

and comportment, Aybui has deftly applied feminist and gender analysis to deconstruct these ever-popular ethical texts.

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## **A History of the 'Alawis: From Medieval Aleppo to the Turkish Republic. Stefan Winter, (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2016). Pp. 328. \$29.95 paper. ISBN: 9780691173894**

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The 'Alawis are considered a branch of Imami Shi'ism, today concentrated on the Mediterranean coast, between Adana in Southern Turkey and Tripoli in Northern Lebanon. Until the French Mandate over Syria, they were referred to as Nusayris, a term deemed pejorative today. In Syria, they represent an important portion of the population (11 percent) and have been the dominant minority controlling the state since the putsch of Hafiz al-Asad in 1970. The civil war raging in Syria since 2011 has awoken interest in the 'Alawis and generated an important literature concerning their history and their current role in state and society.

Stefan Winter's *A History of the 'Alawis* can be considered a convenient handbook, a chronological introduction to the history of the 'Alawis up to the French Mandate over Syria and the Turkish Republic (until 1936). It does not include the more recent history of Syria, but it points to the current fate of the land and its inhabitants.

The work is based on a new interpretation of traditional evidence and on the input of several new sources. Indeed, Winter had access to an original unpublished 'Alawi biographical dictionary which fed a recent new domestic historiography. It has been especially useful to him for approaching the interactions with Ayyubid and Mamluk leaders and with Isma'ili neighbors during the Medieval period. Winter has relied upon Ottoman fiscal censuses and registers of the shari'a court of Tripoli, French Foreign Office and Military archives, and those of the Turkish Republic, which open new perspectives on the 'Alawis in the interwar period.

Winter appears at odds with the common "metanarrative" concerning the 'Alawis. Throughout the book, he engages discussions against the mainstream historiography dominated by nationalist and sectarian prejudices. 'Alawis are generally presented as a marginal and persecuted branch of Islam, compelled to seek refuge in the mountains. The supposed obscurity of 'Alawism exerts a real fascination, which has led many to overemphasize the specificity and irreconcilability of 'Alawis with the Sunni majority of Syria. From the 18th century until the interwar period, the designation "Nusayris," has been often considered by Orientalists and missionaries a diminutive of "Nasara" (Christian), whereas it derives from a 9th-century Shi'i mystic and scholar named Ibn Nusayr al-Namiri. This misunderstanding has allowed some authors to imagine that 'Alawis were Christians who had been compelled to become Muslims but maintained Christian beliefs and rituals.

By reassessing the available sources, Winter sets the Nusayris in the Islamic context of their origins, in a time in which Shi'ism was a front ranking force in Iraq and Syria, without clear doctrinal and institutional borders. Chapter 1 outlines their roots within the intellectual context of Iraq in the period between the 9th and 11th centuries, in which Imami Twelver Shi'ism was not yet formed into a strict orthodoxy, and the *ghulat* (extremists) who deified 'Ali were not yet clearly identified and excluded. 'Alawism itself never completely defined the borders of orthodoxy and orthopraxy and remained open to conceptions and practices coming from Christian Gnosticism or Zoroastrism.

As has been demonstrated by recent anthropological work, it is in situations of competition and mimicry that communal borders are more clearly drawn. From the 10th century onward, the competition with

the Isma‘ili Shi‘a of the Fatimid dynasty, reigning over Egypt, and the Buyid amirs, who ruled the Abbasid empire and endeavored to formulate an Imami Shi‘i orthodoxy, triggered a Nusayri movement of predication and diffusion (*da‘wa*) which enjoyed open and discreet support among the political elite in Syria, and gained a significant following among urban classes. The propagation of ‘Alawism in the Syrian mountains from the 10th century cannot be clearly retraced, but it happened in competition with Twelver Shi‘ism and the Druze, a branch of Isma‘ilism, drawing the sectarian geography of the mountains between Antioch and Acre roughly speaking until today.

The political leadership of Amir Makzun al-Sinjari (13th century) resisted both Crusaders and Sunni Muslims and structured the ‘Alawis as a political body. In that period, Shi‘ism declined while Sunni orthodoxy gained strength through its institutionalization by the Ayyubids and Mamluks. The concentration of a compact ‘Alawi “island” in a Sunni “sea” cemented the religious leadership and identity of the community and fixed its position vis-à-vis the state. Amir Makzun eliminated adversaries who represented allegedly a *hulūlī* (incarnationist) tendency within Shi‘ism. According to Winter, it is through this process that ‘Alawism became structured into an esoteric community, characterized by the distinction between an initiated leadership and a popular class, and by specific folk rituals. The dualism of the ‘Alawi belief system, and its chronological coincidence with Catharism and Bogomilism, leads the author to suggest proximity with these Western and Eastern European movements, an assumption which may be risky with regard to the current debates among historians concerning the origins, genuine believing, and organization of these groups.

An inescapable reference which contributed to the image of the ‘Alawis as a minority persecuted by Sunni Islam, is the fatwa of Ibn Taymiyya (d. 1328), which asserts that the Nusayri are “more godless than Jews, Christians and many polytheists” (p. 57). The fatwa claims they are accomplices of the Frankish Crusaders and Mongol invaders, and it is permissible to shed their blood and to seize their property. It is not clear in which context Ibn Taymiyya issued his fatwa, which does not attest a specific and precise knowledge of ‘Alawism. As a radical Hanbali jurist, the Damascene scholar uses the threat of Shi‘ism as an instrumental argument in his struggle against the more moderate Sunni authorities. However, Ibn Taymiyya cannot be blamed for inspiring Mamluk policy towards the Syrian Mountain people. Following Winter’s interpretation, the well-documented ‘Alawi uprising in Jabala in 1318, featuring millenarian accents under a leading mahdi, was in reaction to an attempt by the central administration to take control over the region by curtailing the autonomy of local amirs and imposing a Sunni orthodoxy.

The author argues against posterior history-writing of this episode by chroniclers interpreting these conflicts within an exclusive religious framework. He intends to distance himself from a confessional historiography through an approach which explores the imperial state’s geopolitical and fiscal motivations to take control of peripheral areas. Nevertheless, it would be anachronistic to distinguish too radically secular politics and economic issues from religious considerations for this period. The religious base of social hierarchy was a fact universally admitted, which the sultans had to rely on in order to gain legitimacy and to restore authority. The social hierarchy based on religious criteria could not be completely ignored by the sultans at least for maintaining public order.

The Mamluks imposed a discriminatory capitation on male members of the Nusayri community. This specific taxation, maintained by the Ottomans, produced, like *jizya* for Christians, a precious source for historians. The capitation censuses of the 16th century allow Winter to sketch a geography of the main ‘Alawi population centers and offer precious clues to rebellions against the central state. A relative mobility of the population is also evidenced. ‘Alawis did not live in a closed refuge. On the contrary they participated in the coastal economy and often shared territory with Sunnis, Ismailis, and Christians. From the end of the 17th century, the inclusion of the region into the world economy through tobacco production not only fostered the growth of the city of Latakia, but also prompted a demographic increase, which urged the highlanders to migrate, provoking unsettledness and violence, just like it happened in the same time with the Maronites in Central and Southern Mount Lebanon. The state, rather than harassing the non-conformist population, appears to have preferred accommodation and conciliation in order to maximize fiscal incomes in the region.

Ottoman documents accessed by the author reveal from the 16th century upwards a new element of social organization among the ‘Alawis: the term “Kalbi,” referring to a tribal designation, begins to replace the appellation “Nusayri.” Later Western reports and consular correspondence attest to the tribal

organization of the “Ansariés.” Winter challenges classic Orientalist assertions about timeless social organization in pre-modern Arab society. He highlights the emergence of the tribe as the result of Ottoman decentralization in the 17th Century, with the introduction of tax farming (*iltizām*), favoring the emergence of a local leadership. Tribal and kinship links thus appear as a way to express new forms of dependence and solidarity, encouraged by the state, in order to control the population and to secure its fiscal incomes. A class of local landlords emerged, among which Saqr ibn Mahfuz Shibli Shamsin (d. 1813) was for forty years the most prominent, playing a political role at a regional level, as an ally or a fighter of Ottoman governors and the Shihabi amirs of Mount Lebanon.

The beginning of the 19th century is characterized by increasing violence, which for the first time took on a sectarian or confessional feature, matching the same evolution in Mount Lebanon. ‘Alawi mountaineer’s “brigandage” (a typical 19th century notion which it would be also worthwhile to deconstruct), in a context of local Ottoman leaders’ rivalry and international meddling, was savagely repressed, with the support of sectarian rhetoric. A document from the shari‘a court of Tripoli (1817) registering the conversion of a huge group of *Shamsīn* Nusayris consists of a profession of faith, abjuring ‘Alawi beliefs and practices, in terms which echo the abjurations before a Catholic Inquisition court. The terminology of Ibn Taymiyya’s fatwa appears for the first time used in official documents. No doubt that the influence of the Sunni revival, and more precisely the proselytizing of a radical Sunni shaykh originating from Sus (Tunisia) settled in Latakia, played a determinant role in this development.

The Egyptian occupation (1831–41) which forbade discrimination and offered new opportunities to minorities by introducing new conditions for commercial and industrial improvement appealed to the ‘Alawis. Nevertheless, a new taxation system and the attempt to disarm the mountains triggered a general rebellion of the highlands, which took the form of guerilla warfare, which was finally crushed in 1836. The return of Ottoman rule did not change the situation of constant sedition and brigandage in the ‘Alawi mountains. Neither the reform of tax system and property law, attempts to enforce military service, nor general “civilizing mission” toward highlanders and rural populations fostered peace. At the end of the 19th century, Sultan Abdülhamit launched a proactive policy to stop foreign (missionary) influence and to educate the ‘Alawi as good Sunni Ottoman subjects. “Conversions” of ‘Alawis to Sunnism seems to have been relatively successful, mainly in more recent settlements. It is nevertheless noteworthy that the newly converted faced hostility from native Sunnis.

The troubled period of the end of the Ottoman Empire, World War I, and the establishment of French colonial authority is not exhaustively treated by Winter, who instead concentrates on specific issues contributing new insight. As other sectarian communities like Twelver Shi‘i or Christian Assyrians, the improvement of education led to an “awakening” of ‘Alawi consciousness, mainly through new forms of secular publications on history and identity. At the same time, ‘Alawi religious leaders attempted to escape isolation by establishing contacts with other sectarian leaders, especially Twelver Shi‘i leaders of Jabal Amil.

This helped later to give the ‘Alawis a place in the official narrative of Syria’s fight for independence. Winter discusses this phase through the lenses of the French and Turkish archives. With the end of hostilities between the French and Turks in October 1921, the ‘Alawis became divided between two states with radically different orientations. In a brief overview, Winter emphasizes “the contrast between France’s policies of ethno-religious differentiation and Turkey’s radical ethno-national assimilationism,” and suggests “that neither strategy ultimately succeeded in the long run in securing for ‘Alawis the recognition as full and equal citizens that they had coveted since the late Ottoman period” (p. 272).

Winter’s book persuades us that there is no fixed and invariant identity, that history must always be questioned anew. It offers a method for studying “sectarian minorities” in the Middle East, by removing them from a still dominant confessional historiography, by examining fresh sources and by re-positioning the researcher. He shows the importance of balancing our observation scales, from a very narrow level of individual or small group actor strategies to imperial politics. As with many studies concerning a specific minority, his is built on a dialectic between minority and majority, periphery and central state. He shows how much neighborhood, mimicry, and conflict between different minorities impacts history and the identity of each group.