The Alevīs and ‘Alawīs

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1 Introduction

Many confuse the Alevīs of Turkey with the ‘Alawīs of Syria, regarding them as one and the same because their names are similar. In both cases, the name indicates a loyalty to, or descent from, ‘Alī ibn Abī Ṭālib, the cousin and son-in-law of the Prophet Muḥammad and a figure who is venerated by both groups and especially so in Shī‘a Islam. However, close examination of the two groups indicates that, despite some small similarities in their religious doctrines and practices, the differences between the two are far greater.

Although the ‘Alawīs constitute just a small percentage of the Syrian population (about twelve percent), they are the only minority that rules over a Sunnī-majority population; they are the ‘rulers’ of Syria, since the president of the state (from 1971 CE until today 2020 CE)¹ is of an ‘Alawī origin. The term ‘Alawī’ became prevalent only in the early-twentieth century; up until then, they were known to most as the Nuṣayrīs. Since the thirteenth century, most of the group has inhabited the mountain region Jabal al-Nuṣayriyya (‘the Nuṣayriyya Mountain’ which is named after the group) in Northwest Syria, as well as the Hatay region in South Turkey. Today, however, followers can be found across many parts of Syria (Zisser 1999: 130).

Some sources consider the ‘Alawīs to be a sect, a stance taken in accordance with Shī‘ite doctrine. Although there are some likenesses between the ‘Alawīs and Twelver Shī‘ite Islam, such as their mutual reverence for ‘Alī and the twelve *imāms*, as well as their shared belief in religious dissimulation, the ‘Alawīs hold many beliefs that are not accepted by the Twelver Shī‘ites. These include the belief in the transmigration of souls and the placing of ‘Alī above the Prophet Muḥammad, among others (Friedman 2002: 89).

Today, the Alevīs are one of Turkey’s largest religious minorities. No accurate data regarding the proportion of Alevīs within the Turkish population are currently available, and it could be anywhere between 10 to 40 per cent and “recent figures suggest Alevīs number in the region of 20 to 25 million” (Minority Rights Group International n.d.). Celia Jenkins, Suavi Aydin, and

¹ Dates are given in common era (CE) throughout unless specified.

Umit Cetin point out that these numbers are confounded because the Alevīs are not recognised as a distinct religious group but are “subsumed under Islam” (2018: 5 n. 1).

The Alevīs are a set of religious groups with roots in Anatolia (Massicard 2013: 4). During the nineteenth century, the term ‘Alevī’ was used occasionally in reference to the Kızılbaş (‘red heads’, named after a red bonnet with twelve folds that symbolises the twelve *imāms*²) to indicate loyalty to, or descent from, ‘Alī ibn Abī Ṭālib. Since the 1920s, however, the term ‘Alevī’ has been used widely, with the community itself coming to utilise the term (Martens 2009: 12). Alevī literature, such as Alevī periodicals and newspapers, and many books, booklets, and articles on the Alevīs, have been published since the 1990s (Vorhoff 2005: 23–50). In addition, various research papers written by non-Alevīs have appeared. Nonetheless, the Alevī identity remains hard to define. Part of the reason is that it is hard to give a clear-cut explanation of their beliefs and practices because they are so diverse.

Although the Alevīs are frequently described as a branch of Twelver Shī‘ite Islam because they share the Shī‘ites’ reverence of ‘Alī, the two creeds have hardly anything else in common, as we shall see. Alevīsm is a syncretic, pluralistic tradition, which includes elements of Islam, Shamanism, Christianity, and the pre-Christian religions of rural Anatolia (Jenkins 2007), while Twelver Shī‘ites tend to reject any tradition that is not wholly Islamic.

This chapter will examine the two Islamic creeds of the ‘Alawīs and Alevīs and their religious doctrines, rituals, and historical backgrounds. It will consider how they became organised sects with their own theologies and identities, as well as exploring the changes that they have both undergone over the years. In addition, the complex relationship both movements have with both Shī‘a and Sunnī Islam will become apparent.

2 Theological Background to ‘Alawīs and Alevīs

After the death of the Prophet Muḥammad in 632, the first signs of a division in the Muslim *umma* (community) appeared in relation to the right to inherit his position as the leader of the *umma*. The majority of Muslims believed that they should not give preference to one Muslim over another and that every pious Muslim was suitable for this position; these Muslims were

2 It seems that the term Kızılbaş originated at the turn of the sixteenth century, in the time of Shāh Ismā‘īl (1510–1524).

called the Ahl-e-Sunna (Juynboll and Brown 1997: 878). However, another group of Muslims, the *shī‘at ‘Alī* (the party/partisans of ‘Alī), claimed that ‘Alī ibn Abī Ṭālib was the most suitable to inherit this position, given that he was the Prophet’s cousin and son-in-law and, although he was very young, he was among the first to believe in Muḥammad’s *da‘wa* (‘call’/‘mission’). Moreover, they argued that the Prophet, while he was alive, had declared ‘Alī his heir, a nomination which was in accordance with the heavenly order (Al-Tawil 1924: 60–89). Thus, they rejected the principle of choosing a leader; for them, ‘Alī had already been chosen by God (Madelung 1997: 420).

‘Alī was named the fourth *khalīfa* (caliph) after the third *khalīfa*, ‘Uthmān b. ‘Affān, was murdered in 656. The appointment strengthened the differences within the Muslim *umma*. During ‘Alī’s reign, a schismatic group named the Khārijites (literally ‘those who went out’) appeared and, in 661, ‘Alī was murdered by one of them. After ‘Alī’s death, his partisans, the Shī‘ites, argued that the person most suitable to inherit his position was his son, al-Ḥasan: the grandson of the Prophet Muḥammad (Madelung 1997: 420–424). However, it was Mu‘āwiya, the founder of the Umayyad dynasty, who became the fifth *khalīfa*. The Caliphate was then held by the Umayyads until the year 750.

Most Shī‘ites are Twelvers (*Ithnā ‘Asharī*); also referred to as the *imāmīyya* or Ja‘fariyya).³ They believe in the existence of twelve *imāms*, beginning with ‘Alī, al-Ḥasan, and al-Ḥusayn (respectively), and continuing along the line of al-Ḥusayn’s descendants until the twelfth *imām*, Muḥammad al-Mahdī, who went into occultation in 873.⁴ Over the years, several splits occurred among the Shī‘ites regarding who had the right to be the *imām*, thus causing the appearance of different creeds such as the Zaydīs (supporters of Zayd bin ‘Alī’s revolt) and the Ismā‘īlīs (named after Ismā‘īl, son of the sixth *imām*, Ja‘far al-Ṣādiq). As well as these groups, other creeds that deified ‘Alī also began to appear. Amongst these is the Nuṣayrī (later ‘Alawī) creed, which first appeared in the ninth century in Iraq (Friedman 2002: 28).

3 *Ja‘fariyya* is derived from the name of Ja‘far al-Sadiq, the sixth *imām* (d. 765), who developed Shī‘ite jurisprudence during his lifetime.

4 Occultation—*Ghaybah*—concealment or absence. According to the Shī‘ites the *imām* Muḥammad al-Mahdī has disappeared and he will return to establish justice and peace. There were two periods of occultations— the minor Occultation and the major Occultation. During the minor Occultation, which lasted until 941, the *imām* communicated with the community through four successive appointed agents. During the major Occultation, which continues to the present, there is no special agent.

3 The Nuṣayrīs (‘Alawīs)

The founder of the Nuṣayrīs is believed to have been Abū Shu‘ayb Muḥammad ibn Nuṣayr al-Namīrī (d. 883), known by his agnomen, Abū Shu‘ayb (Dussaud 1900: 9–10). According to some sources, ibn Nuṣayr was closely associated with the eleventh *imām*, Hasan al-‘Askarī, who died in 873 (*Kitāb al-munazara*, Ms Paris, Fonds arabe 1450: 119). Indeed, ibn Nuṣayr claimed that he was the ‘gate’ (*bāb*)⁵ of the eleventh *imām*. In one Nuṣayrī text, it is stated that al-‘Askarī said: “Muḥammad ibn Nuṣayr is my light, my door, and my proof against mankind. Whatever he related to me is true” (Moosa 1988: 259). Moreover, ibn Nuṣayr asserted that he represented the occulted *imām*, a claim which led him to be excommunicated from the Shi‘i community (Friedman 2002: 8).

The circle of ibn Nuṣayr’s supporters expanded and became known collectively as the Nuṣayrīs. Ibn Nuṣayr was succeeded by Muḥammad ibn Jundab, who, in turn, was succeeded by ‘Abdallāh al-Jannān al-Junbulānī (d. 900). Another figure that had a central role in the formation of the Nuṣayrī creed was al-Ḥusayn b. Ḥamdān al-Khaṣībī (d. 957), who, for several reasons, decided to move to al-Sham (Greater Syria). By the tenth century, there were already Nuṣayrīs on both sides of the Euphrates, in Iraq (mainly Baghdad and Kūfa), and in Syria (mostly Harran and Aleppo) (Halm 1995: 148–150; Friedman 2002: 32–33). According to some sources, by the eleventh century, Nuṣayrī communities could already be found in Jabal al-Ansariyya (Friedman 2002: 42). Another important Nuṣayrī figure is Maymūn b. Qāsim al-Ṭabarānī (d. 1034/5), who is said to have assumed leadership by the beginning of the eleventh century. Al-Ṭabarānī is reported to have been an outstanding leader and theologian, and to have written more books than any other Nuṣayrī theologian (Friedman 2002: 41).

During the thirteenth century, the Nuṣayrī population in Syria increased considerably, due mainly to migration from Jabal Sinjar (north-western Iraq, near the Syrian border). According to the ‘Alawī historian Muhammad Amin Ghalib al-Tawil, in 1220, the Nuṣayrīs were attacked by the Kurds and Ismā‘īlīs, and asked for help from Amīr al-Makzūn al-Sinḡārī (Al-Tawil 1924: 295–300). Al-Makzūn al-Sinḡārī came to the aid of the Nuṣayrīs but was defeated (Al-Tawil 1924: 296–297). Three years later, in 1222, al-Makzūn al-Sinḡārī, leading a large number of warriors and their families, came to the Nuṣayrīs’ rescue once more, this time defeating the Kurds and the Ismā‘īlīs. Al-Sinḡārī’s warriors

5 The *bāb* (‘gate’) is a religious role, and the person holding this role is responsible for directing or leading the people to the *imām* by teaching them the religious doctrine. This term was also applied in early Shi‘ism, being given to a senior disciple of the *imām*.

and their families are considered the ancestors of most of the Nuṣayrī clans in Syria (‘Alī 1972: 349; Al-Tawil 1924: 298). After the Mongols raided Iraq (1258), they destroyed all the religious centers in the country, including that of the Nuṣayrīs. Their station in Syria became the sole Nuṣayrī missionary station, and it was thus that Syria became the center of Nuṣayrī settlement (Al-Tawil 1924: 307).

3.1 *Nuṣayrī Doctrine*

The Nuṣayrī doctrine is secretive and, similar to other minority sects who were persecuted due to their religious beliefs, the Nuṣayrīs resort to religious dissimulation (*taqiyya*) in times of danger, meaning that they are allowed to and even should hide their true religion in order to avoid persecution (Friedman 2002: 143). Nevertheless, various Nuṣayrī religious books and treatises have been written by their theologians, including *Kitāb al-majmū‘* (‘Book of the Totality/Synthesis’), *Kitāb al-ma‘ārif* (‘Book of Knowledge’), *Kitāb majmū‘ al-a‘yad* (‘Book of Festivals’), *Kitāb al-mashyakha* (‘The Manual for Shaykhs’), *Kitāb al-usūs* (‘The Book of Foundations’), *Kitāb ta‘lim al-diyanat al-Nuṣayriyya*, (the Nuṣayrī Catechism), *Risālat al-tawhīd* (‘The Epistle of the Unity of God’). From these texts, we can learn about Nuṣayrī doctrine.

At the heart of the Nuṣayrī creed is the deification of ‘Alī ibn Abī Ṭālib. According to the group, the essence of the divinity was personified in him. As a consequence, he is considered superior to the Prophet Muḥammad. The Nuṣayrīs also believe in the divine triad of ‘A.M.S.’:

1. ‘A’ stands for ‘Alī ibn Abī Ṭālib, who is considered to be the *ma‘nā* (‘essence’ or ‘meaning’). According to the Nuṣayrī catechism, “‘Alī ibn Abī Ṭālib; he is God—there is no God but him, the merciful, the compassionate” (*Kitāb ta‘lim al-diyanat al-Nuṣayriyya*, Ms Paris, Fonds arabe 6182: 2). For the Nuṣayrīs, ‘Alī was not a human being but a docetic appearance of a human form, through which God contacted humanity (Friedman 2002: 132). They believe that ‘Alī is the one who created Muḥammad, who is the second element of the divine triad of ‘Alī, Muḥammad, and Salman.
2. ‘M’ stands for Muḥammad the Prophet, who is considered by to be the *ism* (‘name’) or *ḥijāb* (‘veil’) that hides the essence: “know that the *ma‘nā* entered the *bāb*, veiled himself in the *ism*” (*Kitāb ta‘lim al-diyanat al-Nuṣayriyya*, Ms Paris, Fonds arabe 6182: 4). The *ism* was created from the divine light of the *ma‘nā*, which, in turn, created the *bāb* (‘gate’).
3. ‘S’ stands for Salmān al-Fārisī, one of the Prophet Muḥammad’s companions, who is considered to be the *bāb* that leads to the ‘name,’ which, in turn, leads to the essence: “he is the only *bāb* which leads to the *ma‘nā*, the causal determinant [‘Alī], through the name [Muḥammad]. No one

comes to the God, 'Alī, except through him" (*Risalat al-bayan li Ahl al-u'qal wa al-afham wa man talab al-huda ila ma'rifat al-Rahman*, Ms Paris, Fonds arabe 1450: 55).

According to the Nuṣayrī catechism, A.M.S. is "a trinity without separation, whose unity indicates the divinity of our master ['Alī]" (*Kitāb ta'lim al-dīyanat al-Nuṣayrīyya*, Ms Paris, Fonds arabe 6182: 4).

The Nuṣayrīs believe in metempsychosis (*tanasukh*) or transmigration, which is a sort of a punishment (Friedman 2002: 104). For them, at the beginning of time, there was a pure world of light, and God was praised by his enlightened creations. God wanted to test them, so He changed his form, creating confusion among them. Two major sins were committed by His creations: doubt and pride. These sins were followed by other sins, thus causing their gradual fall from the 'world of light' to the 'material world,' where they were given human bodies. According to the Nuṣayrīs, when a person dies, his/her soul leaves the body and moves to another body. It could be a human body, plant, insect, or inanimate object, depending on the person's actions and belief in 'Alī. The sinner's transmigration can occur on one of five possible levels (Friedman 2002: 105; *Kitāb al-majmu'* mentions seven levels; see Dussaud 1900: 183). The more severe a person's sins, the more inferior the creature into which the soul transmigrates will be. Gnosis is the path through which one can return to the pre-fall state in the world of light, and only a small minority of pious mystics (with no body defects) can return there. Even then, it is only after studying religious texts deeply and gaining extensive knowledge that one can reach the highest degree of piety required to return to that world (Friedman 2002: 115–118).

The journey back to the world of light begins with the 'initiation,' a process with several stages, in which an instructor (*naqīb*) and an initiate are both involved. Initiates range in age from fifteen to sixty and are all male, since women are not allowed to follow this path. In addition, initiates must have Nuṣayrī parents and must take an oath of secrecy. They are obliged to maintain a pure way of life and to keep away from any material temptation that might prevent their salvation. If the initiate disobeys his instructor or betrays him, he is expelled from the process. The relationship between the instructor and the initiate is that of a father and son—a kind of "spiritual fatherhood" (Friedman 2002: 214). Rev. Samuel Lyde (d. 1860), who lived among the Nuṣayrīs in the 1850s, offers extracts from the Nuṣayrī text *Kitāb al-mashyakha* in his book *The Asian Mystery*, in which the 'contract' between the instructor and the initiate is elucidated.⁶ In general, then, Nuṣayrīs can be divided into two groups: the

6 "Now the rights due to the Seyyid from his son are that he reveal not his secrets, nor disobey his commands, nor bear malice against him in his breast [...]. And the rights due to a son from

khassa ('initiated elite'), or the *shaykhs* ('spiritual leaders,' who are in a minority), and the *'amma* (the 'ignorant mass,' consisting of the majority of the population) (Friedman 2002: 144).

The Nuṣayrīs have no specific place of worship but pray in private houses (*bayt/manzil*), and the *shaykhs* take turns to invite the *khassa* to hold meetings at their homes for various purposes (Friedman 2002: 146). The main religious ceremony, which includes the sanctification of wine, is called the *quddās*, or 'mass' (Moosa 1988: 398–408). The Nuṣayrīs also have their own festivals, which are elaborated in the *Kitāb Majmū' al-a'yād* ('Book of Festivals') by al-Ṭabarānī. These festivals contain elements from different religious and ethnic sources: Sunnī, Shī'ite, Persian, and Christian. They celebrate, for example, Eid al-Adha, (the 'festival of sacrifice'), Eid al-Ghadir (the celebration of the appointment of 'Alī by the Prophet Muḥammad as his successor), Nawruz (Persian new year), and Laylat al-Milad (Christmas), but they are given their own Nuṣayrī interpretations (Lyde 2003: 382–398).

The five pillars of Islam are also interpreted differently by the Nuṣayrīs. For example, the fast (*sawm*) of Ramadan is marked by fasting during the daytime, but also includes abstention from speech. Every day of the month of Ramadan represents a different Nuṣayrī figure (*shaykhs*), and the celebration of *al-Fitr* ('breaking of the fast') represents the abolition of the *taḡiyya* at the end of time (Friedman 2002: 155). Moreover, the obligation to pay *zakāt* is interpreted as the giving of a spiritual gift, rather than a material one (although it should be noted that Nuṣayrīs do not exempt themselves from charitable giving) (Friedman 2002: 139).

Nuṣayrī society is segmented along the lines of tribes, religious schools, and classes (religious leaders, landowners, and peasants); there is no distinctive religious or secular leadership. Over the years, this has had a significant influence on the internal solidarity of the group (Al-Sharif 1994: 116–125; Al-Tawil 1924: 469). The Nuṣayrīs can be split into four large tribes or tribal confederations (*'ashā'ir*): the Khayyatin, the Hadadin, the Kalbiyya, and the Matawira. Each tribe is comprised of several smaller clans, each with its own chief. This setup has led to the Nuṣayrīs suffering severely as a result of internecine quarrels from time to time. Disturbances and bloody clashes have erupted between various Nuṣayrī clans, some of them lasting for decades and causing heavy losses, in terms of life and property (Al-Tawil 1924: 349–375). There have also

his Seyyid are, good bringing up and proper instruction; and that he do not put hardships on him, nor teach him in a faulty way; [...] and warn him against all transgression and lusts [...] My wish is that he would [...] direct me to the right knowledge of God [...] know that if you [initiate] shall have known it [the secret], and shall reject it [...] you will be transported into horrid shapes [...] take care of your brethren [...] you must observe prayer [...] and give alms" (Lyde 2003 [1860]: 257–264).

been some religious differences between the main Nuṣayrī religious school (Al-Hariri 1987: 194). The main religious schools, each of which has its own religious leaders, are the Shamsiya (from the word *Shams-sun*) or Shamaliya, and the Qamariya (from the word *Qamar-moon*) or Kalaziya (Moosa 1988: 337–341; Al-Tawil 1924: 468–469; Lyde 2003 [1860]: 188).

Besides the internecine quarrels, the Nuṣayrīs have been persecuted by successive Sunnī Muslim rulers, who have considered the group to be a danger to Islam. Over the years, several Sunnī scholars have issued *fatwās* against the Nuṣayrīs, declaring them heretics. During the fourteenth century, for example, the Sunnī scholar Taqī ad-Dīn Aḥmad ibn Taymiyya (d. 1328) issued three *fatwās* against the Nuṣayrīs. Though they contain false theological and historical accusations against the Nuṣayrīs, the *fatwās* were (and still are) exploited by some extremists to justify their attacks against the group (Talhamy 2010: 175–194).

Two other Sunnī *fatwās* were issued during the period of Ottoman rule (1516–1918). One of these *fatwās* was issued in the sixteenth century. According to various sources, the Ottoman Sultan Selim I, who was at war with the Shīʿite Ṣafavids that ruled over Persia (Iran) from 1502 onward, feared a possible collaboration between the various Shīʿite creeds living adjacent to the border with Persia and the Ṣafavid state. He requested a *fatwā* to justify the conduct of an expedition to tackle these groups, among which were the Nuṣayrīs. The second *fatwā*, issued during the 1820s, stated that the property and lives of the Nuṣayrīs were at the Muslims' disposal (Talhamy 2010: 183). It is worth mentioning that, even though the Ottomans referred to the Nuṣayrīs as heretics, they did not require them to pay the *jizya* (the poll tax that the non-Muslims had to pay). For the purposes of the census, they were counted as part of the Muslim community and, later on, were recruited into the Ottoman army (Talhamy 2011b: 33).

These *fatwās* and the persecution by the Ottomans caused the Nuṣayrīs to retreat to the Nuṣayriyya Mountain and live in small, mainly homogenous villages or in areas surrounding the coastal cities such as Tripoli, Latakia, and Jablah. They lived in seclusion, avoiding the cities and any encounters with the Ottoman authorities or the Muslim community. Isolated in their mountain fortresses and living in ramshackle villages, they had to endure famine and poverty, as well as exploitation by their landlords, most of whom were Sunnīs and held contempt for their tenants, considering them to be infidels (Talhamy 2010: 182).

Due to their miserable situation, during the nineteenth century, the Nuṣayrīs revolted against the Ottomans, refusing to pay taxes. They attacked and plundered their neighboring villages before their attempts were brutally subdued

by the Ottomans (Talhamy 2008: 905). In the second half of the nineteenth century, the Nuṣayrīs, as a religious minority, became a prime target for the Protestant missionaries. This motivated the Ottomans to take action to integrate them into official state religion—or, in other words, ‘Sunnify’ them—by building schools and mosques in their villages, as well as sending Sunnī *imāms* to them. However, neither the Ottomans, nor the Protestant missionaries had much success in converting the Nuṣayrīs (Talhamy 2011a: 218–236). Indeed, they maintained a lowly existence in poverty until the fall of the Ottoman Empire.

3.2 *Becoming ‘Alawīs*

After World War I, and in accordance with the Sykes-Picot Agreement (1916), Syria, Lebanon, and Alexandretta were to be put under French control in what came to be known as the French Mandate. Under the French Mandate, the Nuṣayrīs faced major changes. One of these changes pertained to their name: during the 1920s, they became known as ‘Alawīs or ‘Alawites (‘followers of ‘Alī’). Indeed, as the 1920s and 1930s progressed, the group started fostering this change itself. As Nuṣayrīs, they were outcasts; as ‘Alawīs, however, they could position themselves as part of Shī‘ite Islam and, thus, part of the Muslim community. Hence, during those years, a gradual denial of the Nuṣayrī identity began to occur, along with the emergence of a substantial body of apologetic literature on the issue. At the same time, serious measures were taken by the newly named ‘Alawīs to stress their links to the Shī‘ite doctrine (Firro 2005: 1–31).

Some ‘Alawīs, such as the historian Muhammad Ghalib al-Tawil, say that this was an inevitable step; it allowed the ‘Alawīs finally to restore their original name and discard the name given to them by their opponents in order to denigrate them: “after the World War the ancient name of the community [‘Alawī] was returned to them [...] They were deprived of it for 412 years” (Al-Tawil 1924: 388). In 1926 a group of ‘Alawī *‘ulamā* issued a proclamation, which stated that: “Every ‘Alawī is a Muslim [...] The ‘Alawīs are Shī‘ite Muslims [...] they are the adherents of the *imām* ‘Alī” (Al-Ibrahim 1992: 87–88). Then, in April 1933, some ‘Alawī *‘ulamā* asked to be recognised in the population registers under the name ‘Alawī Muslims’ (Yafee 1992: 251–257). In 1936, another important step toward becoming part of the Muslim faith was taken when the Grand Mufti of Jerusalem, the Sunnī Hajj Amīn al-Ḥusaynī, (d. 1974), issued a *fatwā* that described ‘Alawīs as part of the Muslim community: “the ‘Alawīs are Muslims and the whole Muslim community should cooperate with them for good deeds and move away from the bad deeds [...] they are brothers in faith” (Boneschi 1940: 42–45, 134–152). This was the first time in history that a high

religious authority had recognised the 'Alawīs as belonging within the Muslim community, rather than as an extremist heretic creed that endangered Islam. Following this, a series of declarations were made by 'Alawī *'ulamā'*, stating that they were Shī'ite Muslims (Al-Ibrahim 1999: 79–81, 93–96). Although some may argue that the main purpose of the *fatwā* was to ensure the integrity of Syria, rather than to reconcile with the 'Alawīs, it certainly paved the way for the group's integration into the Muslim community, being crucial in the ending of their long period of isolation (Talhamy 2009: 564).

Politically, however, some 'Alawī leaders saw the French Mandate as an opportunity to gain power by capitalising on the notion of religious difference. The French, who pursued a policy of 'divide and rule,' split Syria into small territories along religious and ethnic lines, and so the 'Alawīs asked for their own independent state to be granted. It was thus that the 'State of the 'Alawīs' (1920–1936) was established in the Nuṣayriyya Mountain area. While some 'Alawīs were pleased to have their own 'independent state,' others opposed it—mainly the young and the educated. They felt that the only way to preserve their existence was through integration with a united Syria, rather than by having their own state (Firro 2005: 17–26).

It was after the French departed Syria in April 1946 that the 'Alawīs' ascendance to power began. This happened through two main channels: the army and the secular-nationalist Ba'ṯh Party (Zisser 1999: 133). There were several reasons why the 'Alawīs became so prominent in the army. During the 1920s, the French formed the Special Troops of the Levant (*Les Troupes Spéciales du Levant*), which were composed of troops recruited locally in the Levant. The majority of these Syrian troops came from rural backgrounds and minority groups: the 'Alawīs, Druze, Kurds, and Circassians. This army, which, by the end of 1945, numbered about 5,000 (in addition to about 3,500 gendarmes) became the regular armed forces of the newly independent state of Syria (Collelo 1987: 236–237). Though many Sunnīs joined the post-independence Syrian army, various Sunnī urban-, middle-, and upper-class families considered the army unfit for their children (Faksh 1984: 143). In contrast, 'Alawī boys, who tended not to go to secondary school and suffered from grave economic situations, often chose the military academy, seeing it as a promising start for social advancement. Some of them reached top ranks in the army. Indeed, the political instability in post-independence Syria facilitated 'Alawī dominance of the armed forces (Moosa 1988: 281, 293). During the 1960s, prominent 'Alawī officers such as Ḥāfiẓ al-Asad and Ṣalāḥ Jadīd were placed in important positions in the armed forces high command (Moosa 1988: 299) and, by the mid-1960s, the 'Alawīs have been prominent in both the army and the security services (Devlin 1991: 1404). At the same time, the socio-economic circumstances of the

'Alawī peasants improved considerably as the 'Alawīs started moving eagerly into education and gained strong representation in key professions and within senior state positions (Van Dam 2011: 9).

The secular Ba'th Party was founded in 1947 and drew its strength from the lower socio-economic classes, minorities, and populations inhabiting rural and peripheral regions of the country (Zisser 2001: 7). During the 1960s, the party was under 'Alawī leadership. It seized power in Syria and managed to retain it, coming to rule the nation (Faksh 1984: 141). Then, in November 1970, the Corrective Revolution (*al-Thawra al-Tashihiya*) brought Ḥāfiẓ al-Asad (d. 2000) to power and, in 1971, he became the first 'Alawī president of Syria (Zisser 2001: 1). Asad (also Assad) managed to unite the 'Alawīs under his leadership and change their social and economic situation. The 'Alawīs, under Asad, became the most dominant political force in Syria. As Matti Moosa puts it, "[t]he Nuṣayrīs, who once would have been content to have autonomy in their own area, now were in control of Syria" (1988: 309).

During the 1970s, Asad made conciliatory moves to gain the trust of the Sunnī majority: he prayed at mosques on Fridays (Dekmejian 1995: 107) and during major Muslim holidays and undertook *'umra* ('small *hajj*') to Mecca. He abolished restrictions on religious institutions and allowed the construction of new mosques (Ma'oz 2004: 182). In addition, he tried to win religious legitimacy for the 'Alawīs. In September 1972, Hasan Mahdi al-Shirazi (d. 1980), an Iraqi Shī'ite cleric, stated that "the beliefs of the 'Alawīs conformed in every respect to those of their Twelver Shī'ite brethren" (Kramer 1987: 249; Al-Mazlum 1999: 127–128; Al-Sharif 1994: 7–8). Then, in July 1973, al-Sayyid Musa al-Sadr, the leader of Lebanon's Shī'ite community, recognised the Muslim 'Alawīs as brothers of the Shī'ites (Al-Nahar 1973).

Some groups in Syrian society, however, refused to accept this new 'Alawī status. They included the Syrian Muslim Brotherhood (henceforth SMB), who were outlawed by the Ba'th Party in 1964. In 1976, the SMB revolted against the regime's socio-economic policy, sectarian character, and secular worldview (Zisser 2001: 10). The group believed that Islam should be declared as the state religion and that *sharī'a* should be the basis of legislation (Hinnebusch 1990: 278). They accused the regime of being tyrannical, corrupt, oppressive, and unjust (Abd-Allah 1983: 43). The SMB was joined by other secular opposition forces, who protested against Asad's intervention in Lebanon (1976), official corruption, and the domination of the 'Alawīs in every sphere of life in Syria. They expressed their intentions to overthrow "tyrant Asad's regime" (Syria Unmasked 1991: 8).

'Alawī military officers, government personnel, and Ba'thists were assassinated, and the tensions continued into the 1980s. In June 1980, the SMB were

accused of a failed attempt to assassinate President Asad. As an act of revenge, many SMB held in Tadmur Prison, Palmyra, were executed (Syria Unmasked 1991: 16). A month later, membership in or association with the SMB was made a crime punishable by death (Dekmejian 1995: 109). In retort, in November 1980, the SMB issued a manifesto emphasising that “a minority cannot and should not rule over a majority” (Abd-Allah 1983: 201–267). The peak of the conflict between the two sides was in February 1982, during the ‘Hama massacre.’ For quite some time Hama has been one of the centers of conflict and the site of several armed clashes between the opposition, mainly the SMB, and the regime forces. On 2 February in 1982 the Defense Brigades and units of the Special forces entered the city to quell the opposition movement once and for all. The consequences were devastating: thousands were killed, many more were injured and left homeless as the city was severely damaged (Syria Unmasked 1991: 17–21).

In the years that followed, the SMB, along with various other secular opposition parties and organisations both inside and outside Syria, continued to protest against the repressive political atmosphere, official corruption and domination by the ‘Alawīs in Syria under both Ḥafiz al-Assad and his son, Bashar al-Assad (who came to power in July 2000) (Talhamy 2012: 34–39). In March 2011, the protest accelerated, with the streets of Syria being dominated by groups of citizens calling for freedom and democracy. The then-supervisor general of the SMB, Mohammad Riad al-Shaqfa, announced optimistically: “I believe that the Asad regime will collapse within the next few months [...] the regime’s days are over” (Asharq al-Awsat London 2011). Soon, the protests evolved into a violent war. In 2020, after more than nine years, the Asad regime has not collapsed as al-Shaqfa and others have predicated but Syria has suffered great damage, as have the ‘Alawīs. Accused of being loyal to the Asad regime, the ‘Alawīs have thus been attacked by various radical Islamic opposition groups. Serving in the Syrian army has also led to significant loss of life from the ‘Alawī population. Additionally, relations between them and the Sunnī majority have deteriorated, and their sense of insecurity has increased. This war has, once again, highlighted their position as a religious minority.

4 The Alevīs

The term ‘Alevīs’ refers not only to the Kızılbaş to indicate loyalty to, or descent from, ‘Alī ibn Abī Ṭālib but also refers to a variety of religious groups. Indeed, it has been suggested that the Alevī identity was “a new trans-regional identity linking previously only partially connected groups which shared similar

narratives, beliefs, as well as social and ritual practices” (Dressler 2006: 271; Dressler 2013: 1–19, 275–287). The vast majority of Alevīs are from the Kızılbaş and Bektaşī groups, with the Tahtaci (‘woodcutters’), Abdal, and Cepni groups also being involved (Dressler 2013: 245).

Linguistically, the Alevīs can be divided into four different categories: Azerbaijani Turkish speakers, Arabic speakers, Turkish speakers, and Kurdish speakers (both Kurmanci and Zaza dialects). The majority of Alevīs speak Turkish or Kurdish. Up until the middle of the twentieth century, the Turkish Alevīs lived mainly in central Anatolia—around Hacibektaş, Ankara, and the regions of Çankiri, Çorum, and Tokat. The Kurdish Alevīs, meanwhile, tended to live in the regions of Tunceli, Elazığ, Erzincan, Bingöl, and Kars (Massicard 2013: 5). Arabic-speaking Alevīs are found mainly in southern Turkey, especially around Adana and in the region of Iskenderun.⁷ They have close links with the Syrian ‘Alawīs and have only few, if any, historical ties to the Anatolian Alevīs (Massicard 2013: 5). The term ‘Alevism’ homogenised the aforementioned groups, connecting them to Turkish culture and integrating them into Islam. At the same time, however, they still asserted their ‘heterodoxy’ (Dressler 2013).

4.1 *Historical Background*

The native soil of the Alevīs is Anatolia (Massicard 2013: 12). From the end of the eleventh century up until the thirteenth century, Turkman tribes travelled to Anatolia (Mélíhoff 2005: 1). It is believed that in 1230, after escaping the Mongol invasion, a dervish known by the name of Hacı Bektaş also arrived in Anatolia. Hacı Bektaş was a mystical healer and a thaumaturge, who, despite being a Muslim, had not given up the ancient practices and customs of Central Asia. While some sources from the late-twelfth century indicate that Hacı Bektaş founded an order, others suggest that the order in question was not founded until after his death, when a woman named Kandincik Ana, together with her disciple, Abdal Musa, founded a new group (Mélíhoff 2005: 2).

Out of the tribes that settled in the area, two groups appeared: the Bektaş and the Kızılbaş. The Bektaş derive their name from Hacı Bektaş and are a predominantly urban group. They claim that membership is open to any Muslim. The Kızılbaş are mainly rural, and claim that one can acquire identity only through parentage, that is, you cannot become an Alevī; rather, you are born one (Massicard 2013: 5).

7 Iskenderun, or Alexandretta, is the largest district in the province of Hatay. It was annexed to the Turkish Republic in 1939, causing some of the ‘Alawīs living there to move south toward the Nuşayriyya Mountain (although others chose to stay).

The Kızılbaş were partisans of the Shī'ite Ṣafavids,⁸ and had joined several revolts against the Ottomans. This troubled the Sunnī Ottoman Sultan Selim I (1512–1520), who was at war with the Ṣafavids. Some sources mention that, in 1514, prior to his march to meet Shāh Isma'il at Chaldiran (where the latter was badly defeated), Sultan Selim ordered a census of the Shī'ites living adjacent to the border with Persia. He feared the possibility of a collaboration between the local Shī'ite creeds and the Ṣafavid state, and so he massacred those Shī'ites identified through the census (Farid Bik 1896: 74). As discussed earlier, as Sultan Selim's expedition was an attack against the various Shī'ite-inclined creeds, it may have targeted the Kızılbaş, too, as some sources imply (Issa 2017: 72).

Following the victory at Chaldiran, the Ottomans persecuted the Kızılbaş, who were repressed for centuries (Arslantaş 2013: 92). In the conception of the Ottomans and the surrounding Sunnī society, the Kızılbaş had strayed from the true path of Islam. They were referred to as *zındıks* ('heretics') and *mulhids* ('atheists'), who were endangering Islam (Vorhoff 1998: 229). To avoid the Ottomans' persecution many Kızılbaş retreated to inaccessible regions of Anatolia, living in relatively isolated villages, far away from the Sunnīs. It is believed that it was during this period of relative isolation that the Kızılbaş developed their own political, social and religious institutions, practices, traditions, and doctrines (Massicard 2013: 15). These elements enabled them to survive in small, self-sufficient and isolated local communities (Zeidan 1999: 76). Due to their beliefs and secretive rituals, however, myths proliferated regarding their "moral deviance" (Zeidan 1999: 76).

From the seventeenth century onward, Hacı Bektaş came to be considered an important saint by most of the Kızılbaş (Massicard 2013: 15). Today, his picture is displayed at their associations and worship centers. The group also names associations after him, and members are often heard quoting sayings attributed to him. Moreover, hundreds of thousands of Alevīs visit Bektaş' tomb in Kırşehir every August (Shindeldecker 1998: 15).

8 The Ṣafavids derive their name from Shaykh Ṣafī al-Dīn Ishāq, who died in 1334. Ṣafī, who chose to live the Ṣūfī life, became the head of the Safawi Ṣūfī order (the title deriving from his name). Ala al-Dīn Ali, Ṣafī's grandson, became the leader of the Safawi order, which was joined by many Shī'ites. To make the new Shī'ite members of his order more prominent, Ali ordered his men to wear a new cap divided into twelve plates, representing the twelve *imāms*. Later, the Safawi order became a political force, whose rallying point was Twelver Shī'ism (*Ithnā 'Asharī*). It seems, however, that the term Kızılbaş did not emerge until the turn of the sixteenth century, in the time of Shāh Ismā'il.

4.2 *Alevī Doctrine*

The Alevīs accept 'Alī as the only legitimate successor to Muḥammad. They venerate the 'House of the Prophet' (*ahl al-bayt*) and reject all their enemies (Zeidan 1999: 79). Some Alevīs consider both the Prophet Muḥammad and 'Alī to be emanations of the 'Divine Light.' Here, Muḥammad is seen as the announcer and 'Alī is the preserver of 'Divine Truth,' and both seem to merge, at times, into one divine figure: the Alevīs use the following saying: "Alī is Muḥammad, Muḥammad is 'Alī" (Shindeldecker 1998: 13). Some Alevīs believe in a trinity consisting of Allāh, Muḥammad, and 'Alī. They assert, however, that this trinity is not the same as that of the Christians (Shindeldecker 1998: 14).

For a proportion of Alevīs, 'Alī is the ultimate example of the perfect human. They consider him the 'gate' (*bāb*) to esoteric knowledge (Zeidan 1999: 79). Thus, certain divine attributes are ascribed to him, such as the ability to have created the world and the dispensation of the livelihood of his creatures (Moosa 1988: 51). The following poem (Olsson 2005: 174–175) demonstrates how 'Alī is viewed by the Alevīs:

You are the first and the last of this world
 Shah, who is the sultan of the universe
 I wander around in every corner of the world
 I never saw any other man than Ali
 Who bestowed destiny and created the worlds
 I never saw any other man than Ali
 One of his names is Ali, one of his names is Allah
 By God, I swear by God, I do not deny
 Facing the way of Ali and Muhammad
 I never saw any other man than Ali

In addition, 'Alī's picture is displayed in every Alevī place of worship and association, and it often appears on the cover of Alevī publications (Shindeldecker 1998: 12). Here is another example (Olsson 2005: 173) illustrating the identification of 'Alī with the divine reality composed by Melniet Ali Hilmi Dedebaba (d. 1907):

I took the mirror to my face
 Ali appeared to my eye ...
 He is Jesus and Christ
 He is the refuge to the believers
 He is the Shah of the two worlds

Ali appeared to my eye
 Ali is the pure, Ali is the clean
 Ali is the hidden, Ali is the manifest
 Ali is the first, Ali is the last
 Ali appeared to my eye
 Ali is the life, Ali is the Beloved
 Ali is the religion, Ali is the belief
 Ali is the Merciful, Ali is the Compassionate
 Ali appeared to my eye

The Alevīs believe that the four major holy books, the Torah, Psalms, the Gospel, and the Qurʾān, are God's written revelations, and that the Qurʾān is the last written revelation from God (Shindeldecker 1998: 5). Most Alevīs believe that the 'original' Qurʾān stated clearly that 'Alī was to be the Prophet's successor, and that parts of the text related to 'Alī were taken out of it by his rivals. The Alevīs interpret the Qurʾān in an esoteric, allegoric, and symbolic (rather than literal) manner (Shindeldecker 1998: 5). They also look to the following religious books as sources for their beliefs and practices: 1. the *ḥadīth* (the traditions of the Prophet Muḥammad); 2. *Nahj al-balāgha* (the traditions and sayings of 'Alī); 3. the Buyruks (collections containing the doctrine and practices of several of the twelve *imāms*, claimed to have been written by important leaders (Zeidan 1999: 79); and 4. the *Vilayetnameler* and/or *Menakibnameler* (books that describe events in the lives of important Alevī figures, such as Hacı Bektaş). Another important source of Alevī belief and thought comes in the form of the mystical poems and musical ballads/liturgical hymns (*deyisler*; *nefesler*) that are passed down orally from one generation to the next (Shindeldecker 1998: 5).

According to the Alevīs, in order to approach God, the faithful must pass through the following four consecutive 'gates' (each of which includes ten 'levels' or duties) Zeidan 1999: 79): 1. *sharīʿa* (Islamic law); 2. *tarīqat* ('the path'), which is at the core of the community (and is an Alevī mode of worship, where strangers are not welcome); 3. *marifet* ('knowledge'): the esoteric intuitive knowledge of God; 4. *ḥaqīqat* ('ultimate truth'): union with God—the highest stage (it is believed that the *dede* lineages are at this level) (Zeidan 1999: 79). For the Alevīs, salvation exists in imitating perfect models such as 'Alī, Hacı Bektaş, and other Alevī saints. According to them, every Alevī must "be master of his hands, tongue and loins," meaning that theft, lies, and adultery are forbidden because every man must seek "purity of heart" (Shankland 2005: 19). Additionally, love and forgiveness are seen as important elements in interpersonal relationships (Zeidan 1999: 79).

The Alevīs reject external forms of Islam, including its five pillars. They do not have mosques and do not pray five times a day. They believe that relationships with people are more important than observing formal religious ritual: "If you hurt another person, the ritual prayers you have done are counted worthless" (Shindeldecker 1998: 10). Although, one can find mosques in the Alevī villages today, few residents attend the five daily prayers (Shankland 2005: 21). Alevīs do not undertake pilgrimage to Mecca and do not fast during the month of Ramadan (Moosa 1988: 121). Their main fast is held during the first twelve days of the month of Muharram, during which they mourn the murder of 'Alī's son, al-Ḥusayn, during the battle of Karbalā'. During this fast, they avoid any sort of comfort or enjoyment (Shindeldecker 1998: 11).

Their rituals differ markedly from Sunnī rituals (Zeidan 1999: 79). Their form of community worship, which is attended by both men and women, is referred to as the 'assembly meeting' (*cem* or *ayini cem*)⁹ and is held either in a private home or in a building or a room known as 'assembly house' (*cem evi*). In contrast with mosques, *cem evi*s do not have minarets and *cem* meetings are not announced by a call to prayer (Shindeldecker 1998: 10).

The assembly meeting is led by a 'grandfather' (*dede*): a man recognised to have spiritual and moral authority in the community and who claims to have a direct bloodline connection to the family of the Prophet Muḥammad through one of the twelve *imāms*. Only *dedes* are allowed to lead the rituals and prayers. Before the *dede* holds the religious service, he must make sure that all the members of the congregation are at peace with one another. If he finds that there are any quarrels, he will act as a judge to foster a reconciliation between those involved; anyone who refuses to be reconciled in this way is prevented from participating in the assembly (Shindeldecker 1998: 10). Additionally, those who do not confess their personal sins or are not reconciled with others are disciplined by the *dede* and are sometimes excommunicated until they repent (Moosa 1988: 90; Shindeldecker 1998: 9).

During the *cem ayini*, the *dede* sits on a sheepskin on the floor on one side of the room. The participants, who enter the room barefoot, sit in a circle on the floor, facing each other. They are instructed to cleanse themselves all over before attending an assembly meeting. Most Alevīs also believe that being clean on the inside when coming to worship is at least as important as being clean on the outside; indeed, many regard inner cleanliness as even more important than outer cleanliness. The *dede* says prayers, gives short religious messages, sings solo ballads, and leads the congregation in singing, while playing the *saz* (a seven-stringed lute). A select group of men and women also

9 *Cem* can be translated as community/congregation and *ayin* means rite/ceremony.

perform the *semah*: a ritual circle dance characterised by turning and swirling (Massicard 2013: 15), which symbolises unity with God (Grove 2008). At the end of the service, which is held entirely in Turkish, the congregation shares a meal (Shindeldecker 1998: 10).

One of the Alevīs' customs is to visit holy shrines (*ziyārāt*) dedicated to figures such as Hacı Bektaş and Abdal Musa. They pray at these people's tombs, asking for spiritual cleansing and blessings for themselves and others (Shindeldecker 1998: 8). The Alevīs also hold festivals and celebration days. For instance, they celebrate Nawruz (21 March), which is believed by many to be 'Alī's birthday. Others believe that the date is 'Alī and Fāṭima's wedding anniversary, the day that Joseph was pulled out of the well, or the day God created Earth; in any case, it is considered a significant celebration (Shindeldecker 1998: 11). In addition, they observe numerous folk religious practices, such as lighting candles at saints' tombs, not stepping on the thresholds of holy buildings, and writing wishes on cloth strips before hanging them on trees that are considered spiritually powerful (Shindeldecker 1998: 17).

The Spiritual Brotherhood ceremony (*musahiplik*) is very important in the Alevī faith and society. In this ceremony, two unrelated men, along with their wives, enter into an irreversible, lifetime kinship of total solidarity, in which they share all possessions and the responsibility for all debts, as well as agreeing to support each other and any children in the two families (Shindeldecker 1998: 10). Importantly, this relationship is considered deeper than a blood relationship (Zeidan 1999: 80). The practices and rules followed in Alevī society, such as monogamy, the prohibition of divorce, Spiritual Brotherhood, and the acquisition of the Alevī identity by parentage only, help to guarantee the group's survival (Massicard 2013: 16).

Most Alevīs believe that one can change his or her position in life through education and work. They say that "the greatest act of worship is to work" (Shindeldecker 1998: 7). Observers have noted that Alevī society is divided into two separate endogamous groups: the *Ocak* ('hearth'), which consists of the spiritual and social elite, who claim descent from 'Alī, al-Ḥusayn, the *imāms*, legendary Saints, or religious warriors and who constitute a priestly caste; and the *Talips* (disciples), the lay majority. Religious knowledge is passed down orally by the *Ocak* families, who are responsible for the religious and social leadership of the community. The *Ocaks* are the central authority for the survival of Alevī religious knowledge and identity, and comprise some ten percent of the Alevī community (Zeidan 1999: 79).

4.3 *From the Ottoman Empire to the Turkish Republic*

Up until the late Ottoman period, the Kızılbaş were considered heretics. They had no official status, being neither members of the dominant Sunnī group,

nor protected by the status afforded by the *millet* system (Massicard 2013: 16). During the middle of the nineteenth century, however, shortly after the establishment of the Protestant *millet* (1850), Protestant missionaries started working among the Alevīs (as was the case with the Nuṣayrīs of Syria). This alarmed the Ottoman authorities and, as with the Nuṣayrīs, the Ottomans reacted by seeking to integrate the Alevīs into official state religion by building mosques and sending *imāms* to their villages (Massicard 2013: 17).

After the founding of the Turkish republic in 1923 and the ascendance of Mustafa Kemal Atatürk (d. 1938), who instituted state secularism, there was a change in the attitude of the Alevīs. The Alevīs were supportive of the secular ideals of Atatürk (Van Bruinessen 1996: 8). Atatürk's policy on secularism was to remove religion from the public realm and reduce it to a matter of the faith and practice of the individual. In 1924, he established the Directorate of Religious Affairs (*Diyanet İşleri Başkanlığı*), an arm of the state responsible for overseeing religious matters and ensuring their separation by law from other affairs of state. The Diyanet provides religious services and, at the same time, regulates the majority of religious activities in Turkey (Hurd 2014: 417). According to the Diyanet, the Alevīs are Muslims who were pushed away somehow from the 'true path.' The Alevīs' religious status was not recognised and *cem evi*s were not recognised as places of worship, unlike mosques, churches, and synagogues, which were exempted from water and electricity charges due to their status (Massicard 2003: 169). Alevī places of worship were not given these privileges.

Despite all this, the Alevīs still chose to stay in their isolated villages. A change in the Alevī attitude began, however, in the 1950s, when group members started leaving the villages to settle in the towns in Western Turkey. Some even migrated further west to other parts of Europe, mainly Germany (Van Bruinessen 1996: 7). On one hand, when the Alevīs migrated to the towns, became educated, and began working in the public service sector, this helped them to integrate into wider society and put an end to their marginalisation. It brought them into closer contact with the Sunnīs, from whom they had remained socially separate for centuries (Van Bruinessen 1996: 7). On the other hand, however, migration largely weakened their religious practice, since they could not perform their religious practices publicly in places where a mixture of citizens with different beliefs resided (Massicard 2005: 4). In addition, in some regions, relations between the Sunnīs and the Alevīs were marked by tension. During the 1970s, there were bloody clashes between some conservative Sunnī groups and the Alevīs, resulting in the death of hundreds of Alevīs (Martens 2009: 19).

During the 1980s there was a change in the state's policy towards Islam. The Diyanet was strengthened, new mosques were built, *imāms* were appointed in different parts of Turkey (and included some Alevīs), and religious education

was made obligatory. These measures were viewed by some as governmental efforts to bring the Alevīs into the Sunnī fold (Van Bruinessen 1996: 8). During those years, an Alevī cultural revival was witnessed. In an attempt to reconstruct the Alevī culture, community, and identity, the newly educated Alevī elite leadership organised foundations and trusts, rebuilt Saints' tombs, and restored rituals. Alevī voluntary associations sprang up all over Turkey, Alevī rituals were performed publicly, and new *cem evi*s were opened. Alevī intellectuals published several works in which they reinterpreted Alevī history, doctrine, and rituals, and defined its relationship to Sunnī Islam, thus resulting in a 'reinvention' of Alevī traditions. The Alevīs stopped 'hiding' their identity and started calling for its recognition (Massicard 2013: 4). These efforts continued into the 1990s, when the Alevīs increased their political activity. They demanded the legalisation of their religious rituals and practices, the integration of their doctrine into the state education system, and a fair share of broadcasting time in the official media (Zeidan 1999: 78). The state, for its part, began assisting in the organisation of the annual Alevī festival commemorating Hacı Bektaş, which became a place for "political bargaining, [and] expressing demands and promises" (Massicard 2000: 29).

The Alevīs in Europe were active, too, but in a different way. In 2004, due to Alevī demands, the EU officially categorised the Alevīs as a "non-Sunnī Muslim minority" (Massicard 2013: 9), while the Venice Commission defined them as a disadvantaged minority in need of legal recognition and protection (Hurd 2014: 430). At the same time, the chairman of the Dede Commission of the Federation of Alevī Communities in Germany, Hasan Kılavuz, openly rejected attempts to associate Alevism with Islamic tradition:

Alevilik is a belief in its own right. Alevīs possess a belief that sees God everywhere in the universe. Alevīs performed their worship and beliefs for a thousand years in a modest and extremely pure form; today, some *dedes* try to decorate this form of belief with fake pearls. These *dedes*, which are insecure about themselves, which are carried away by a minority complex towards the Sunnī Muslim faith, distance the essence of Alevism from our traditions and customs [...] We cannot connect the faith of the Anatolian Alevīs with the basic principles of the Islamic religion.

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In contemporary Turkey, however, the Diyanet promotes a version of Sunnī Ḥanafī Islam that incorporates Alevism into Islam, considering it an interpretation of the faith. Here, reference is made to the "common share of Islam," a phrase that overlooks the complexity of Islamic traditions, which, like all

religious traditions, are fundamentally indeterminate and contested (Hurd 2014: 432). Moreover, despite these attempts at bringing the Alevīs into the wider community, Alevī community leaders are still not trained via or funded by state resources. To this day, *cem evi*s are treated more like cultural centers than houses of worship, and Alevism is not taught at state schools or included in textbooks (Özyürek 2009: 124–125).

5 Similarities and Differences between the ‘Alawīs and the Alevīs

The historical and ethnic backgrounds of the two creeds discussed here are very different. The ‘Alawī creed developed from Arab Islamic origins in Iraq in the ninth century and, up until the 1920s, they were known as Nuṣayrīs. The Alevī creed developed in Anatolia during the thirteenth century, however, from Turkoman tribes in the main, and followers came to be known as Alevīs in the 1920s. There are similarities in terms of their names: both were named to indicate their loyalty to, or descent from, ‘Alī ibn Abī Ṭālib, who is venerated by both creeds. Moreover, both groups have lived in isolated villages and have been persecuted by Muslim Sunnī rulers as they were considered heretics (*zındıks*) that endangered Islam. Since the 1920s, the political influence of both the ‘Alawīs and the Alevīs has increased considerably—especially that of the ‘Alawīs, who, ultimately, have become the rulers of Syria.

There are also some similarities and differences with regard to Alevī and ‘Alawī religious doctrine and practices. They both believe in a trinity, but while the ‘Alawī trinity consists of ‘Alī, Muḥammad, and Salmān, the Alevī trinity includes Allāh, Muḥammad, and ‘Alī. The way in which they tend to view ‘Alī differs, too. The ‘Alawīs see ‘Alī as a human form through which God contacted humanity in a docetic appearance. Here, ‘Alī is considered superior to the Prophet Muḥammad. Some Alevīs, however, consider both Prophet Muḥammad and ‘Alī to be emanations of the divine, while others believe ‘Alī is the ultimate example of the perfect human and a gate to esoteric knowledge. The ‘Alawīs believe in the transmigration of souls, while the Alevīs do not. Neither group prays at a mosque; the ‘Alawīs pray at private houses and the Alevīs pray at *cem evi*s. Moreover, neither group prays five times a day nor performs pilgrimage to Mecca. During Ramadan, the ‘Alawīs, like the rest of the Muslims, do fast, but also abstain from speech and give it (Ramadan) a mystical meaning, while the Alevīs do not which are typical aspects of other Islamic traditions.

In terms of the social makeup of the two creeds’ followers, the ‘Alawīs are divided into two groups: the *khassa* (the initiated elite, who are in a minority)

and the *'amma*, who are the majority. Similarly, the Alevīs also form two groups: the *Ocak* (the spiritual and social elite, who are a minority) and the *Talips* (lay members). This, however, is not a unique feature of these two movements, but a common feature to many Islamic and non-Islamic religious groups.

6 Conclusion

Looking closely at the doctrine, practices, and history of the Alevīs and the 'Alawīs, it is evident that the differences between these two creeds exceed their similarities. Their historical and ethnic backgrounds are different, and so are their geopolitical conditions. While the 'Alawī/Nuṣayrī creed developed in Iraq in the ninth century and is of Arab origin, the Alevī creed was born several centuries later, stemming mainly of Turkoman tribes that settled in Anatolia during the thirteenth century. As we have seen, the ways that they view 'Alī and Muḥammad, their interpretations of the divine triad, their festivals and prayers, and their religious assemblies and practices differ, too.

Where they are similar is in that they have both suffered from aggressiveness leveled at them by Sunnī rulers, who, historically speaking, have viewed them as heretics endangering Islam. Moreover, the two groups' reactions to Sunnī oppression were similar. To avoid persecution and for self-preservation, followers of both creeds chose to live in homogenous villages in inaccessible, mountainous regions. Since their rituals and beliefs were different from those of the Sunnī majority, they resorted, in both cases, to secrecy, thus causing Sunnīs to accuse them of moral deviance.

Even though such comparisons can be made, the creeds have certainly evolved very differently. Within forty years, the 'Alawīs of Syria, despite comprising only twelve percent of the total population, managed to become the rulers of their country; the Alevīs of Turkey, however, are still striving for state recognition and equality. What can be said is that, although both groups changed their names in the 1920s for different reasons, such changes did, in some ways (and perhaps in one case more than the other), help them to become integrated into Islam.

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