

INTRODUCTION

The ‘Alawis are doubtless one of the most conspicuous, talked-about confessional groups in the Middle East today. Considered a branch of Imami Shi‘ism and referred to in much of the classical literature as “Nusayris,” the ‘Alawis represent perhaps 11 percent of the population in Syria (approximately two million people), with important regional concentrations in the province of Antioch (Hatay) as well as in Adana and Mersin in southern Turkey,¹ and in the ‘Akkar district and the city of Tripoli in northern Lebanon. There is also a single ‘Alawi village in southern Lebanon, Ghajar, half of which was sectored off and has remained under Israeli occupation even after the IDF’s withdrawal from most of the country in 2000. Whatever Ghajar’s eventual status (as of September 2015 it is still occupied), a small population of ‘Alawis can thus also be said to have come under de facto Israeli sovereignty. But it is above all their role in the modern history of Syria that has attracted attention: long deprecated as a heterodox mountain “sect” living on the geographic and social margins of the state, the rise of a new class of ‘Alawi officers in the army of independent Syria, their dominant position within the Ba‘th Party and the outright seizure of power by the ‘Alawi general Hafiz al-Asad in 1970, his lengthy reign as president followed by that of his son Bashar in 2000, and the disproportionate role since played by ‘Alawis in the state, especially marked since Syria’s descent into civil war and sectarian chaos in 2011, have all served to put the spotlight on the putative origins, development, and political identity of the community as such.

Despite (or rather because of) the current interest they have generated, however, the older history of the ‘Alawis is often treated in essentialist terms and reduced to a single overarching theme of religious deviance, marginality, and oppression. Whether in Western or Arab Gulf media, hardly any report on Syria today fails to specify that ‘Alawism is a “minority” regarded by other Muslims as heretical, and that the entire community has therefore been “historically persecuted.” According to this metanarrative, which is also shared

1 Not to be confused with the “Alevi” of Turkey, with whom they share a similar name and confessional basis but who constitute an entirely distinct, or even several distinct, ethnic and religious communities.

by a good number of academics, a fatwa that was given by the well-known fundamentalist scholar Ibn Taymiyya in the fourteenth century and which calls for their extermination would also sum up their actual lived experience under Muslim rule, such that they survived only by remaining holed up in their “mountain refuge” of northwestern Syria, before emerging from isolation in the French mandate period and ultimately “capturing power” over the whole country. The concealment, self-defense, and clannishness of the ceaselessly persecuted sect would thus go a long way toward explaining the current regime’s nature. Ironically, Asad proponents have begun to play on this view themselves and stoke fears among the ‘Alawis and other groups of the Sunni majority’s unbridled historical hatred, as a means of enforcing loyalty to the regime.²

The problem with the notion of “historical persecution” and other such blanket assessments is that they are not borne out by the historical evidence. In basing their perception on fatwas, theological treatises, and narrative chronicles, historians have always tended to concentrate on the ‘Alawis’ normative separation from the rest of society and on episodic, inherently rare cases of communal conflict. The focus on confessional difference—part of a wider pattern of interpretation which assumes that religion is really the only thing that matters in the Middle East—is not only unsatisfying in scholarly terms but also indefensible in light of the sectarianist myths being mobilized on all sides of the civil war in Syria. Numerous sources exist that point to the ‘Alawis’ integration within wider Syrian society throughout history. In particular, a wealth of Mamluk administration manuals, Ottoman and Turkish archival documents, and the ‘Alawis’ own prosopographical literature challenge the notion that the ‘Alawi “community,” if there even was one such thing, was cut off from the world around it, differentiated from other rural populations, or subjected to systematic discrimination. This study aims to provide a less essentializing, more material account of ‘Alawi history by focusing not on its confessional underpinnings but on the origins and spread of the ‘Alawi mission in Syria, on the ‘Alawis’ specific situation under successive Muslim empires and their relations with other communities, and on regional and class differences within ‘Alawi society itself. It proposes a “secular” approach to this history in the double sense of the word (as in French *séculier* and *séculaire*): by privileging the socioeconomic, political, and administrative context of modern ‘Alawism’s development over its purely religious traits, and by adopting a *longue-durée*, multicentury perspective in order to take stock of the necessarily profound transformation of ‘Alawi communal identity over time.

2 See the recent analyses in Michael Kerr and Craig Larkin, eds., *The Alawis of Syria: War, Faith and Politics in the Levant* (London: Hurst, 2015).

CLASSICAL PERCEPTIONS OF ‘ALAWISM,
NOMENCLATURISM, AND DISSIMULATION

In terms of doctrine, ‘Alawism or Nusayrism is a secret mystical revelation of the true nature of God, the cosmos, and the “imamate” (i.e., the belief, common to all Shi‘is, that ‘Ali ibn Abi Talib and his lineage were the Prophet Muhammad’s only legitimate successors), passed down from Muhammad Ibn Nusayr, a scholar and companion of the last two visible Shi‘i Imams in the ninth century. Because of the concealed, esoteric nature of the teaching, which, much like in a Sufi order, is transmitted only to select initiates, pious ‘Alawis have naturally been loath to divulge the details of their faith and cult to outsiders, and it has thus become a common cliché to present ‘Alawism as obscure, mysterious, and insufficiently studied.³ In fact, its very fascination has spawned a huge literature in modern times that belies its supposed obscurity. Some of the first European travelers to the region did not actually meet any ‘Alawis and were content simply to rely on their local interlocutors for their breathless depictions of the sect; even renowned orientalist scholars have repeated outrageous claims to the effect that the ‘Alawis are pagans, that they worship the sun, dogs, and female genitalia or partake in night-time sex orgies as part of their cultic practices—things that have of course formed part of the standard register of accusations against sectarian groups, both Christian and Muslim, throughout history. At the same time, the increasing presence of Europeans in the Middle East and the expansion of oriental studies at Western universities in the nineteenth century also produced a large number of sober, text-critical or empirical studies that early served to establish ‘Alawism as a privileged subject of academic inquiry.

Classical scholarship on ‘Alawism, much like on other Eastern religions, has concentrated for the most part on its hypothetical origins and allegorical teaching. Joseph Simon Assemani’s *Bibliotheca Orientalis* (1717–28), a compendium of oriental texts translated into Latin, which contains a somewhat deprecatory account of the sect’s beginnings, long served as the basis of European knowledge about the ‘Alawis;⁴ among the first critical examinations of the community, however, is that offered by Carsten Niebuhr (d. 1815), a member of a Danish-funded expedition to Arabia and the Far East in the 1760s. Niebuhr’s account is based on information obtained from sympathetic local contacts as well as on a Nusayri treatise apparently seized by the Ottoman authorities, and it already contains in essence what is known about

3 For a state-of-the-art overview, see Heinz Halm, “Nusayriyya,” *Encyclopaedia of Islam*, new ed. [EI2] (Leiden: Brill, 1995), 8:145–48; İlyas Üzüm, “Nusayrîlik,” *Türkiye Diyanet Vakfı İslam Ansiklopedisi* (Istanbul: İSAM, 2007), 33:270–74.

4 Cited in Constantin-François Volney (d. 1820), *Travels through Egypt and Syria in the Years 1783, 1784, and 1785* (New York: Evert Duyckinck, 1798), 2:3–5.

the religion today. Niebuhr stands out among early writers for his attempt to explain 'Alawism rationally, noting that the "Nusayris" prefer to refer to themselves as "Mûmen" (believers), accurately summarizing their belief structure, and suggesting that accusations regarding their supposed worship of the sun and other celestial bodies might result from a misinterpretation of their catalog of symbolic names and terms.⁵ Subsequent orientalists and missionaries explored at great length the sect's possible grounding in Neoplatonism, Gnosticism, and Eastern Christianity. Studies by Olaus Gerhard Tychsen (1784, 1793) and Heinrich Gottlob Paulus (1792), for example, debated whether the Nusayris were to be identified with the Mandaeans, whose syncretic beliefs and similar-sounding alternate name of "Nazoraean" proved a source of lasting confusion;⁶ a number of later authors followed Ernest Renan (d. 1892) in assuming that "Nusayri" was the Arabic diminutive of "Nasara" (Christians) and that the 'Alawis were hence a long-lost Christian sect.⁷ Though easily disproven, this notion does bespeak the fact that Nusayri thought had several features in common with early Christian Gnosticism and that on a popular level, the 'Alawis of the Syrian highlands often participated in or even adopted the religious holidays of their Christian neighbors. Even today, the degree of Christianity's and other religions' possible influences on 'Alawism continues to be a subject of much interest and debate among specialized scholars.⁸

The fascination with 'Alawism's roots and doctrines has also brought attention to bear on two aspects of 'Alawi identity of concern here, namely, the lack of a uniform historical term for the group, and the supposed practice of *taqiyya* or dissimulation. The name "Nusayri" is first encountered in medieval Muslim heresiographies and has never been used by 'Alawi scholars in their own writings. On the other hand, the 'Alawi populace did in many cases identify themselves vis-à-vis others as Nusayris (or, in the contracted colloquial pronunciation of the Arabic plural, *an-Nusayriyya*, which was then consecrated in European travel reports as "Ansarie," "Ansairy" etc.), so that one can presume that, as with other heterodox groups, they eventually appropriated a term that had originally been applied to them by others in

5 Carsten Niebuhr, *Reisebeschreibung nach Arabien und anderen unliegenden Ländern* (Copenhagen: Nicolaus Möller, 1778), 2:439–44.

6 Olaus Gerhard Tychsen (d. 1815), "Die Syrischen Nassairier und ihre Itame," in *Memorabilien*, vol. 4 (1793), 185–88; Heinrich Eberhard Gottlob Paulus (d. 1851), in *Memorabilien: Eine philologisch-theologische Zeitschrift der Geschichte und Philologie der Religionen dem Bibelstudium und der morgenländischen Litteratur gewidmet*, ed. H. Paulus (Leipzig: Siegfried Lebrecht Crusius, 1793), 3:111–22.

7 René Dussaud (d. 1951), *Histoire et religion des Nusairis* (Paris: Bouillon, 1900), xxxi, 9, 14.

8 Meir Bar-Asher and Aryeh Kofsky, *The Nusayri-'Alawi Religion: An Enquiry into Its Theology and Liturgy* (Leiden: Brill, 2002); Yaron Friedman, *The Nusayri-'Alawis: An Introduction to the Religion, History and Identity of the Leading Minority in Syria* (Leiden: Brill, 2010).

a pejorative sense.⁹ The name “Alawi,” while serving occasionally in medieval times to distinguish Imami from Ismaili Shi‘is (see chapter 1), was not adopted until the very end of Ottoman rule; by way of self-identification, Syrian ‘Alawis were more liable to refer to themselves as *fellahin* (“peasantry”) or as followers of the “Khasibi” path, in distinction to other currents within the early Shi‘i movement. The use of the term to designate and construct a single overarching sectarian community for the first time, typified in the publication of Muhammad Amin Ghalib al-Tawil’s *Tarikh al-‘Alawiyyin* in 1924,¹⁰ to date the only complete history of the ‘Alawis per se, as will be argued in chapter 6, was in itself a historical process proper to the dislocation of the Ottoman Empire.

The other aspect of ‘Alawism that has received considerable, often undue, attention in Western studies is the practice of dissimulation, known in Islamic terminology as *taqiyya*, by which ‘Alawis as well as members of other sectarian minorities could conceal or at least downplay their identity in order to avoid discrimination. The principle of *taqiyya* is firmly anchored in Islamic jurisprudence but has historically played a particular role in Shi‘ism and certain Sufi rites, where it can also have the meaning of keeping the mystery of one’s secret knowledge hidden from outsiders.¹¹ Nusayri initiates thus certainly practiced *taqiyya* as regards their religious precepts, but their Sunni disparagers as well as Western observers have often claimed that this extended to lying about their identity too: “It is their principle to adhere to no certain religion,” the seventeenth-century English voyager Henry Maundrell remarked, “but chameleonlike, they put on the color of that religion, whatever it be, which is reflected upon them from the persons with whom they happen to converse.”¹² Not insisting on the nonconformist elements of their faith, or on questions of religion in general, will have come naturally to members of heterodox minorities when traveling or dealing with the authorities over

9 Samuel Lyde (d. 1860), *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), 1. The term ‘Alawi will be used when discussing the community and its history in a general sense, but the term Nusayri will also be used without prejudice when referring more precisely to its religious doctrines or when quoting from primary sources. “Nusayri” has gained some acceptance in Syria and Lebanon when used in a historical context; see Muhammad Ahmad ‘Ali, *Al-‘Alawiyyin fi’l-Tarikh: Haqa’iq wa-Abatil* (Beirut: Mu’assasat al-Nur, 1997), 259–61. In Turkey, where the term is not subject to the same political taboo, it is commonly used to distinguish the “Arap Aleviliği” (Arab ‘Alawism) of Hatay and adjoining regions from the larger Turkish “Alevi” denomination.

10 Muhammad Amin Ghalib al-Tawil (d. 1932), *Tarikh al-‘Alawiyyin*, 3rd ed. (Beirut: Dar al-Andalus, 1979).

11 Etan Kohlberg, “Some Imami-Shi‘i Views of Taqiya,” *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 95 (1975): 395–402; Friedman, *Nusayri-‘Alawis*, 13–14, 143–47.

12 Henry Maundrell (d. 1701), *A Journey from Aleppo to Jerusalem at Easter, A.D. 1697* (Boston: Samuel Simpkins, 1836), 21.

more worldly matters; on the other hand, in a time when different segments of society were even more clearly distinguishable by dress and dialect¹³ than today, it is highly unlikely that ‘Alawis and other mountaineers were not immediately recognizable for what they were. Mamluk chancery manuals and Ottoman administrative documents, as will be seen, demonstrate that the authorities usually had a precise, well-informed idea of their taxable subjects’ sectarian identities, if only very little concern with their actual confessional beliefs. The capture and execution of certain ‘Alawis in Latakia in the early nineteenth century (see chapter 5) belie the notion that they could merely hide their identity. *Taqiyya* was, historically speaking, simply never a factor in their interaction with the state or with members of other communities.

SOURCES AND ARGUMENT

This study is predicated on the understanding that most literary sources, including the ‘Alawis’ own theological writings as well as Sunni heresiographies, fatwas, medieval chronicles, and essentially any text that names the ‘Alawis (Nusayris) as such, will concentrate on their religious identity and therefore overemphasize their otherness and irreconcilability with the rest of Muslim or Syrian society. The result is that almost all previous studies of the ‘Alawi past either have been too concerned with theology or have provided only *histoire événementielle*, emplotting a handful of references to seemingly ubiquitous, but in fact very rare, instances of sectarian strife, discrimination, and violence of the sort favored in the narrative chronicles, to produce a story of apparently unremitting conflict. The following chapters, on the other hand, will concentrate precisely on the less conspicuous—but ultimately more typical—historical evidence of mundane, uneventful, everyday interaction between the ‘Alawis, their neighbors, and the state authorities. In particular, they will bring to light a wealth of administrative documents from both Istanbul and Tripoli that, among other reasons because they do not support the usual narrative of persecution, have never been used before: tax cadastres and executive orders which show that both the Mamluks and Ottomans recognized and integrated the ‘Alawis as a taxpaying category of subjects; tax farm contracts from the *shar‘iyya* court archives in Tripoli which show that the region was dominated by an autonomous class of Ottoman-‘Alawi landed gentry that owed its success to the development of commercial tobacco farming in the eighteenth century; records of school construction by the state and other social disciplining efforts in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries; and a new series of documents from the military archives

13 Even in modern times ‘Alawis are often distinguished by their pronunciation of the letter q, which is silent in most other Syrian spoken dialects.

of Ankara revealing the functional ties between an 'Alawi revolt against the French at the very end of the Ottoman Empire and Kemalist forces in Anatolia.

These sources will be complemented, especially for the two opening chapters on the medieval period, with a unique, unpublished 'Alawi biographical dictionary (of which the master copy now appears to be inaccessible on account of the civil war) that contains numerous incidental references to 'Alawis interacting on an ordinary, day-to-day level with Ayyubid or Mamluk officials and with their Ismaili neighbors. The *Khayr al-Sani'a fi Mukhtasar Tarikh Ghulat al-Shi'a* by Husayn Mayhub Harfush (d. 1959) has not yet been the object of a systematic study, even though its corpus has begun to inform a broad new, prosopography-based 'Alawi historiography in recent decades.¹⁴ The final two chapters will furthermore incorporate extensive materials from the French Foreign Ministry (La Courneuve) and military (Vincennes) archives that reflect France's growing interest in, and finally authority over, the 'Alawi community in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. The book will close with a consideration of early Turkish republican documents from the National Archives in Ankara, which detail the efforts of Atatürk's Cumhuriyet Halk Partisi (Republican People's Party; CHP) to recast the 'Alawis of southern Turkey as ethnic Turks. By privileging secular over religious sources throughout, this study aims not to discredit the pertinence of 'Alawi religious identity and of the 'Alawi sectarian community as a subject of analysis but to demonstrate that its rapport with its neighbors, rulers, and presumed oppressors can be examined, in all its historical depth, only on a significantly wider documentary basis than has previously been used.

Chronologically this book begins with the establishment of the Shi'i Hamdanid dynasty in Aleppo in 947, under whose patronage the 'Alawi teaching was originally disseminated in geographic Syria. Chapter 1 argues that 'Alawism was not an "offshoot" of "mainstream" Iraqi Twelver Shi'ism but rather constituted one of its central tendencies and was only retrospectively cast as a "heterodox" variant or heresy with the institutionalization of a literary Twelver Shi'ism in the eleventh century. Moreover, its spread throughout the Euphrates valley and into northern Syria, Aleppo, Hama, and finally the coastal highlands from Acre to Latakia (in that order) was the result not of some imagined flight from oppression but rather of a sustained missionary effort (*da'wa*). This *da'wa* was in competition with that of the Ismailis, the Ishaqis, and various other Shi'i subgroups but was not clearly distinct from

14 See 'Ali 'Abbas Harfush (d. 1981), *Al-Maghmurun al-Qudama' fi Jibal al-Ladbiqiyya* (Damascus: Dar al-Yanibi; 1996); Dīb 'Ali Hasan, *A'lam min al-Madhbhab al-Ja'fari "al-'Alawi,"* 3 vols. (Beirut: Dar al-Sahil li'l-Turath, 1997–2000); 'Ali Muhammad al-Musa, *Al-Imam 'Ali wa'l-'Alawiyyun: Dirasa wa-Tarikh wa-Tarajim* (Damascus: Dar al-Fatat, 2002); and Amīl 'Abbas Al Ma'ruf, *Tarikh al-'Alawiyyin fi Bilad al-Sham: Mundhu Fajr al-Islam ila Tarikhina al-Mu'asir khilal Jami' al-'Usur wa'l-Duwaylat illati Marrat 'ala'l-Mintaqa al-'Arabiyya wa'l-Islamiyya,* 3 vols. (Tripoli: Dar al-Amal wa'l-Salam, 2013).

Imami Shi'ism until later medieval times, which explains why 'Alawi and Twelver Shi'i territory in Syria and Lebanon are to the present day perfectly contiguous without overlapping. The 'Alawi *da'wa* was probably the most important of these missions up to the early eleventh century, having the support of various local dynasties including the Hamdanids, the Tanukhids, and even the Fatimids, and therefore developed historically not as a "marginal" sect but as one of the most important currents in all of Islam; its cantonalization in the mountains of western Syria was above all the product of the Crusades, which spelled the effective end of the *da'wa* and increasingly forced the 'Alawis to organize themselves along tribal lines and seek the protection of their erstwhile competitors, the Nizari Ismaili emirs.

This process of inward turning, as chapter 2 will attempt to show, brought on an important internal debate about the limits of 'Alawi religious authority and orthodoxy, which were far more formative of the community than any supposed conflict with other Shi'i or Sunni tendencies; the medieval Arabic chronicles almost never mention the 'Alawi community, which, according to its own biographical sources, benefited from the indifference if not outright tolerance on the part of Ayyubid and Mamluk officials in the later Middle Ages. This chapter will furthermore focus on a punitive campaign against the 'Alawis of the Jabala region in 1318, which has often been taken as representative of general Mamluk policy against the 'Alawis, but which was in fact caused by a local tax revolt and only reinterpreted in later, "piety-minded" Sunni literature as a religious conflict. Ibn Taymiyya's famous fatwa, being one of the only Sunni sources to even mention the sect in this period, has come to be seen today as expressing the one and unchanging Muslim orthodox position on 'Alawism, when in fact Ibn Taymiyya himself was an outcast and his opinions demonstrably had no influence on Mamluk or Ottoman thought until the eighteenth century. A far better source on Mamluk "policy" toward the 'Alawis, I will argue in closing, would be early Ottoman tax cadastres, which perpetuated and institutionalized the Mamluk practice of levying 'Alawi-specific taxes, thereby formally recognizing the community.

The Ottoman cadastres are then examined in detail in chapter 3, both to demonstrate the extent of the Ottoman state's control over the region in the sixteenth century and to show that the Ottomans did not attempt to annihilate the 'Alawi population (as is claimed in local folklore) but rather to maximize their tax revenues, maintaining 'Alawi-specific dues but also emending or even forgiving taxes in areas in need of economic revival. The second part of the chapter will draw mainly on Ottoman executive orders to show that the imperial government perceived of brigandage in the coastal mountains committed by 'Alawis as a social and not a religious problem, repeatedly casting "uneducated" 'Alawi subjects as the victims of manipulation by more powerful figures and not discriminating against them on the basis of their religion.

Continuing in the same vein, chapter 4 will show that with the decentralization of Ottoman provincial rule in the eighteenth century, the authorities were happy to employ known 'Alawi families as government tax farmers in the region, who in turn benefited from the unprecedented development of commercial tobacco cultivation to become a veritable landed gentry; the chapter will argue that growing social disparities within the community, rather than oppression from without, led both to the increasing "tribalization" of 'Alawi society and to widespread 'Alawi migration toward the coastal and interior plains as well as to the colonization of the Hatay district in what is now Turkey.

Chapter 5 tackles the long nineteenth century and the period of Ottoman reform. It begins by showing that the 'Alawi notability increasingly came into conflict with semiautonomous local officials during the breakdown of Ottoman imperial authority at the start of the century, causing the community as a whole to be cast as heretics and outcasts from Ottoman society for the first time. Faced with increasing discrimination and abuse by provincial officials, 'Alawi feudal leaders nonetheless continued to support the diffuse authority of the Ottoman Empire over the intrusive statism of the Egyptian regime between 1832 and 1840. We go on to argue that the 'Alawi community was then increasingly subjected to repressive social engineering measures under the Tanzimat and the reign of Abdülhamid II, including military conscription and conversion. At the same time, however, while resisting efforts at assimilation, the 'Alawis nevertheless also began to avail themselves of the benefits of modern public schooling and proportional representation on newly instituted municipal councils, thereby finding their voice as a political community for perhaps the first time.

Finally, chapter 6 traces the continuing ambivalence of late Ottoman, French mandatory, and Turkish republican efforts to integrate the 'Alawi population into the modern state. After examining both Hamidian and Young Turk concepts of citizenship as applied, or not applied, to the 'Alawis, the chapter highlights the literary and intellectual "awakening" (*yaqza*) led on behalf of the community by a new class of 'Alawi intellectuals on the eve of World War I. Arising out of this watershed communal moment, it will be argued, the great 'Alawi resistance against the French occupying forces in 1918–21, far from constituting a parochial rejection of foreign authority or a local variant of Arab nationalism, as the literature alternately claims, was a coordinated effort with Turkish Kemalist forces and should therefore be understood as part of the "southern front" campaign (Güney Cephesi) of the Turkish "War of Liberation." The book closes with a comparative look at the different fates of the 'Alawi communities in postwar Syria and Turkey and suggests that 'Alawis in Syria were fundamentally divided over support for, and resistance against, the constitution of a separate "Alaouites" state under French rule, a dichotomy with important consequences during

the treaty negotiations between France and Syria in 1936, with which this chronological purview ends, and arguably with echoes down to the present day. The 'Alawi population in southern Turkey, on the other hand, was subjected to radical, even racialized assimilation policies under the iron fist of the CHP, perhaps with the somewhat paradoxical long-term effect that they now constitute a more secure, self-aware sectarian minority within Turkey than do the 'Alawis in Syria.

There is obviously not one, linear progression of 'Alawi destiny from the arrival of the Khasibi *da'wa* in Hamdanid Aleppo to the independence of the modern Syrian and Turkish republics. The lived experiences of the 'Alawi community or communities, over a period of ten centuries and in countless distinct regional and political contexts, from the collapse of Fatimid rule over southern Syria to the Crusades, early state modernization under the Mamluks, the Ottoman conquest, integration into a world system economy and finally modern colonialism, were necessarily diverse. Rather than trying to impose a single interpretative framework or theme on this history, or treating it in isolation, this study aims to bring out the complexity, contingency, and changeability of factors affecting the 'Alawis' secular and multisecular rapport with Middle Eastern, Ottoman, and Syrian society at large. The sources emphasized here tell of fiscal exploitation, war, and migration but also of alliances between Bedouin and 'Alawis, promotions to government office, and intercommunal friendship. As all Syrians today will, in the medium to long term, have no alternative but to rebuild their country as well as their national community in one form or another, the lesson that 'Alawi relations with other groups and individuals were not historically determined by uniform animosity and inescapable oppression but were repeatedly characterized by accommodation, cooperation, and trust may yet be an important one.