, the French High Commissioner for Syria (1925–27), quoted a leading Alawi politician telling him: 'We have succeeded in making more progress in three or four years than we had in three or four centuries. Leave us therefore in our present situation'.⁶⁶

Pro-French sentiment was expressed especially clearly in 1936, when

the temporary incorporation of the Alawi state into Syria provoked wide protests. A March 1936 petition referred to union with the Sunnis as 'slavery'.⁶⁷ On 11 June 1936, an Alawi leader wrote a letter to Prime Minister Léon Blum of France, reminding him of 'the profoundness of the abyss that separates us from the [Sunni] Syrians', and asking him to 'imagine the disastrous catastrophe that would follow' incorporation.⁶⁸

Days later, six Alawi notables (including Sulayman Asad, Hafiz al-Asad's grandfather)⁶⁹ sent another letter to Blum in which they made several points: Alawis differ from Sunnis religiously and historically; Alawis refuse to be joined to Syria, for it is a Sunni state and Sunnis consider them unbelievers (*kafirs*); ending the mandate would expose the Alawis to mortal danger; 'the spirit of religious feudalism' makes the country unfit for self-rule; therefore, France should secure the Alawis' freedom and independence by staying in Syria.⁷⁰

An Alawi note to the French government in July 1936 asked: 'Are the French today ignorant that the Crusades would have succeeded if their fortresses had been in northeast Syria, in the Land of the Nusayris? . . . We are the people most faithful to France'.⁷¹ Even more strongly worded was a petition of September 1936, signed by 450,000 Alawis, Christians and Druzes, which read:

The Alawis believe that they are humans, not beasts ready for slaughter. No power in the world can force them to accept the yoke of their traditional and hereditary enemies to be slaves forever. . . . The Alawis would profoundly regret the loss of their friendship and loyal attachment to noble France, which has until now been so loved, admired, and adored by them.⁷²

Although Latakia lost its autonomous status in December 1936, the province continued to benefit from a 'special administrative and financial regime'.⁷³

Alawi resistance to Sunni rule took a new turn in 1939 with the launching of an armed rebellion led by Sulayman al-Murshid, the 'half-sinister, half-ludicrous figure of the obese, illiterate, miracle-working "god"'.⁷⁴ Murshid, a bandit who proclaimed himself divine, challenged Sunni rule with French weapons and some 5,000 Alawi followers. In the words of a 1944 British consular report: 'The local Alaouite leaders, whose conception of the new order in Syria is a Nationalist Government who will treat them after the fashion of the French, upholding their authority and condoning their excesses, are doing their best to combine, and the movement appears to be supported by the French'.⁷⁵ Murshid succeeded in keeping Damascus' authority out of Alawi territories.

Right up to independence, Alawi leaders continued to submit petitions to the French in favor of continued French patronage. For example, a manifesto signed by 12 leaders in March 1945 called for all Alawi soldiers

to remain under French command and for French arbitration of disputes between the Alawi government and Damascus.⁷⁶

Sunni Dominance, 1946–63

It was the Sunnis, especially the urban Sunni elite, who inherited the government when the French mandate ended in 1946. Even after independence, Alawis continued to resist submission to the central government. Sulayman al-Murshid led a second revolt in 1946, ending in his execution. A third unsuccessful uprising, led by Murshid's son, took place in 1952. The failure of these efforts led Alawis to look into the possibility of attaching Latakia to Lebanon or Transjordan – anything to avoid absorption into Syria. These acts of resistance further tarnished the Alawis' already poor reputation among Sunnis.

When they came to power, the Sunni rulers in Damascus spared no effort to integrate Latakia into Syria (in part because this region offered the only access to the sea). Overcoming armed resistance, they abolished the Alawi state, Alawi military units, Alawi seats in Parliament, and courts applying Alawi laws of personal status. These measures had some success; Alawis became reconciled to Syrian citizenship after the crushing of a Druze revolt in 1954 and henceforth gave up the dream of a separate state. This change of outlook, which seemed to be a matter of relatively minor importance at the time, in fact ushered in a new era of Syrian political life: the political ascent of the Alawis.

Once they recognized that their future lay within Syria, the Alawis began a rapid rise to power. Two key institutions, the armed forces and the Ba'ath Party, had special importance in their transformation. Even though the special circumstances which had brought them into the military lapsed with the French departure, Alawis and other minorities continued after independence to be over-represented in the army. Old soldiers remained in service and new ones kept coming in. Given the Sunni attitude toward Alawis, the persistence of large numbers of Alawis in the armed forces is surprising. This anomaly resulted from several factors. First, the military retained its reputation as a place for the minorities. Patrick Seale observed that Sunni landed families, 'being predominantly of nationalist sentiment, despised the army as a profession: to join it between the wars was to serve the French. Homs [Military Academy] to them was a place for the lazy, the rebellious, the academically backward, or the socially undistinguished'.⁷⁷ For the non-Sunnis, however, Homs was a place of opportunity for the ambitious and talented.

Second, the Sunni rulers virtually ignored the army as a tool of state; fearing its power in domestic politics, they begrudged it funds, kept it small, and rendered military careers unattractive. Third, the dire economic predicament of the Alawis and other rural peoples meant that they could

not pay the fee to exempt their children from military service. More positively, those children saw military service as a means to make a decent living.

Accordingly, although the proportion of Alawis entering the Homs Military Academy declined after 1946, Alawis remained over-represented in the officer corps. A report from 1949 stated that 'persons originating from the minorities' commanded 'all units of any importance' in the Syrian military.⁷⁸ (This did not mean just Alawis; for example, the bodyguard of President Husni az-Za'im in 1949 was entirely Circassian.) Alawis formed a plurality among the soldiers and some two-thirds of the non-commissioned officers.

Sunni leaders apparently believed that reserving the top positions for themselves would suffice to control the military forces. Accordingly, minorities filled the lower ranks and for some years found it difficult to rise above the company level. Ironically, this discrimination actually served them well; as senior officers engaged in innumerable military *coups d'état* between 1949 and 1963, each change of government was accompanied by ruinous power struggles among the Sunnis, leading to resignations and the depletion of Sunni ranks. Wags claimed, with some justice, that there were more officers outside the Syrian army than inside it. Standing apart from these conflicts, the non-Sunnis, and Alawis especially, benefited from the repeated purges.⁷⁹ As Sunni officers eliminated each other, Alawis inherited their positions. With time, Alawis became increasingly senior; and, as one Alawi rose through the ranks, he brought his kinsmen along.

Purges and counter-purges during the 1946–63 period bred a deep mistrust between the officers. Never knowing who might be plotting against whom, superior officers frequently bypassed the normal hierarchy of command in favor of kinship bonds. As fear of betrayal came to dominate relations between military men, having reliable ethnic ties gave minority officers great advantage. In circumstances of almost universal suspicion, those officers within reliable networks could act far more effectively than those without. Sunnis entered the military as individuals, while Alawis entered as members of a sect; the latter, therefore, prospered. Alawi ethnic solidarity offered a far more enduring basis of co-operation than the shifting alliances formed by Sunni officers.

In addition to the military, Alawis also acquired power through the Ba'th Party. From its earliest years, the Ba'th held special attraction for Syrians of rural and minority backgrounds, including the Alawis, who joined in disproportionately large numbers (especially at the Ba'th Party's Latakia branch). Rural migrants who went to Damascus for educational purposes constituted a majority of the membership in the Ba'th Party. They tended to be students of lower middle-class origins, the sons of ex-peasants newly arrived in the towns. In Aleppo, for example, the Ba'th claimed as members as many as three-quarters of the high school students in some schools. One

of the founders of the party was an Alawi, Zaki al-Arsuzi, and he brought along many of his (rural) coreligionists to the Ba'th.

In particular, two doctrines appealed to the Alawis: socialism and secularism. Socialism offered economic opportunities to the country's poorest community. (The Ba'th's socialism was unclear, however, until the 1960s; only when the minorities took over did this feature become prominent.) Secularism – the withdrawal of religion from public life – offered the promise of less prejudice to a despised minority. What could be more attractive to members of a downtrodden religious community than a combination of these two ideologies? Indeed, these aspects drew Alawis (and other poor rural minorities) to the Ba'th more than its Pan-Arab nationalism.

The only rival to the Ba'th was the Syrian Social Nationalist Party (SSNP), which offered roughly the same attractions. The two competed rather evenly for a decade, until the Ba'th eliminated the SSNP through the Maliki affair in 1955. From then on, especially in Syria, Alawis were associated predominantly with the Ba'th.⁸⁰

Alawi Consolidation, 1963–70

Three changes in the regime marked the Alawi consolidation of power: the Ba'th *coup d'état* of March 1963, the Alawi coup of February 1966, and the Asad coup of November 1970. The Alawis had a major role in the coup of 8 March 1963 and took many of the key government positions in the Ba'th regime that followed. Between 1963 and 1966, sectarian battles pitting minorities against Sunnis took place within the military and the Ba'th Party.

First the military: to resist President Amin al-Hafiz, a Sunni, and to consolidate their new position, Alawi leaders flooded the military with cosectarians. In this way, minority officers came to dominate the Syrian military establishment. When 700 vacancies opened in the army soon after the March 1963 coup, Alawis filled half the positions. So restricted were Sunnis that some graduating cadets were denied their commissions to the officer corps. While Alawis, Druze, and Isma'ilis held politically sensitive positions in the Damascus region, Sunnis were sent to regions distant from the capital. Although communal affiliation did not drive every alliance,⁸¹ it provided the basis for most enduring relationships. Alawi leaders such as Muhammad 'Umran built key units of members from their own religious community. Sunni officers often became figureheads, holding high positions but disposing of little power. In retaliation, Hafiz came to see nearly every Alawi as an enemy and pursued blatant sectarian policies, for example, excluding Alawis from some positions solely on the basis of communal affiliation.

Even Alawi officers who resisted confessionalism eventually succumbed

to it. Political events solidified ties between Alawis, reducing the tribal, social, and sectarian differences that historically had split them. Itamar Rabinovich, a leading student of this period, explains how confessionalism acquired a dynamic of its own:

J'did [Salah Jadid, ruler of Syria 1966–70] was among those who (for political reasons) denounced 'Umran for promoting "sectarianism" (*ta'ifiyya*) but ironically he inherited the support of many 'Alawi officers who had been advanced by 'Umran. . . . The 'Alawi officers promoted by 'Umran realized that their overrepresentation in the upper echelons of the army was resented by the majority, and they seem to have rallied around J'did, by then the most prominent 'Alawi officer in the Syrian army and the person deemed most likely to preserve their high but precarious position. It was also quite natural for [Amin al-] Hafiz . . . to try to gather Sunni officers around himself by accusing J'did of engaging in "sectarian" politics. . . . The solidarity of [Jadid's] 'Alawi supporters seems to have been further cemented by the feeling that the issue had assumed a confessional character and that their collective and personal positions were at stake.⁸²

The same factors caused Druze officers – also over-represented in high military offices – to throw in their lot with the Alawis in 1965.

A similar dynamic move occurred in the Ba'th Party. Just as Alawis filled more than half of 700 military vacancies, so they moved in numbers into the party. To make their recruitment possible, ideological requirements for admission were relaxed for two years after March 1963. Many party officials brought in members of their family, tribe, village or sect. As an internal Ba'th Party document of 1966 explained the problem, 'friendship, family relationship and sometimes mere personal acquaintance were the basis' of admission to the party, leading 'to the infiltration of elements alien to the party's logic and points of departure'.⁸³ While Alawis brought in other Alawis, many Sunnis were purged. Membership quintupled in the year after the Ba'th Party's accession to power, transforming the party from an ideological to a sectarian affiliation. The Ba'th became an entirely different institution during its first two and half years in power (March 1963 to late 1965).

These changes culminated in Hafiz' decision in February 1966 to purge 30 officers of minority background from the army. Hearing of his plan, a group of mainly Alawi Ba'thist officers pre-empted Hafiz and took power on 23 February in Syria's bloodiest-ever change of government. Once in office, they purged rival officers belonging to other religious groups – first the Sunnis and Druze, then the Isma'ilis – further exacerbating communal tensions. Alawi officers received the most important postings, and acquired unprecedented power. The Regional Command of the Ba'th Party, a key decision-making center, included no representatives at all during the

1966–70 period from the Sunni urban areas of Damascus, Aleppo and Hama. Two-thirds of its members, however, were recruited from the rural and minority populations in Latakia, the Hawran and Dayr az-Zur. The skewing was even more apparent among military officers on the Regional Command; during 1966–70, 63 per cent came from Latakia alone.

The Alawi hold on power provoked bitter complaints from other communities. A Druze military leader, Salim Hatum, told the press after he fled Syria that Alawis in the army outnumbered other religious communities by a ratio of five to one. He noted that ‘the situation in Syria was being threatened by a civil war as a result of the growth of the sectarian and tribal spirit’. He also observed that ‘whenever a Syrian military man is questioned about his free officers, his answer will be that they have been dismissed and driven away, and that only Alawi officers have remained’. Playing on the Ba‘th slogan, ‘One Arab nation with an eternal mission,’ Hatum mocked the rulers in Damascus, saying that they believe in ‘One Alawi state with an eternal mission’.⁸⁴

Alawi domination did not assure stability. Two Alawi leaders, Salah Jadid and Hafiz al-Asad, fought each other for supremacy in Syria through the late 1960s, a rivalry that ended only when Asad prevailed in November 1970. In addition to differences in outlook – Jadid was more the ideologue and Asad more the pragmatist – they represented diverse Alawi sects. The September 1970 war between the PLO and the Jordanian government was the decisive event in Asad’s rise to power. Jadid sent Syrian ground forces to help the Palestinians but Asad refused to send air cover. The defeat of Syrian armor precipitated Asad’s bloodless *coup d’état* two months later. This, Syria’s tenth military *coup d’état* in 17 years, was to be the last for a long time to come. It also virtually ended intra-Alawi fighting.

The man who won the long contest for control of Syria, Hafiz ibn Ali ibn Sulayman al-Asad,⁸⁵ was born on 6 October 1930 in Qardaha, a village not far from the Turkish border and the seat of the Alawi religious leader. Hafiz was the ninth of his father’s eleven children. The family belonged to the Numaylatiya branch of the Matawira tribe. (This means Asad’s ancestors came from Iraq in the 1120s.)

Hafiz’ grandfather and father had completed the transition from peasant to minor notable, so that the family was relatively well-off by the time he was born. Thus, while Qardaha consisted mostly of dried mud houses, he grew up in a stone building. In later years, however, Asad cultivated a story of poverty, recounting to visitors, for example, about having to drop out of school until his father found the sixteen Syrian pounds to pay for his tuition.⁸⁶ True or not, Hafiz was a bright child and the first of his family to attend school. His parents sent him in 1939–40 to live in the nearby town of Latakia for studies. The next academic year he returned to the Qardaha school. From 1944 to 1951 he was back in Latakia, attending the Collège de Lattaquié, a top high school.

Early in 1948, when only 17 years old, Asad went to Damascus and volunteered in the Syrian Army to help destroy the nascent state of Israel, only to be rejected as under-age. Upon graduation in 1951, he enrolled in the Homs Military Academy and then transferred to the just-formed Aleppo Air School. Asad distinguished himself as a combat pilot and graduated as an officer in 1955. Assigned that year to the Mezze Air Base (outside Damascus), he was soon ordered to go to Egypt for a six-month training course in jet aircraft. Back in Syria during the Suez war, he shot one time at a British aircraft, without hitting it. In mid-1958, just after marrying Anisa Makhlef, Asad went to the Soviet Union for eleven months, where he learned how to fly the MiG-15s and -17s which had just arrived in Syria. There, he picked up a bit of the Russian language. During the UAR years, he commanded a night-fighter squadron of MiG-19s near Cairo.

Asad had been active in politics as early as 1945. While at the Collège de Lattaquié, he served as president of the Students' Committee, then he went on to be elected president of the National Union of Students. While still a student, he was jailed by the French authorities for political activities. Asad joined the Ba'th Party soon after its creation in 1947 (making him one of the party's earliest members). Even as he rose through the military ranks, he remained active in the Ba'th Party. In 1959, during his exile in Egypt, Asad helped to found the Military Committee and organize its activities. By that time, he had also begun the decade-long process of consolidating his position within the Syrian armed forces.

The dissolution of the UAR in September 1961 precipitated a difficult two years for Asad. In short order, he found himself in jail in Egypt, Syria and Lebanon. He spent a month and a half in an Egyptian jail by virtue of being a Syrian soldier stranded near Cairo. Asad was a powerful figure by that time, so on his return to Syria, the conservative leaders who had taken power in Damascus forced him to resign his commission as captain and put him in a minor position in the Department of Maritime Transportation. Asad rarely appeared for work, spending his time instead participating in Military Committee activities.

He ended up in Lebanese and Syrian jails for his part in the failed putsch in March 1962. He fled to Tripoli, Lebanon, where he was apprehended by the authorities and jailed for nine days, then extradited back to Syria, where he spent another few days in prison. This misadventure notwithstanding, Asad continued to engage in conspiratorial politics and played an important role in the March 1963 Ba'th coup. He was rewarded for his efforts with a recall to the military and a meteoric rise through the ranks, going from captain in early 1963 to major-general in December 1964 and field marshal in 1968. (He resigned from the military in 1970 or 1971.) Asad took command of the key air force base at Dumayr after the 1963 coup and quickly established his control over the entire air force – his power-base during the subsequent years of turmoil.

The 1963 coup gave Asad his first taste of administration and authority, and right from the start he proved very competent at both. His timely support for the rebellion in February 1966 proved decisive in the events that brought Alawis to power; his reward was to be appointed defense minister just twenty minutes after the new regime had been proclaimed. This new position gave Asad an opportunity to extend his authority beyond the air force, especially to the combat forces of the army. He was already the most powerful figure in the country in 1968, but he bided his time before taking complete control. The moment came in November 1970, when he simultaneously ousted his last rival, Salah Jadid, and culminated the Alawi rise to power in Syria.

CONCLUSION

The manner of the Alawi ascent reveals much about Syria's political culture, pointing to complex connections between the army, the political parties and the ethnic communities. The Ba'th Party, the army and the Alawis rose in tandem; but which of these three had the most importance? Were the new rulers Ba'thists who just happened to be Alawi soldiers, or were they soldiers who happened to be Alawi Ba'thists? Actually, a third formulation is most accurate: these were Alawis who happened to be Ba'thists and soldiers.

True, the party and the military were critical, but in the end it was the transfer of authority from Sunnis to Alawis that counted most. Without deprecating the critical roles of party and army, the Alawi affiliation ultimately defined the rulers of Syria. Party and career mattered, but, as so often in Syria, ethnic and religious affiliation ultimately defined identity. To see the Asad regime primarily in terms of its Ba'thist or military nature is to ignore the key to Syrian politics. Confessional affiliation remains vitally important; as through the centuries, a person's sect matters more than any other attribute.

The Sunni response to the new rulers, which has taken a predominantly communal form, bears out this view. The widespread opposition of Sunnis, who make up about 69 per cent of the Syrian population, to an Alawi ruler has inspired the Muslim Brethren organization to challenge the government in violent, even terroristic ways. Though so far unsuccessful, the Brethren have on several occasions come near to toppling the regime.

It appears inevitable that the Alawis – still a small and despised minority, for all their present power – will eventually lose their control over Syria. When this happens, it is likely that conflicts along communal lines will bring them down, with the critical battle taking place between the Alawi rulers and the Sunni majority. In this sense, the Alawis' fall – be it through assassinations of top figures, a palace coup or a regional revolt – is likely to resemble their rise.

NOTES

1. Annie Laurent, 'Syrie-Liban: Les faux frères jumeaux', *Politique Étrangère* 48 (1983) p.598.
2. Matti Moosa, *Extremist Shiites: The Ghulat Sects* (Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 1988), p.297.
3. Anon., *Al-Muslimun fi Suriya wa'l-Irhab an-Nusayri, 1964-1979* (Cairo: n.p., n.d.), p.46.
4. For the fullest account of these meetings, see Abu Musa al-Hariri, *Al-'Alawiyun-an-Nusayriyun* (Beirut, n.p., 1400/1980), pp.234-7.
5. John F. Devlin, *The Ba'th Party: A History from Its Origins to 1966* (Stanford: Hoover Institution Press, 1976), pp.319-20.
6. Alasdair Drysdale, 'The Syrian Political Elite, 1966-1976: A Spatial and Social Analysis', *Middle Eastern Studies* Vol.17, No. 1 (January 1981), p.27.
7. Yahya M. Sadowski, 'Ba'thist Ethics and the Spirit of State Capitalism: Patronage and Party in Contemporary Syria', in Peter J. Chelkowski and Robert Pranger (eds.), *Ideology and Power in the Middle East: Studies in Honor of George Lenczowski* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1988), p.168.
8. Michael van Dusen, 'Syria: Downfall of a Traditional Elite', in Frank Tachan (ed.), *Political Elites and Political Development in the Middle East* (Cambridge, MA: Schenkman Publishing, 1975), p.136.
9. Apologists have constructed an elaborate argument to prove that 'Alawi was the sect's original name. See 'Ali' Aziz Ibrahim, *Al-'Alawiyun: Fida'iy ash-Shi'a al-Majhulun* (n.p., 1392/1972), pp.9-14.
10. For accounts of Alawi theology and doctrines, see many of the books cited in the following notes, especially those by Sulayman Efendi al-Adhani, Halm, Lammens, Lyde, Moosa, de Sacy, and Sharaf ad-Din.
11. Ibn Kathir, *Al-Bidaya wa'n-Nihaya* (Cairo: Matba'a as-Sa'ada, 1351-58/1932-39), Vol.14, p.83.
12. See Wolff 'Auszüge aus dem Katechismus der Nossairier', *Zeitschrift der Deutschen morgenländischen Gesellschaft* 3 (1849), p.308.
13. Just as Muslims traditionally accused Christians of making Jesus divine, so they accused Alawis of doing the same to Ali; the parallel is striking.
14. T. E. Lawrence, *Seven Pillars of Wisdom: A Triumph* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, Doran & Co., 1935), p.329.
15. Henri Lammens, 'Les Nossairis: Notes sur leur histoire et leur religion', *Etudes* (1899), p.492.
16. Sami al-Jundi, *Al-Ba'th* (Beirut: Dar an-Nahar li'n-Nashr, 1969), p.145.
17. Pierre May, *L'Alaouite: ses croyances, ses moeurs, les cheikhs, les lois de la tribu et les chefs* (Beirut: Imprimerie catholique, 1931?), pp.42-3.
18. F. Walpole, *The Ansayrii (or Assassins,) with Travels to the Further East, in 1850-51* (London: Richard Bentley, 1851), Vol.3, p.64.
19. Heinz Halm, *Die islamische Gnosis: die extreme Schia und die 'Alawiten* (Zurich: Artemis, 1982), p.316.
20. Hamza ibn 'Ali, *Ar-Risala ad-Damigha li'l-Fasiq ar-Radd'ala an-Nusayri*. Text in Silvestre de Sacy, *Exposé de la religion des Druzes* (Paris: A l'Imprimerie Royale, 1838), Vol.2, pp.571-3.
21. For a wild novelistic account of Alawi religious orgies, see Jehan Cendrieux, *Al-Ghadir ou le Sexe-Dieu* (Paris: Bibliothèque-Charpentier, 1926), pp.10-11.
22. 'An Oriental Student', *The Modern Syrians: or, Native Society in Damascus, Aleppo, and the Mountains of the Druzes* (London: Longman, Brown, Green, and Longmans, 1844), p.281.

23. Sulayman Efendi al-Adhani, *Kitab al-Bakura as-Sulaymaniya fi Kashf Asrar ad-Diyana an-Nusayriya*. Summary and Arabic extracts in Edward E. Salisbury, 'The Book of Sulaiman's First Ripe Fruit: Disclosing the Mysteries of the Nusairian Religion', *Journal of the American Oriental Society*, 8 (1866), pp.285, 306. According to Sulayman Efendi, this practice originates in an esoteric interpretation of the Qur'an, Sura 33, Verse 49.
24. Ibn Battuta, *Ar-Rihla* (Beirut: Dar as-Sadr and Dar Bayrut, 1384/ 1964), pp.79–80.
25. Moosa, *Extremist Shiites*, p.271.
26. Ignaz Goldziher, *Vorlesungen über den Islam* (Heidelberg C. Winter, 1910); trans. by Andras and Ruth Hamori as *Introduction to Islamic Theology and Law* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1981), p.228.
27. Sulayman Efendi al-Adhani, *Kitab al-Bakura*. Extracts in al-Husayni 'Abdallah (ed.), *Al-Judhur at-Ta'rikhiya li'n-Nusayriya al-'Alawiya* (Cairo: Dar al-'tisam, 1400/1980), p.55.
28. Sulayman Efendi al-Adhani, *Kitab al-Bakura*, in Salisbury, 'The Book of Sulaiman's First Ripe Fruit', p.298. The third sentence in this quote comes from Henri Lammens, *L'Islam, croyances et institutions*, 2nd ed. (Beirut: Imprimerie catholique, 1941), p.228.
29. Paulo Boneschi, 'Une fatwà du Grand Mufti de Jérusalem Muhammad' Amin al-Husayni sur les 'Alawites'. *Revue de l'histoire des religions* 122, 2–3 (Sept.–Dec. 1940), p.152.
30. Henry Maundrell, *A Journey from Aleppo to Jerusalem in 1697* (London: J. White & Co., 1810), pp. 16–17.
31. Benjamin Disraeli, *Tancred, or The New Crusade* (London: Longmans, Green, and Co., 1847), pp.374–5.
32. Sulayman Efendi al-Adhani, *Kitab al-Bakura*, in Salisbury, 'The Book of Sulaiman's First Ripe Fruit', p.298.
33. Muhammad Rida Shams ad-Din, *Ma'a al-'Alawiyin fi Suriya* (Beirut: Matba'a al-Insaf, 1376), pp.5–6.
34. Annie Laurent and Antoine Basbous, *Guerres secrètes au Liban* (Paris: Gallimard, 1987), pp.71–2.
35. Hamza ibn 'Ali, *Ar-Risala ad-Damigha*, Vol.2, p.570. This accusation resembles those used by medieval Christians to explain the popularity of Islam.
36. Quoted in 'Izz ad-Din al-Farisi and Ahmad Sadiq, 'Ath-Thawra al-Islamiya fi Suriya', *Al-Mukhtar al-Islami* (Cairo, Oct. 1980), p.39.
37. Ahmad ibn Taymiya, 'Fatwa fi'n-Nusayriya'. Arabic text in M. St. Guyard, 'Le Fetwa d'Ibn Taimiyyah sur les Nosairis', *Journal Asiatique*, 6th series, Vol.16, No.66 (1871): pp.167, 168, 169, 177. For other pre-modern Sunni assessments of the Alawis – including al-Ash'ari, Abd al-Qadir al-Baghdadi, Ibn Hazm, ash-Shahrastani, and Fakhr ad-Din ar-Razi – see as-Sayyid 'Abd al-Husayn Mahdi al-'Askari, *Al-'Alawiyun aw an-Nusayriya* (N.p., 1400/1980), pp.49–53.
38. Text in Robert Mantran and Jean Sauvaget (eds.), *Règlements fiscaux ottomans: Les provinces syriens* (Paris: Librairie d'Amérique et d'Orient, 1951), p.76. See also pp.77, 88, 93.
39. Jacques Weulersse, 'Antioche, un type de cité d'Islam', *Comptes rendus du Congrès international de Géographie, Varsovie 1934* (Warsaw Kasa Im. Mianowskiego, 1937), Vol.3, p.258.
40. Martin Kramer, 'Syria's Alawis and Shi'ism', in Martin Kramer (ed.), *Shi'ism, Resistance, and Revolution* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1987), p.238.
41. Samuel Lyde, *The Asian Mystery: Illustrated in the History, Religion, and Present State of the Ansaireeh or Nusairis of Syria* (London: Longman, Green, Longman, and Roberts, 1860), p.196; Walpole, *The Ansayrii*, Vol.3, p.115.
42. Ibn Battuta, *Ar-Rihla*, p.80; Muhammad Amin Ghalib at-Tawil, *Ta'rikh al-'Alawiyin*, 2nd ed. (Beirut: Dar al-Andalus, 1386/1966), p.342. Tawil, a leading Alawi shaykh, published the first edition of his history in 1924.
43. Jacques Weulersse, *Le pays des Alaouites* (Tours: Arrault & Cie., 1940), Vol.1, p.54.

44. E. Janot, *Des Croisades au Mandat: Notes sur le peuple Alouïte* (Lyon: Imprimerie L. Bascon, 1934), p.37.
45. Paul Jacquot, *L'état des Alaouïtes: Guide* (Beirut: Imprimerie catholique, 1929), p.10.
46. R. Strothmann, 'Die Nusairi im heutigen Syrien', *Nachrichten der Akademie der Wissenschaften in Göttingen*, Phil. Hist. Kl. No.4 (1950), p.35.
47. George Samné, *La Syrie* (Paris: Bossard, 1920), p.340.
48. John Lewis Burckhardt, *Travels in Syria and the Holy Land* (London: John Murray, 1822), p.141.
49. Lyde, *Asian Mystery*, pp.219–20.
50. *Handbook for Travellers in Syria and Palestine* (London: John Murray, 1858), p.xli.
51. Weulersse, *Le pays des Alaouïtes*, Vol.1, pp.73, 317; idem., *Paysans de Syrie et du Proche Orient* (Paris: Gallimard, 1946), p.272. Étienne de Vaumas shows the similarities of the Lebanese and Alawi regions, then explains the profound differences of their populations in 'Le Djebel Ansariéh: Études de Géographie humaine,' *Revue de Géographie alpine*, 48 (1960), 267–311.
52. Nawfal Iliyas, a lawyer who worked for the Alawi tribes during those decades; reported by Laurent and Basbous, *Guerres secrètes au Liban*, p.70. On Iliyas, see Jurj Gharib, *Nawfal Iliyas: Siyasa, Adab, Dhikriyat* (Beirut: Dar ath-Thaqafa, 1975).
53. Tawil, *Ta'rikh al-'Alawiyin*, p.470.
54. Lyde, *Asian Mystery*, p.222.
55. Weulersse, 'Antioche', p.258.
56. Weulersse, *Paysans de Syrie*, p.85.
57. Nikolaos van Dam, *The Struggle for Power in Syria: Sectarianism, Regionalism and Tribalism in Politics, 1961–1978* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1979), p.22.
58. Yusuf al-Hakim, *Dhikriyat al-Hakim*, Vol.3, *Suriya wa'l-'Ahd al-Faysali* (Beirut: Al-Matba'a al-Kathulikiya, 1966), p.94.
59. Lammens, *L'Islam*, p.228.
60. Gouraud to premier and foreign minister, 29 December 1919, Ministère des Affaires Étrangères, Series E, Levant, Syrie-Liban, Vol.20, pp.226–33. Quoted in Wajih Kawtharani, *Bilad ash-Sham* (Beirut: Ma'had al-Inma' al-'Arabi, 1980), p.211.
61. Taqi Sharaf ad-Din, *An-Nusayriya: Dirasa Tahliliya* (Beirut: n.p., 1983), pp.73–5.
62. Arrêté no. 623, 15 Sept. 1922. Quoted in E. Rabbath, *L'Évolution politique de la Syrie sous mandat* (Paris: Marcel Rivière, 1928), p.185.
63. Sharaf ad-Din, *An-Nusayriya: Dirasa Tahliliya*, p.80.
64. Seventy-seven per cent voted in the Alawi state, 20–25 per cent in Aleppo, and so few in Hama that elections were cancelled. League of Nations, Permanent Mandates Commission, *Minutes of the 9th Session*, 16th meeting, 17 June 1926, p.116.
65. Alawis made up the 1st, 2nd, and much of the 5th battalions; Armenians appear to have made up the 4th; and Christians made up the 8th. The composition of the 3rd, 6th, and 7th battalions is unknown. Alawis had no cavalry role. The 2nd battalion, for example, had 773 soldiers, of whom 623 were Alawi, 73 Sunni, 64 Christian, and 13 Isma'ilis. See R. Bayly Winder, 'The Modern Military Tradition in Syria', unpublished draft dated 5 March 1959, pp.14–15; and Jacquot, *L'état des Alaouïtes*, p.11.
66. President of the Alawis' State Representative Council, League of Nations, Permanent Mandates Commission, *Minutes of the 9th Session*, 16th meeting, 17 June 1926, p.112.
67. Petition dated 4 March 1936, *Bulletin du Comité de l'Asie Française*, April 1936, p.131.
68. 11 June 1936, Ministère des Affaires Étrangères, Levant 1918–1930, Syrie-Liban, Doc. E-492, fol.195. Quoted in Laurent and Basbous, *Guerres secrètes au Liban*, p.74.
69. For more on him and his name, see note 85.
70. Document 3547, dated 15 June 1936, Ministère des Affaires Étrangères. Text in Hariri, *Al-'Alawiyun-an-Nusayriyun*, pp.228–31. See also *International Impact*, 28 March 1980; al-Farisi and Sadiq, 'Ath-Thawra al-Islamiya fi Suriya', p.39; *Al-Irhab an-Nusayri*, p.6; Laurent, 'Syrie-Liban', p.598; Annie Laurent and Antoine Basbous, *Une proie pour deux*

- Fauves?* (Beirut: Ad-Da'irat, 1983), p.96. Moosa, *Extremist Shiites*, pp.287–88 provides a full English translation of the letter. Laurent and Basbous report (*Guerres secrètes au Liban*, p.76) that the letter is missing from the Quai d'Orsay and speculate that its absence has to do with the embarrassment it causes the Asad regime. Four other memoranda from the Alawis to the French High Commissioner are quoted extensively in Sharaf ad-Din, *An-Nusayriya: Dirasa Tahliliya*, pp.87–92.
71. Note dated 3 July 1936, quoted in Sharaf ad-Din, *An-Nusayriya: Dirasa Tahliliya*, p.57, n.67.
 72. Petition dated 26 Sept. 1936, *Bulletin du Comité de l'Asie Française*, Dec. 1936, p.340.
 73. Arrêté of 5 Dec. 1936, *Échos de Syrie*, 13 Dec. 1936.
 74. Stephen Helmsley Longrigg, *Syria and Lebanon Under French Mandate* (London: Oxford University Press, 1958), p.210. British officials called him a 'notorious brigand'. See 'Weekly Political Summary, Syria and the Lebanon', 2 Feb. 1944, E 1049/23/89, FO 371/40299/7543. For photographs of this strange figure, see Weulersse, *Pays des Alaouites*, Vol.2, pp.XCI–XCII.
 75. 'Weekly Political Summary, Syria and the Lebanon', 22 March 1944, E 2211/23/89, FO 371/40300/7543.
 76. 'The Present State of Syria and the Lebanon', Supplement II, 23 March 1945, FO 371/45562/7505.
 77. Patrick Seale, *The Struggle for Syria* (London: Oxford University Press, 1965), p.37.
 78. Fadallah Abu Mansur, *A'asir Dimashq* (Beirut, 1959), p.51. The total number of army officers at this time, it should be noted, was less than 200.
 79. The 'Adnan al-Maliki affair of 1955, which eliminated the SSNP from political power in Syria, was an exception, for the SSNP included many Alawis (including Sergeant Yusuf Abd al-Karim, the man who assassinated Maliki). For some years after this event, Alawis in the army laid low.
 80. On the Ba'th-SSNP rivalry, see my 'Radical Politics and the Syrian Social Nationalist Party', *International Journal of Middle East Studies*, Vol.20 (1988), pp.313–16.
 81. The most prominent exception to communal alignment was the co-operation between Amin al-Hafiz, a Sunni, and Salah Jadid and Hafiz al-Asad, both Alawis. In subsequent years, as non-Alawis increasingly served Alawi purposes, cross-communal ties became unbalanced.
 82. Itamar Rabinovich, *Syria Under the Ba'th 1963–1966: The Army-Party Symbiosis* (Jerusalem: Israel Universities Press, 1972), p.181.
 83. Syrian Regional Command of the Ba'th Party, *Azmat al-Hizb wa Harakat 23 Shubat* (Damascus, 1966), pp.20–21. This document was classified as a 'secret internal publication exclusively for members'.
 84. *Ad-Difa'* [Jerusalem], 14 Sept. 1966; *An-Nahar*, 15 Sept. 1966; *Al-Hayat*, 29 Sept. 1966. Quoted in van Dam, *Struggle for Power*, pp.75–6. For many more examples of suspicion about Alawis, see *ibid.*, pp.110–24. Much of my information on the rise of the Alawis derives from van Dam's meticulous study.
 85. The family name was originally Wahsh, meaning 'wild beast' or 'monster', then was changed to Asad, meaning 'lion'. The meaning of the two names is akin, but the tone is entirely different. Michael Hillegas van Dusen, 'Intra- and Inter-Generational Conflict in the Syrian Army', unpublished Ph.D. dissertation, John Hopkins University, 1971, p.315. There is some disagreement over the year of the change in name. Patrick Seale, *Asad of Syria: The Struggle for the Middle East* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1989), p.6, gives 1927 as the year of the change. Ma'oz, *Asad*, p.24, has it around 1944. Seale's date fits with other evidence (such as his grandfather signing his name as Sulayman Asad in 1936).
 86. According to Ahmed Sulayman al-Ahmad, *Al-Watan al-'Arabi*, 5 August 1988.