

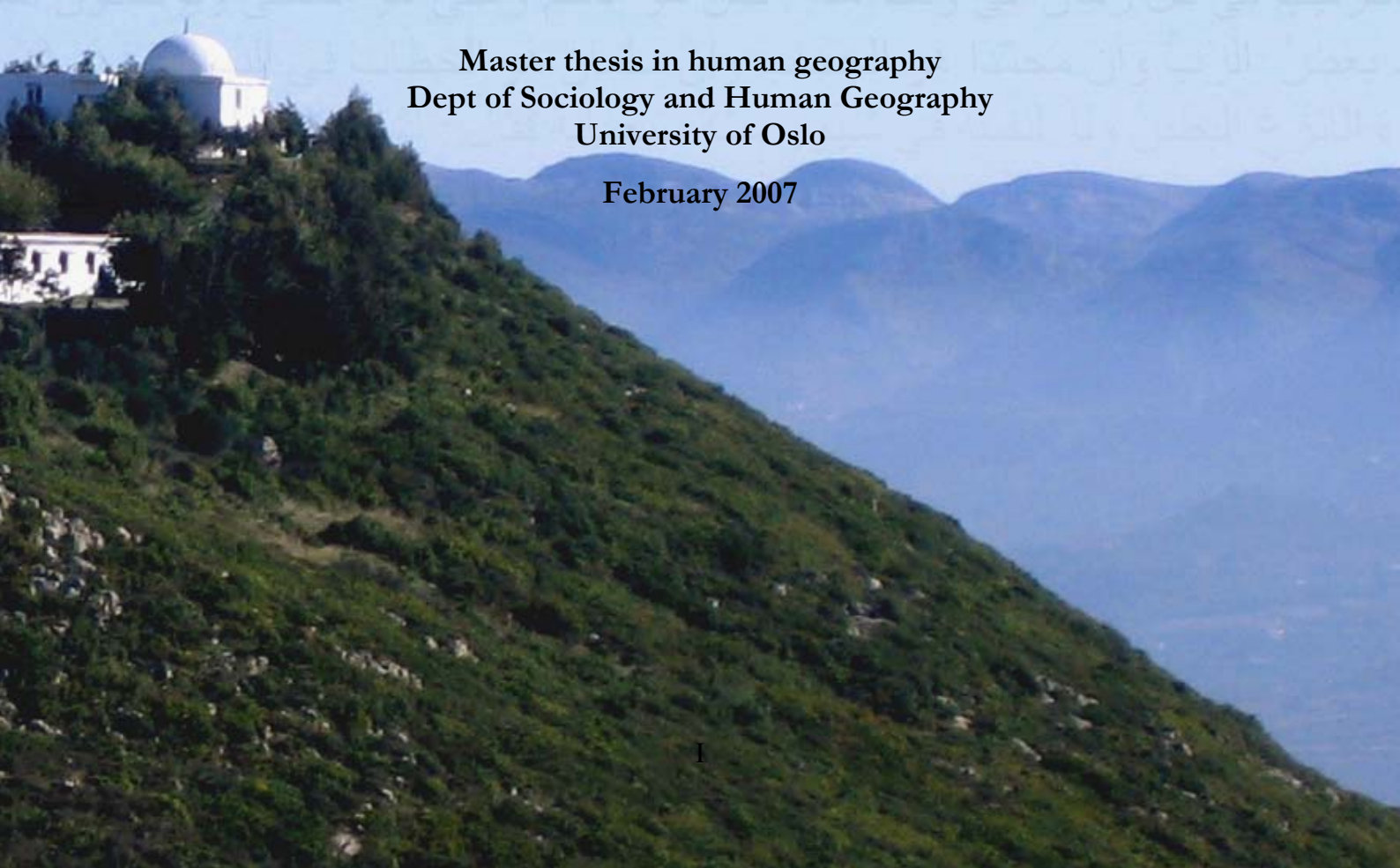
Fear and Resistance

The Construction of Alawi Identity in Syria

Torstein Schiøtz Worren

Master thesis in human geography
Dept of Sociology and Human Geography
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عندما خلق الله الكون، خلق من كل
شيء زوج. فقال الجواب: أنا ذاهب
لسوريا ، فقال السؤال : أنا ذاهب الى
هناك أيضاً .

كعب الأحبار

/

When God created the world, he
paired all things. 'I shall go to
Syria' said Answer. 'That is also
where I am going' said Question.

Ka'b al-Ahbar

Photo on front page by author

Quote on previous page from: Saḥīḥ al-Bukhārī. *Saḥīḥ al-Bukhārī*, 1963, page 213

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Any faults or misinterpretations in this thesis are entirely my own.

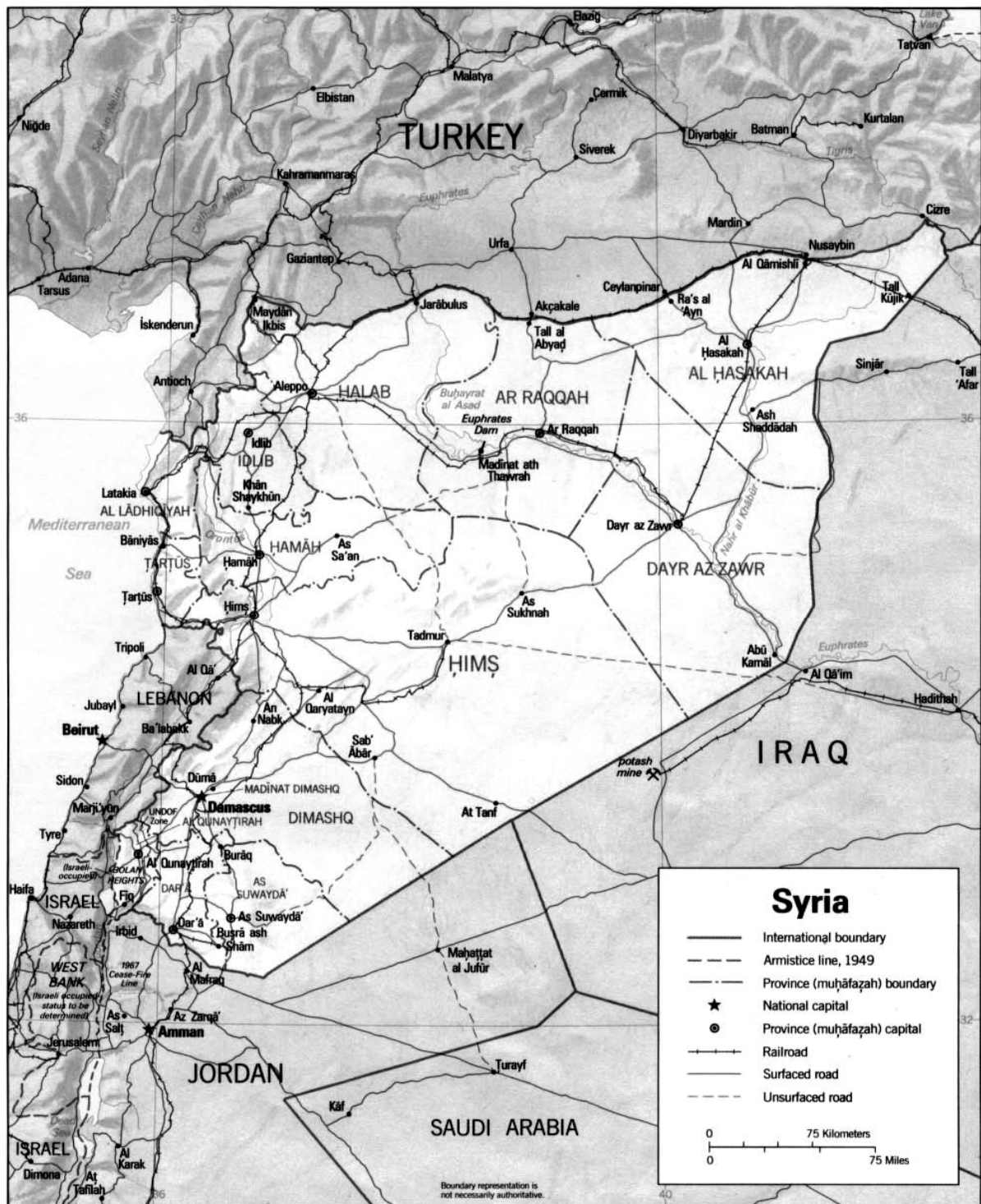
In addition, I would like to thank my tutors Elin Sæther and Kristian Stokke for their critical remarks and encouraging comments, and Frida Nome at PRIO for interesting and inspiring conversations in both Syria and Oslo about sectarianism and the political situation in Syria.

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Torstein Schiøtz Worren

Oslo, 18.02.2007

Map of Syria



From: http://www.lib.utexas.edu/maps/middle_east_and_asia/syria_rel90.jpg

1

INTRODUCTION

Syria has increasingly become a topic in international news media following the Bush administration's War on Terror and the rising levels of conflict in the region. From being a country few people knew anything about, Syria has now gained the dubious honour of membership in the Axis of Evil – taking the place of Iraq – as a sponsor of terrorism and regional troublemaker. At the same time, much is written about internal Syrian politics and claims are made about the inherent instability of the country and the threat it faces from sectarian conflict and civil war, similar to what has occurred in Lebanon and Iraq. Kaplan (20.03.2005), for example, wrote two years ago that

rather than Iraq, it could be Syria that ends up collapsing...Syria is but a Levantine version of the former Yugoslavia--without the intellectual class which that other post-Ottoman state could claim at the time of its break-up (since Hafez al-Assad's rule was so much more stultifying than Tito's). In Syria, as in the former Yugoslavia, each sect and religion has a specific geography...As President Bush humiliates Assad's son-and-successor into weakness, will Syria become a larger version of Civil War-era Lebanon?

These predictions have piqued my interest in the internal and sectarian politics of Syria and its future, especially due to what is written about the Alawi minority to which the president and many of those in power belong.

In addition, the increasing power of the Shi'as of the Middle East raises the need for insight into the Alawi sect because they in many instances are grouped together with the Shi'as of other countries in order to explain political developments. Religious simplification makes the inclusion of Syria into the so-called Shi'a Axis of power – stretching from Iran in the east, through Iraq and Syria, to the Shi'as of Hezbollah in Lebanon in the west – so much easier. Being officially Shi'as, the Alawis are then understood largely on the basis of the understanding of Shi'as elsewhere and portrayed as motivated mainly by religion. In his newest book on the Middle East, the well-known Middle East correspondent Robert Fisk (2006: 1013) falls into both of these traps of over-simplification:

Alawite power explains many things. It explains why Iran – the very vanguard of Shiite Muslim revolution – should have become so close an ally of [Syria]...It explains why the Hizballah...should be so enamoured of the regime in Damascus. Though the Baath [Party] is secular, the women of Qardaha [the home of the

president's family in the Alawi heartland] cover their faces even more assiduously than the women of Tehran.

I first learned about the Alawis while travelling in Syria in 2002 and 2004. Although I knew that they were somehow different from other Muslims in Syria, I knew little else about them. However, while visiting the mountains and the Mediterranean coast, the areas where most Alawis live, I realised that these regions were different from the rest of Syria and appeared to be more relaxed and liberal, quite contrary to the impression one is left with from the statement of Robert Fisk (2006) above. When I looked the Alawis up online, there seemed to be a lot of information about them, but this would prove to be only a half-truth. The more I looked the more I realised that what is available on the net is just copied and re-copied from other sources and very little seems to be based on first-hand information. The lack of information is apparent in the multiple use of a quote of an Alawi woman who speaks about how Alawis are considered Muslims by a majority of Muslim Syrians (originally from Landis 2003). This has been copied widely across the net as proof of one thing or another.

Moreover, with a few noteworthy exceptions, there seems to be a lack of primary and recent research in the academic literature. What is written about them is mostly based on historical sources, sometimes going back centuries. Many of these are Orientalist and prejudiced accounts from European 'explorers', but these are still used by some scholars to legitimise their judgement on the 'nature' of the Alawis, as if, even if it was true at one time, it should be the same today. Daniel Pipes (1990: 161), for example, concludes in his chapter on them: 'Ignaz Goldziher [*published in 1910*] put it succinctly: "This religion is Islam only in appearance." It is important to make this point very clear: Alawis have never been Muslims and are not now.' His reasons for making such claims, and in such a manner, can only be guessed at.

Accounts such as his have led me to distrust most information available about them as it refuses to take into account the politics involved in sectarian issues in Middle Eastern countries. Neither does it consider the impact the strategies that minorities use to protect themselves and their beliefs has when living in hostile environments. The need to be able to place Alawis outside the boundaries of Islam seems to emanate only from certain Sunni Muslims who feel threatened by Islamic diversity. At the same time, viewing sects and religions as static and immutable is, in my view, not very useful for understanding socio-political issues. This thesis consequently adopts a constructivist perspective, which sees the world as made up of socially constructed phenomena. The attempt is therefore not to judge or

decide one way or another, but to show how sectarianism, and especially the case of the Alawis, is contingent on myriad factors. Moreover, the understanding of them and of minority sects elsewhere should not be reduced to the texts in their holy books or to outsiders' claims about their beliefs.

This thesis is therefore meant as a contribution to the understanding of the dynamics that make up sectarian identities and politics in Syria at present. It is not meant to generalise about Alawis across the country, but to give an indication of the different ways Alawis construct themselves and their communities in relation to other sects and groups in Syria. The research question that has guided this thesis from beginning to end has therefore been:

How do the Alawis of Syria construct their collective identity?

Levels of analysis

Analysing an issue according to strict categories is not necessarily useful. Likewise, categorising Syrians according to sect is not necessarily the best way to analyse Syrian society. They may also be analysed on completely different levels and along very different lines such as class or urban-rural divisions. This would have been important for this thesis if it had rested on different theoretical foundations with the aim of *explaining* rather than *understanding* a phenomenon. What this thesis tries to do, though, is to *understand* how Alawis depict their role as a group in Syria. Where competing categories are used as an explanatory factor, this will be mentioned. But overall, my sources use sect as their primary category.

When in Syria, a foreigner is exposed to a range of opinion about 'The Others' from all the different sects and communities. It is hard to distinguish what is based on personal experience and what derives from hearsay and rumour. Due to the variable nature of statements and opinions, I wanted to organise people's opinions about one another after an academic fashion. Because of the focus on political Islam over the last decade, the majority, Sunni Muslims, have been in the spotlight in research. It was therefore of interest to me to focus on what takes place in the Alawi communities as this has gained very little attention apart from their role in the regime of the former president and his son, the current president. As for the units of analysis: as long as my sources construct their world along sectarian lines, this has been directly adopted in this thesis.

In my experience, sectarian identities are very important in Syria and one cannot choose to place oneself outside this hierarchy. One is born into a sect and one is therefore 'trapped' in it. Although a Syrian can convert to another faith, this is very rare, and the idea of where one is

from ‘originally’ is essential to Syrians’ categorisation of others. One cannot hide from this because either name or place of origin – in many cases several generations back – are giveaways for what sect one belongs to. Some people seem to rise above such a ‘crude’ understanding of their society, but these are the idealists or those of the upper classes who interact using alternative categorisations. Although many people wish sect did not matter, most seem to be forced into the sectarian framework if only for the reason that ‘The Others’ categorise ‘Us’ according to sect.

In any case, this thesis is not about religion. Beliefs and faith are of secondary importance and only to the extent that they are important to my sources to how they construct their likenesses or differences from other groups. The issue here is a minority that is defined according to religion. Due to the rigid boundaries between the sects in Syria, they take on an aspect of ethnic groups even if they speak the same language and look the same. This is because the sects have developed identities that are cultural just as much as they are religious. In many cases, other texts use terms such as *communal group*. However, this term has political connotations as a group that mobilises along sectarian lines. It is therefore more suitable to cases such as the politicised sects in Lebanon. Even though opposing groups categorise the Alawis as mobilised by sectarian interests, this is not necessarily my impression. The term used in this thesis is therefore *sect*.

Although this thesis speaks of Alawis *in general* and as a group, this is only to simplify the text and not an attempt to generalise or to claim that this is representative of all Alawis. Identity is both relational and in flux – just as discourses are in varying stages of closure – and how Alawis construct their identity will therefore vary in time and in space. The discourses presented in this thesis are for that reason only indicative, and above all in those areas where I have done my fieldwork. Other sources, for example Landis (2003), seem to have encountered other discourses that differ from those I have identified. This is possibly due to what type of sources I have used, which is explained further in the next chapter on methodology. It is likely that Alawis living in areas where they locally constitute a minority, for example in Damascus, will construct their identity in a different way.

Furthermore, what my sources tell me and how they choose to narrate their views is dependent both on me and the circumstances. Syria is a tightly controlled country where sectarian issues are considered divisive and destructive on the social fabric. Therefore, unless an outsider meets the most outspoken and confident of individuals, the information he is first presented with is the acceptable and politically correct view. However, the idea behind this thesis is precisely to get below this layer of the publicly acceptable opinion and to tell the

story of what my sources have told me *after* we have been politically correct and people have chosen to trust me, hence the focus on primary sources. Following on from this, this thesis is in itself a narrative, enhancing certain stories and downplaying others as it ‘re-presents’ the stories told to me through four visits to Syria.

The structure of the thesis

The next chapter, *chapter two*, outlines the methodological considerations this thesis is founded on. It explains the extraordinary difficulties one has to face when doing research in Syria and how this affects the choices of methods and approaches. It also dwells on my relation to the field and how it is affected by my presence.

Chapter three is the theoretical framework of this thesis. Considering that the thesis is empirically focused, the theories used are meant as inspiration rather than a straitjacket for the analysis. The main tools for the conceptualisation of identity is discourse theory and the concrete terms and instruments this gives for the analysis of discourses and identities. However, in order to better conceptualise certain issues that have come up during my work on the topic, both historical narrative – used in the analysis of nationalism – and theory on domination and resistance have been included.

Chapter four gives a presentation of Syria and the context of the topic at hand based on secondary literature. The first part gives a historical description of the political developments in Syria while the second part shows how the Alawis’ role in this can be understood. A short description of the theology of the Alawis has also been included in order to present some of the points of contestation on issues of tenets and beliefs. This is followed by an explanation of how the Syrian regime has dealt with sectarian issues following the rise of Alawis to positions of political power in Syria after 1963. Of importance here is how the regime has imposed its own Official Discourse in public communication, which tries to make the ideal of peaceful co-existence come true by claiming that it *is* true.

Chapters five, six, and seven constitute the analysis itself, divided according to the main elements identified in the Alawis’ construction of their collective identity. *Chapter five* shows how history is used to construct a line from the past to the present, and this historical narrative is central to how the Alawis construct how they live, where they live, and how they came to be who they are. These stories are similar to those found among minorities elsewhere and is structured according to Smith’s (1999) classification of ethnic myths. This is followed by *chapter six*, which analyses how Alawis use social markers in order to differentiate between ‘Us’ and ‘Them’. The construction of an ‘Us’ is unequivocally dependent on the construction

of 'The Other' and the differentiation takes place on the frontier between the two, mainly through interaction with Syria's Sunnis and Christians. *Chapter seven* deals with the construction of contemporary politics in Syria and how events both inside and outside Syria influence Alawi identity. Central to this topic is the issue explained in chapter four on the role Alawis play in the regime of president Bashar al-Asad and to what extent the regime and other Syrians' perceptions of the regime influence how Alawis present themselves.

The conclusion, *chapter eight*, ties the previous chapters together and explains how, in my opinion, the different discourses in Syria exist in parallel. The antagonistic relationship between the Sunni hegemony and the Alawi discourses is a result of the historical dominance of the Sunnis, but also of the regime's (anti) sectarian policies. The relationship between these discourses also has relevance for the analysis of power, which, in this perspective, rests on the power of definition.

2

METHODOLOGY

Collecting data in Syria, above all on issues deemed taboo in a controlled society, poses a range of difficulties and leaves the researcher with relatively few alternatives. This chapter outlines the choices I have made before and during the two fieldworks for this thesis in order to get access to the information I have sought and what these choices have had to say for the later analysis. Methodology and theoretical considerations are closely related. Yet, in order to separate the theoretical framework for the *analysis* of identity from the method of data collection, I have chosen to put all theoretical considerations in chapter three. Of issue here, therefore, is methodology as practice; the choices and the considerations I have made based on a constructivist paradigm discussed in the next chapter.

Challenges to research in Syria

Doing research on sectarian issues in Syria poses a range of challenges that need to be addressed. As mentioned in the introduction, the issue itself is a difficult one. Speaking about sects in anything other than positive terms is something people are uncomfortable with because of the nature of the state and the regime in the country. In terms of repression, Syria is not among the most authoritarian of states. As long as a citizen does not meddle in politics or mobilise people on grounds that can be interpreted as political, ‘normal’ people are usually left to themselves and their own affairs. This means that Syrians are fairly easy to talk to about most things, including foreign affairs, but if a foreigner asks about national politics, it is apparent from people’s reactions that they become uncomfortable. Most of the time, they will follow the official line on the issue or say something neutral and then change the subject.

In Syria, sectarian issues are considered highly political. This is partly due to history, events in neighbouring countries with their sectarian conflicts, and partly to the rhetoric of the regime. The message from the regime in public communication and education is that Syria’s sects are an advantage and enrich culture and country. All Syrians are supposed to be Syrian and Arab first and sectarian identities are therefore secondary. Sectarian identities are acceptable as long as they are cultural and religious, but once they turn political they compete

with the only allowed political identities – Arab and Syrian – and that is seen as a threat to the cohesiveness and stability of the state.

This does not mean that sect is not important or that people do not talk about it. Indeed, the fact that it is taboo gives an indication of its significance in Syrian society. However, since speaking about it is seen as a threat to the state, people will not discuss this topic openly with just anybody. This is exacerbated by the conflicts in the wider region. Due to the traditional enmity with Israel and the more recent disintegration of relations with the United States, internal conflict is usually blamed on these external actors. For example, during the Muslim Brotherhood uprising 30 years ago, the regime claimed that the insurgents were funded by Israel in order to tear Syria apart (van Dam 1996). Therefore, when a foreigner starts asking questions about such dangerous issues, many people become suspicious about the motivations behind them. This reaction is intensified when the questioner not only speaks their language, but is also knowledgeable about Syrian society. Although I have rarely been accused of being a spy outright, it has still been an issue at times, such as one situation when, with a group of acquaintances, one of them challenged me by claiming that 70 percent of all foreigners in Syria are spies one way or another.

On the surface, Syria is not a very controlled society. However, its intelligence apparatus – or rather, its myriad independent branches – is considered extremely large in relative terms (Batatu 1999). It is referred to as the *Mukhābarāt* and every Syrian is aware that any public conversation can be overheard by someone working for them. Apart from the use of informants, its agents typically double as something else in order to spy more effectively on both citizens and foreigners, frequently working as taxi drivers or lottery salesmen. Indeed, a taxi driver, thinking I was an innocent traveller and sympathetic to his cause, confided in me that he worked for the *Mukhābarāt*. In any case, the ordinariness of surveillance makes Syrians especially wary since not only may a conversation be overheard, but any person that one does not know personally could be on their payroll. This is probably one of the main reasons Syrians in general employ the Official Discourse of harmonious co-existence in order to appear to be a perfect citizen who believes in the regime's discourse (see chapter four).

In addition to this, the negative connotations sectarian issues have in Syria mean that people seem to feel somewhat ashamed about the existence of sectarian friction when speaking to a foreigner. Syrians are very aware of the general perceptions people from Europe and North America have of Syria and the Middle East and they are eager to show that there is more to their country and region than what one hears about in the news. This means that focusing on a topic that they find negative in many cases leads them to deny its existence and

claim that non-Arabs are always out to find conflicts and problems that do not exist. This is a valid point and many issues are blown out of all proportions when it comes to the Middle East. However, if only for the outright denial of its existence, I find such opinions of little value for the topic here. In this thesis, though, I try to give a balanced picture and not to give the most conflict-oriented sources too loud a voice.

Design

The study of collective identity decides to a large extent the possibilities I have had for gathering information. As I have wanted to ‘capture’ an identity, the most obvious approach was to use the objects of the study’s *own* stories of themselves and how they describe their identity. This was the most logical consequence of the topic, and basing the theoretical framework on constructivism allows for a conceptualisation of identity as temporal and fragmented, not to mention *context-specific*. Of course, there is never just *one* collective identity, but there should be common denominators in an identity that those who identify with it themselves present as a collective identity (Wodak et al 1999). This was also the impression I had after two trips to Syria during the summers of 2002 and 2004. When the Alawis themselves construct a collective identity that is defined according to belonging to a specific sect, this also defines the field of research.

The theory I have used as inspiration, mainly discourse theory and historical narrative, is explained properly in the next chapter in order to place it closer to the analysis. However, the impact this choice has on the research is profound. Whereas a structuralist will look for causal relationships, what I am looking for are the chains of meaning in accounts. The starting point for the research also changes radically. Whereas a Marxist researcher will begin with the deep structure, which in the social realm means class divisions, and see all his subsequent data as reflections of this structure, my research begins with the data – with what I am told from the objects of my research, who are subjects in their own right. In other words, the research is subjective in that it only seeks to use the information provided and not judge it according to standards such as truth or objective reality (Hammersley & Atkinson 1996, Peet 1998).

However, doing research on identity is challenging, and even more so when it is taboo and in a repressive context. It requires knowledge of the field, of the context, and of social codes. This became possible by dividing my research into stages and over a period of time. First of all, I have studied Arabic in the Middle East, something that facilitates communication immensely since most Syrians do not speak much English. Although I have studied Standard Arabic, the Arabic lingua franca, I have gotten used to the particularities of Syrian dialect

from my stays in Syria. I am nowhere near fluent, but my knowledge of Arabic is good enough for understanding everyday topics. Having lived in other Arabic-speaking countries such as Jordan, this has expanded my cultural knowledge, as the similarities to Syria are many.

Secondly, I have been to Syria a total of four times. The first two times have already been mentioned and they formed my first impressions of Syrian society and sectarian differences. After forming a rough idea about my topic, I spent four months in Syria in the autumn of 2005 living on the Mediterranean coast, both practicing the language and building up a new understanding of the topic. As I was living in an Alawi community, the idea was to immerse myself in the field and get to know people and their lives. On returning home, I spent half a year reading up on Syria and on theories relevant to the topic and furthermore systematising my experiences from Syria. During the summer of 2006, I spent another eight weeks in Syria. Knowing what I was after and having a network to rely on for information, I was able to be much more concrete and systematic in my approach than earlier. I could ask directly about what I perceived to be central to the topic and along analytical lines I had identified as relevant to the topic.

My position in relation to the topic is of importance here. It can be argued that one is more able to understand one's own culture because one is part of it, which would mean that an Alawi and a Syrian should be doing this research. Turning this on its head, one can also argue that when one is part of something one cannot see things clearly, meaning that an outsider can see relationships more easily (Thagaard 2003). What I have tried to do is combine these two approaches. By being an outsider, I am not part of the field and its politics, which has been invaluable during my stays. This will be elaborated on below. However, having spent time in the field and built up trust with many of my sources, I hope I have gained enough insight into Alawi society to write about it, even though I wish I had had more time to do this.

Approach

There has been very little empirical research done on the Alawis in Syria and it was the realisation of this lack of information that first gave me the idea to look into the topic of sectarian relations, and more specifically, how the minority Alawis construct their world. However, getting access to the field and learning about a topic that is considered taboo and, furthermore, set in a repressive society presented me with uncomfortable choices. Adapted from Hammersley and Atkinson (1996), I had the following alternatives when seeking information in the field:

1. Pretending to only be visiting and conceal the reasons behind my curiosity
2. Telling people I was considering writing about Syria and thus only trying to learn more about Syrian society
3. Telling people outright that I was doing research on their community and for what purpose

None of these alternatives was ideal in itself and I would have to rely on all three of them at different times. The first option was the easiest and the least ethically acceptable. Yet, this has been the way I have had to gather most of the information. Being completely open about my research was never a viable alternative in general. Due to the challenges connected with the topic, most people I have met and talked to would probably never have said what they did. This is either because they would be afraid it could be used against them if it fell into the wrong hands or because writing about a sensitive topic would in their eyes be spying, regardless of academic ideals. Furthermore, because of the number of intelligence service agents in Syria, it would only be a question of time before I would attract unwanted attention, which could endanger both my sources and my friends.

I only told a few people what I was doing and only those I trusted completely, either because I had known them a long time or because of their attitude either to the topic or to academic research. In addition, to some people I only said that I was *considering* writing about the Alawis. This was because they were uncomfortable with the situation and I knew it would endanger my relationship with them to say that I was doing research at present. However, all the sources I draw on *extensively* throughout this thesis all knew what they were contributing to (see the later section on sources). However, only telling those I trusted was no guarantee for not attracting attention. At one point, I was about to tell an acquaintance what I was doing in order to ask him if he would be interested in doing an informal interview. I was certain that he would be a good source and positive to my research and the topic. Before doing so, I asked a mutual friend if she thought it would be a good idea to tell him and was told that he was kept under surveillance and had been forced to report to the secret police if he met anyone suspicious. Working in the government herself, she actually warned me that it would be preferable if I did not tell *anyone* about the research.

In the Syrian context, therefore, it is either a question of doing the research covertly or not getting any reliable information at all. Not only is this the case when talking to people, but it is also relevant in relation to the state. Since sectarianism is a non-issue and not to be discussed, keeping a low profile was a requirement in order to do it safely. Had I sought

permission and, although highly unlikely, been given it, it would have entailed being kept under close surveillance and my sources facing possible negative repercussions also.

Yet, there are ethical considerations one must make when choosing this type of research. First, there is the vulnerability of the group (Thagaard 2003). Knowing that the Alawis are a minority and would be vulnerable in a new and possibly volatile political situation, I have had to consider if anything of what I write can be used against them. This has conflicted with what I see as the reason of doing research, which is to be honest and to make the results available. Considering that this thesis is publicly available, I have in a few cases decided not to include information because it can be used wrongly. I have also been very careful about ‘using’ people, meaning that I have not only spoken to them because they can be useful to me. Had I been more cynical, I could probably have broadened the base of the research and included more sources. Using what people say against them is easier when dealing with a powerful group on the top of the hierarchy, such as an elite operating largely above the law (Cook 1997).

Secondly, I have a responsibility to my sources that what they say cannot be traced back to them (Hammersley & Atkinson 1996). This has had a number of practical consequences for recording data, which will be explained below when giving details of my sources. Furthermore, the confidentiality required means that my analysis will be lacking in references. I have chosen not to include any information anywhere that can be used to track sources or to correlate the references. This means that both dates and, in most cases, places have been omitted. Only in the cases where it has relevance have I included additional information other than sex. This is undeniably paranoia, but it is based on a worst-case scenario where I have been under surveillance and my contacts could be traced. Although several of my sources are open about the topic and are not too worried about being overheard, I have chosen this option out of respect for those who did worry.

Positioning

In constructivist research, neutrality is neither a possibility nor an ideal. I, the researcher, am not able to stay objective or aloof from the field I am working in. I enter the field with preconceptions and ideas – external knowledge – and the questions I pose and the role I take influence those I speak to and the answers I get (Thagaard 2003). Furthermore, many of those I write about have become friends and this means I feel a sense of loyalty. The topic is also highly politicised, which means that once I have chosen the approach, I have also chosen sides. When my sources speak in an anti-hegemonic way, my writing also becomes anti-

hegemonic. However, this is not something I try to conceal. Indeed, one of the motivations behind this thesis is to give the Alawis a voice, something I feel is lacking in the Anglo-American academic texts on Syria.

The role the researcher takes in the field is often decided by the circumstances, but is also affected by how one portrays oneself in relation to the topics of the research (Hammersley & Atkinson 1996). Being a Norwegian, I was an outsider, a foreigner, and a guest. Even if I was mistaken for a Syrian from time to time, this was never the case during any of my conversations. I was therefore never a participant in society or part of the sectarian framework. For my particular research, this was mostly something that eased my access to the field as I was not perceived to have an agenda, at least not within Syria – although people's references to spying meant that some of them thought I was a foreign agent of some sort. To the extent that I would be placed in any sectarian category, I would be referred to as a Christian, a group that is described as being culturally close to the Alawis and an ally in their scepticism towards Sunnis. This would mean that people sometimes would include me in their narratives when speaking of the good historical relationship between Christians and Alawis.

I would also seemingly be an ally just because I am from Europe and am perceived to have a more similar culture to them in relation to the Sunnis. This definitely had an impact on the way they would explain their differences from other groups. Talking with someone from an 'ideal' society, at least to some people, meant that they probably highlighted things they thought would seem positive to a European. Yet this is only to be expected and highlights the relational aspect of identity construction. Speaking to a Sunni Muslim who has grown up in Europe, they would probably have described themselves in a different way. All the accounts are true in the sense that all identities are reflections of the others that are part of the discourse, be it the conversation partner or the neighbour that they are speaking about.

Yet, overtly taking sides was a tactic I used consciously in order to get access to the field. By finding and creating bonding material between my sources and me, I would let them know that I understood the mechanisms at work in the relations between people and their sects. My most interesting conversations came after taking a firm stance and declaring my scepticism towards Sunni extremism or by praising the social or cultural differences that make the Alawis different. It is important to point out, though, that I was never lying or tricking anybody at any point. It was instead a way of gaining people's trust and to show them that I was on their side. Had I positioned myself as a neutral visitor – or, worse, sceptical to the Alawis as a group – this would never have given me access to parts of their discourses. Being sympathetic to the position of the Alawis in Syria meant that people trusted me to voice

critical opinions and this was also how the aforementioned taxi driver ended up confiding in me that he was working for the intelligence services. He even gave me a local name because he found me to be such a Syrian patriot. In a way, I was only playing a game that I had learned locally; of taking on roles or identities to make things go smoother. Often, I would also have to feign ignorance or pretend to know less about the topic than I did. Playing the curious foreigner meant that I had the basic presentation of who the Alawis are repeated to me in many different contexts and meant I could seize on things people said to ask further questions. In some cases, I even had to understate my Arabic skills because people found my accent suspiciously good.

Had I been studying issues of conflict *within* the community I would to a greater extent have had to present myself as more neutral. If I had taken sides, I could have closed off access to people with a radically different opinion who would have been alienated by my positioning to one side in the conflict (Thagaard 2003). However, since this research was subjective in that it only seeks to portray the Alawis according to themselves, this was less of an issue. The only instance when this was probably an issue was when speaking about sensitive political issues. Due to Syrians' wariness about stating opinions about regime politics in unsafe settings, mentioning unmentionable issues made people withdraw or become uncertain. This meant that I would proceed much more cautiously and gauge people's opinions before volunteering my own.

Methods

I have been using a number of methods in order to get access to information during my research. In a way, this has functioned as *triangulation*, also called different *lines of action*, in order to diversify the approach to the field. The idea behind triangulation is to mutually confirm the findings by advancing from different angles. This is not in order to get more data, but to combine different forms of data and put them *in relation* to each other (Berg 2004). For this research, I have relied on observation, informal conversations and a limited number of reference interviews. The reliance on primary sources – almost exclusively Alawis, but also with some of mixed backgrounds – is a result of the phenomenon being researched. Much of what is available on the Alawis in books and online are accounts with uncertain origin or with dubious references. And at any rate, using non-Alawis as a source for how the Alawis construct their collective identity, which some accounts seem to do, cannot be relied on to give accounts for someone else's identity. I therefore rely principally on data I have collected myself and use secondary sources only when I have reason to trust them.

Observation

The use of observation has its roots in ethnographic research and can describe many different forms of interaction with the field. The term *participant* observation is widespread and acknowledges the presence of the researcher in the situation he is observing. This is used to bypass the notion of a neutral or external observer who has no impact on his object of study or plays no role in a situation. The role of the researcher can be diversified further depending on whether the researcher takes active part in activities as if he were a member of the group he is studying or not, and whether or not the people being studied know that they are being studied. My position and approach to the field was explained above and, as a foreigner, I was an outsider in all situations related to my research. Yet, the term *participation* recognises the partaking that social scientific research is. And in this sense, I was participating in the situations I observed and therefore I impacted on what took place (Atkinson & Hammersley 1998).

Observation also describes the passive nature of my relation to the field. It has formed the basis of my understanding of the topic and has gone hand in hand with the informal conversations mentioned below. Observation is an important way to gain access to phenomena that are normally closed to researchers. By being an observer, one can gain important information about actions and relations between people. One learns about the field in interaction with its actors so to speak, yet from an outsider's standpoint. Observation requires a high degree of interpretation because actions and relations have to be imbued with meaning. This requires a deep familiarity with the field gained through interaction with it and the use of field notes to organise the observations (Berg 2004, Thagaard 2003).

The covert nature of most of my observation practices has meant that I have often been socially invisible. By this, I mean that my presence has been acknowledged, but due to the unawareness of my intentions, conversations or actions have taken place that the participants probably had no idea that I was interested in or that I understood the meaning of. This is referred to as the *masking of identity*. This is useful because the knowledge of the presence of a researcher might hamper normal conversation and interaction (Berg 2004). In Syria, this approach is especially useful because of people's scepticism to research into topics of conflict or that go contrary to how things are presented by those in power. My time in the field, personal relations, and knowledge of Arabic all gave me the opportunity to put my observations within a context and to be either 'an ignorant foreigner who happened to be there' or a trusted friend within a larger group.

Informal conversations

Yet, my observation has rarely been that of a silent or completely passive observer. I have been part of situations and have sought information through my presence in situations. Still, my methods have mostly been passive in that I have seldom actively sought information, but instead let information come to me. This is a result of the challenges to research in Syria, but also because I found that the information that people volunteered themselves more accurately reflected their experiences and opinions. Typically, therefore, I would only seize on situations where someone raised an interesting issue and spur them on further rather than initiate the topic myself.

The majority of conversations drawn on in this thesis are therefore of the informal kind, where the people I have spoken to have chosen to speak about themselves as Alawis or about sectarian issues to the extent that they have done so of their own volition. This has mostly constituted an unknown number of conversations in situations where I have met people in a variety of circumstances and only briefly spoken about specific issues. These informal encounters and chats ‘on the road’ have been the most useful for me. The extended use of this type of data collection is not due to a lack of access to interview subjects, but instead because this type of communication captures expressions of identity in a very different way from interviews, which are an out-of-context way of interacting (Valentine 1997).

Although many of these conversations have been with random people with no knowledge of my role as a researcher, some of them have also been with people I had built up a level of trust with. Spending time with me for extended periods spanning two or more visits to Syria meant that they trusted me not to exploit what they told me for reasons other than academic research. Yet, they were not completely comfortable about the situation and the topic and I therefore let them steer the conversation. Furthermore, I could not take notes because this immediately changed the situation into something formal and seemingly more threatening. All accounts would therefore be written down only after the conversations had taken place. At any rate, the knowledge of my role and my intentions meant that I was able to ask questions that were more direct without having to worry that they would become suspicious. Furthermore, by knowing them personally, I was able to read more between the lines and detect evasiveness or feelings of unease to the extent that this seemed to have relevance for what we were talking about.

Semi-structured interviews

Observation and interaction takes place in the field and the sources and objects of observation are in everyday situations. However, making sense of the *meaning* inherent in this data is difficult and this was the reason for the extended stays and variety of approaches. In order to verify my impressions and to be able to ask specific questions, I also had five semi-structured interviews during my second fieldwork to complement the informal conversations that had formed my impressions thus far. As with the informal conversations with friends mentioned above, they all knew what the interviews were for.

The semi-structured interviews took place with those of my sources who felt most comfortable with the topic and somewhat aloof from the fear of reprisals for various reasons. The interviews centred on four topics that I had identified as central to how Alawis talk about themselves; namely history, beliefs, society, and politics, of which the first two have been joined into the same chapter in this thesis. They formed a guiding line throughout the interviews, but there was also space for other subjects that came up. These topics turned out to fit quite well with how the interviewees constructed their discourses. Unlike the majority of my conversations, the interviews were all conducted in English in order to verify my ideas and to minimise the risk of misunderstandings on my part. This group of five thus functioned as a reference group to control my insights. Some of them I also spoke to several times or corresponded with electronically. Moreover, I was able to take notes during the interviews, making those particular notes more accurate in that I did not have to wait to write them down, which was the case for the observations and informal conversations. Recording the interviews on tape was never a viable option in the Syrian context. I was careful about all written information and there were no personal references. As soon as possible, I transferred all accounts and my own notes to a computer in encrypted formats.

Sources

Due to the sensitive nature of the topic, I have not had the luxury of picking and choosing sources. For the most part, I have used those who have been interested and felt comfortable about talking about the issues. Even among people who I consider friends, there are many who have always shied away from sectarian issues both before and after learning about my research. The portion of people speaking openly about it is small in relative terms and I have avoided pushing people I felt to be uncomfortable speaking about these things.

My age, sex, and background also affect who I typically come into contact with since people with similar frames of reference tend to meet and get along. People in their twenties

and thirties are therefore overrepresented. The same goes for men, although the relative ease of interaction between men and women in Alawi society means that I have been able to draw on the accounts of women also. The educational background of my sources also varies, but those having studied at university level are overrepresented in the reference group, above all because these sources have been more likely to understand the academic value of doing research on sectarian issues in their country. Geographically, my research has been confined to sources from the coastal regions and, to a smaller extent, to the coastal mountains. It is therefore important to reiterate that the discourses identified in this thesis are those encountered in this region where the Alawis constitute the majority. Inland Syria will probably display variations on these discourses or different ones altogether.

Meeting and talking to people in Syria is relatively easy. The relatively low number of tourists in Syria means that people are interested in talking to foreigners. Furthermore, people are proud of 'Arab hospitality' and are in general very welcoming and inclusive. This has meant that being visibly foreign has led to small talk in situations ranging from fellow bus passengers to guests at restaurants. The ease of meeting new people and the exchange of phone numbers and personal information meant that I could pursue those who displayed most openness. Nearly all my sources are either people I have met in random ways or friends of these random encounters. Displaying knowledge of Arabic also impresses people because this is quite rare to find among Westerners in Syria. This, in addition to being interested in social and political issues in the Middle East, often makes people eager to talk about their own impressions and experiences and paves the way for the sensitive topics, yet, as mentioned, only when people themselves have opened up to it.

In addition to my own sources, I have used a number of written or online sources that I will describe here. First, the written academic sources consist of Joshua Landis, assistant professor at the University of Oklahoma who has unique access to the field through personal relations, and Frida Nome who I know personally and who has done research on related issues in Syria. Landis' blog *Syriacomment*¹ has been used to give background information and to back up certain points. I also draw on a personal contact of his who has published two texts on his blog; an Alawi calling himself Khudr.

¹ <http://joshualandis.com/blog/>, formerly <http://faculty-staff.ou.edu/L/Joshua.M.Landis-1/syriablog/>

Secondly, I have drawn on texts that are available on the website Alaweenonline². This website appears to be an attempt by Alawi religious scholars to counter claims about their beliefs and to present their views within an Islamic context. It is a good example of how the discourse that I term the Official Discourse explains Alawi beliefs in 'acceptable' Islamic terms and the texts are used as an expression of this discourse. The website is in Arabic and relevant texts have been translated to English for me by one of my sources.

Finally, there is a blog called Syriaexposed³, which is written by somebody calling themselves Karfan and Friend. They present themselves better than I can:

This is a place for all the dirty laundry of Syria. The real Syria away from Academics, Journalists, and Intellectuals jabbering about Bathism, Arabism, Totalitarianism, and all the big talk that they invented just to give credibility to analyses and meaning to events. In day-to-day life, there is no Arabism, there is no Bathism, there is not even a Syria as they are displayed in all the writings around this world. This blog is by Karfan, whose name means disgusted. Generally disgusted with life and everything in it. Recently, disgusted with all those who are trying to make a living from giving false and fictitious analyses about Syria and with those who believe them. I am his freind, I write Karfan's bullshit in English because he thinks that anyone who lives in Syria knows about this bullshit and there is no need to put it for them in Arabic. Karfan says that this blog is about the reality of Syria from within for those of us who forgot this reality and believed recently a big lie: that we actually have a normal country. (Karfan 18.03.2005a)

Their aim is to tear apart all the myths about the Syrian society, in a way deconstructing the official Syrian discourse. Although Karfan is an Alawi from Tartous, some readers claim that he is not. In my opinion, he probably is, but in any case, due to the nature and style of his writing, I have not used the blog as a primary source. Instead, I use it to quote from when it expresses parts of the discourses that I have identified because they illustrate points in an entertaining, albeit sometimes extreme, manner. As the quote says, Syrians already know about what they write, and their satirical style is found in Syrian media, although it is veiled to conform to the censored arena in the country. From the reactions in many of the posts, it is clear that this style of writing and topics raised mean that writing in a similar way in Arabic would cause problems. In fact, the author claims that he dares not publish or access the blog in Syria and only writes when he is in Lebanon in order not to be tracked by Syrian intelligence. This in itself illustrates the sensitive nature of these topics.

It should be noted that when quoting this blog, I have chosen not to correct spelling mistakes as long as they do not inhibit understanding. This is because they are rather frequent and doing so would lead to an impression of major editing through the multiple brackets.

² <http://www.alaweenonline.com>

³ <http://syriaexposed.blogspot.com>

A note on referencing

As already mentioned and for good reasons, none of my personal sources for this thesis are referenced with either dates or personal information. Throughout most of the analysis, therefore, unlike traditional ways of referencing, I will only refer to ‘a source’ and avoid making cross-referencing possible by linking these anonymous sources together. Texts, on the other hand, are referenced normally with name and year, and there is a full list of references at the end of the thesis. When I use online information, it is referenced with name and date and with a complete reference with web address and date of download in the online reference list at the end. References to online information with no author are only referenced with the address and date of download in a footnote.

Analysis

Constructing meaning out of observation and myriad conversations of various kinds is a matter of interpretation. In any kind of interpretation, the information collected fuses with the analyst’s preconceptions and attitudes and this gives rise to criticism of the lack of neutrality. As mentioned, the point here is not to be neutral. I have not been looking for facts, but for meaning. This means looking for what my sources emphasise and how they create frontiers between themselves and others and how they link all this together. It is also about critical interpretation, meaning that one should look beyond what is being said and interpreting the *meaning* in statements and actions. This requires solid knowledge of the field (Thagaard 2003).

My approach is grounded in the theories I use and in a way, the result is no different from the accounts I analyse. In a narrative sense, this thesis is a narrative in its own right, enhancing some things and ignoring others; all pieced together from separate events and accounts. The end result – the analysis – is a summary and systematisation of a range of accounts and categorised according to what I have found interesting and based on the theories I have used for the analysis. The discourses presented in the analysis are, as such, categories of my own invention based on tendencies in my data rather than clear-cut categories. The theoretical framework presented in chapter three has been used instrumentally and the analytical tools available from these can be found there. Yet, the way the process took shape is of interest.

Central to the development of the collection of data and the analysis was the splitting of the fieldwork in two. The first fieldwork in the autumn of 2005, constituting my third visit to Syria, was based on a loose outline of what I wanted to investigate, building on impressions

from the two earlier visits. Following this stay, I spent a total of five months in Oslo systematising the preliminary findings and writing a draft for the theoretical framework. This meant that I had the opportunity to go back into the field for a second time with my ideas grounded in theory to be examined anew in light of the theories I found useful. I could then expand on things I had heard, but not pursued. The approach has therefore been a rotation between inductive and deductive approaches (Thagaard 2003).

In conclusion

The theoretical foundation of this research and the methodology that follows from it emphasises the contextual and situated character of the findings. This means that the revelation of an *objective* reality is neither possible nor an aim. Instead, it seeks to emphasise the social character of the construction of people's multiple and contextual realities. Our ability to generalise in the traditional scientific way is therefore limited. However, this type of qualitative research, despite the concealment of sources, gives more than an indication of the construction of identity among Alawis. By linking the contextual and the theoretical, it means that it has value to similar contexts of relations between majorities and minorities, especially when these relations are not open to discussion or their official interpretations are contestable. In a way, it is a contribution to theory building on the topic at hand and the dynamics of dominant discourses and the resistance these create (Denzin & Lincoln 1998).

That I have touched on something vital for the Syrian context, at least, seems to be the case if only by being called 'dangerous' by one of my sources on hearing the preliminary ideas for the analysis.

3

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The purpose of this chapter is to present a framework for the analysis of Alawi identity. As the title of the chapter suggests, the idea is to create a prism through which we can see the findings and to interpret them, but not to judge them. Consequently, the theories are not presented in order to neither test nor disprove them, but instead to use them as a tool for interpreting how the Alawis see their world. In other words, the theoretical framework is meant to be inspirational and not all-encompassing for understanding the topic, although the basis for the framework is that reality is socially constructed. As the aim is to present the *Alawi* view of reality and not to judge the legitimacy or truthfulness of their claims, it was natural to choose an angle that neither lays claims to the truth nor judges its subject. Discourse theory is suited for this purpose because it seeks to show how different components are pieced together into a logical whole that gives meaning to its subjects. Individuals are the access points to the discourses and their construction of identity.

In the following, the social constructivist background of discourse theory will be presented followed by how discourse theory explains the construction of both individual and collective identities. The focus will be on the differentiation between an experienced ‘Us’ and ‘Them’ and the conflictual nature of identity formation. Furthermore, an expanded theory on the dynamics of domination and resistance will be explored, ending with an explanation of narrative theory and its usefulness for making sense of how history is represented.

Constructivism in the Social Sciences

The theory of the social construction of reality, henceforth termed *constructivism*, is a fairly recent theory in the social sciences and emerged as part of a general critique of the established paradigms of how we can understand and explain the world we live in. These had been influenced by the natural sciences and their dominance in defining how knowledge can be determined. Early in the history of the social sciences, this quest for truth was the driving force behind research, although how one arrived at this truth has been a point of contestation (Guba & Lincoln 1994, Schwandt 1994).

Constructivism is part of the post-modern paradigm and can be separated from the classical theories on different levels. At the ontological level, the level of what form reality has and what can be known about it, theories such as positivism, Marxism and critical realism can be called foundational. Foundationalism claims that ‘there exist fixed, indubitable, and final foundations that guarantee the truth of a given claim to knowledge’ existing independently of our knowledge of them (Johnston et al. 2000: 279). Contrasting this, constructivism is *relativist*, meaning there is no ‘real’ reality and as such no underlying, fixed and definite truth. Rather, to constructivists, reality is constructed socially and does not exist outside its specific context, and even if does, there is no way we can identify it (Guba & Lincoln 1994).

This same distinction is visible on the epistemological level – of how we can gain valid knowledge of reality and the role of the researcher in relation to this knowledge. Constructivists will claim that since there is no independent and underlying truth, all knowledge is created. Given that what is true to me might not be true to you, there is no way of choosing or deciding between competing claims to the truth. A researcher must therefore acknowledge that he himself is embedded in his own context and that this influences what he is studying. Adherents to foundationalist theories, on the other hand, will either see the researcher as independent and removed from his study object and able to establish certainty (such as positivists) or at least have objectivity as an ideal, even though it might not be possible, and thus to be able to establish a *probable* certainty (such as critical realists). On the methodological level, this will be based on the use of verification or falsification, whereas for constructivists, determining what is true to someone means using some form of interpretation. This means that a constructivist approach can never *explain* a phenomenon since this is based on a belief that we can find facts that will tell us what the world is like, whether this is permanent or contingent of time and place. Rather, the focus will be on *understanding* or, more specifically, understanding what constructs knowledge. (Guba & Lincoln 1994, Peet 1998).

The construction of meaning

The inspiration for discourse theory as a theory for understanding meaning is the work of Saussure, a structuralist who claimed that the relationship in language between words and their meaning is arbitrary and we can only understand reality through concepts that have no meaning in themselves. Instead, they have meaning only when understood in relation to other concepts that describe something different. For example, ‘socialism’ only has meaning in re-

lation to terms such as ‘capitalism’ and ‘feudalism’ (Torfing 1999). Yet, where Saussure saw these meanings and relations as locked, critics of the structuralist approach claim that these relationships change and meanings consequently change according to the context in which concepts are used. Furthermore, the meanings carried by language are temporary and contestable and open to interpretation. In the constructivist approach, language is a precondition for thought as it creates a framework for how we can understand and explain what we experience. Nevertheless, this understanding is taught to us from infancy and we are therefore forced to acknowledge its predefined concepts. When we use language, we reproduce our world by reaffirming the pre-established meanings behind the language (Burr 1995).

Discourse analysis is a theory where the goal is to expose the processes that determine how meaning is constructed. There are different theoretical approaches within discourse analysis with differing views on what constitutes discourse and therefore what can be analysed. Some approaches are strictly linguistic whereas others see ‘everything as discourse’. Yet, this latter approach does not imply that there is no material reality outside of discourse, meaning that the desk I am sitting by is not real. Instead, the point they make is that the desk does have a material existence, but our *comprehension* of the desk can only come through the meaning it has in various discourses (Torfing 1999).

This thesis uses the terms and concepts developed in the discourse theory of Laclau and Mouffe. As Jørgensen and Phillips (1999) say, different approaches can profitably be mixed in order to make an analysis possible depending on the subject matter. The point here is not to position myself strictly to one approach, but rather to adopt one set of tools useful when analysing how discourses create identities and construct the available subject positions.

All discourses are created and exist through *articulation*. This is a process where our reality is defined through the construction of meaning. This happens by fixing concepts together in a way where they mutually constitute one another. Meaning is thus constructed through their differential positions. Discourse theory distinguishes between *elements*, which are concepts, or signs, that can have various meanings, and *moments*, which are signs that have attained one meaning through its place in the discourse. Central in each discourse are the *nodal points*; privileged signs, or reference points, that all the other signs in the discourse are organised around. In the process of articulation, the goal is a totality where elements are turned into contingent moments whereby alternative meanings are excluded in order to make the discourse unambiguous. This is called *closure*. An example is the moments of ‘democracy’, ‘state’, and ‘freedom’ that take on a whole new meaning from liberal democracy when articulated in communist discourse:

Democracy acquires the meaning of 'real' democracy as opposed to 'bourgeois' democracy, freedom acquires an economic connotation and the role and function of the state is transformed. In other words, their meaning is partially fixed by reference to the nodal point 'communism' (Howarth & Stavrakakis 2000: 8)

Everything that is excluded from a discourse is part of what is called *the field of discursivity*. This is the discourse's constitutive outside and is what ultimately defines it by defining what it is *not* (Jørgensen & Phillips 1999).

Yet, discourses can never attain complete closure due to the pressure exerted from the field of discursivity, as exclusion to this field 'is precisely what makes possible the articulation of a multiplicity of competing discourses' (Torfing 1999: 92). Meaning arises in the relation between concepts, and these relations are in constant flux, threatening to turn the moments back into elements. As Neumann (2001: 61, own translation) asserts: 'In any fundamentalist religious society there will be atheists'. This is one of the main premises of discourse theory, where every closure is seen as at best temporary and partial. This is because the meaning of signs can be undermined by the meaning they have in other discourses, thus making them ambiguous. The degree of a discourse's closure can be from a position of political conflict, where the discourse is open and the fixation of meaning has yet to occur, to a state of *hegemony*, where a discourse has attained a dominant position and stabilises a particular social order. Torfing (1999: 101) describes this as 'the expansion of a discourse, or a set of discourses, into a dominant horizon of social orientation and action by means of articulating unfixed elements into partially fixed moments in a context crisscrossed by antagonistic forces'. Eventually, when a hegemony is entrenched enough, it becomes *objective*, what is called *ideology* in other theories of discourse. In this situation, it appears as something that is no longer political or contested and is what we take for granted or see as 'natural'.

Hegemony is established through *hegemonic interventions*, which involves the use of *force*. This takes place when two or more discourses overlap and restrict one another and involves repression of real and existing possibilities (Jørgensen & Phillips 1999). Hegemony and how it is established is described in more practical terms by Torfing (1999: 302) as the

achievement of a moral, intellectual and political leadership through the expansion of a discourse that partially fixes meaning around nodal points. [It] involves more than a passive consensus and more than legitimate actions. It involves the expansion of a particular discourse of norms, values, views and perceptions through persuasive redescriptions of the world.

The conflict between discourses and their identities, called antagonism, will be elaborated on below.

The idea of hegemony is intimately connected to power. Power is not objects wielded by *someone* to threaten someone else, but is instead seen as a product of discourse. Power becomes visible in the process of articulation, which always takes place in a setting of constant conflict. Power is to control the definition of what constitutes meaning and what is expelled to the outside of the discourse. In effect, power is the fixation of meaning in order to make certain social practices and actions acceptable and, similarly, to marginalise conflicting social practices and actions. It is hence an effect of discourses. In this way, groups or individuals are powerful by their place in a discourse and they exercise power by drawing upon the discourses to sanction their actions (Burr 1995). When something has reached a level of objectivity, this power is no longer perceptible. It has become something we take for granted and is not contested. However, the power is still there, only it is invisible. Objectivity is ‘the sedimented form of power, in other words a power whose traces have been erased’ (Laclau 1990, cited in Torfing 1999: 161-162).

Identity as discourse

Central to the continual debates in the social sciences is the relationship between structure and agency. All over-arching socio-political theories can be placed along a continuum of the weight that is given to the individual’s freedom of action. At one extreme, there is humanism, which took shape during the Age of Enlightenment and where the philosopher Descartes is central. Humanism argues that people are autonomous and rational beings with a choice and subsequent control over their action. In this view, identity comes from within as a unified whole that is permanent and static. The focus here will be people’s actions. At the opposite end of the continuum, we find structuralism, which sees people as subjected to the structures around them. An example of extreme structuralism can be found in orthodox Marxism, which theorises levels of structures working behind what we can conceive. These structures are completely deterministic on human agency and claims that people have no independence when it comes to making their own choices and deciding their own actions (Peet 1998).

Yet, both humanism and structuralism fall within the foundationalist paradigm mentioned in the first part of this chapter in believing there to be a ‘real’ reality or a truth that can be known through theorising or observation. Constructivism, on the other hand, sees reality as constructed through processes and this has consequences for the view on identity. There can be no reality behind our feeling of self and it is never stable. Instead, it is seen as fragmented and in constant change in response to what we experience. Whereas the foundationalist theories have an essentialist understanding of identity, where subjects are seen to be in the

centre of the categories that empower them, constructivism sees identity as the *product* of the process of categorisation (Natter & Jones III 1997, Peet 1998).

Individual identity

The constructivist understanding of identity is that it is not something that arises from within a person. Instead, it is something that exists between people and is therefore *relational*. Burr (1995) uses the example of a person who has always lived alone on a deserted island. With no one to interact with there will be no traits he can use to describe himself nor any feeling of self that makes sense. This can only arise in relations with other people.

The term used for the role of agency in discourse theory is *subject position*. This is a notion that considers each discourse to have implicit in it a limited number of positions that people can take. People thus constitute points in discourse with certain roles and actions open or closed to them depending on the discourse. In this sense, the concept of identity is somewhat structuralist in that it sees people as having freedom only internally to the identity in a discourse. The point of departure for the constructivist understanding of identity is the idea that there is a human urge to feel ‘complete’ and that every person seeks to find himself or herself. This can only take place by identifying with the subject positions open for this person within the available discourses (Torfing 1999). In the words of Burr (1995: 141): ‘A person can only be a meaningful entity, both to himself and others, by being “read” in terms of the discourses available in that society.’ The main point is that identity is constituted in and by discourse.

The process whereby a person takes on a subject position is called *interpellation*. This is defined as ‘addressing [individuals] in a way which constructs them as particular discursive subjectivities, i.e. as women, consumers, workers, “trouble-makers”, foreigners, etc.’ (Torfing 1999: 302). Yet, the determinism that we find in structuralism is not present in discourse theory. The ambiguous nature of discourses gives room for manoeuvre and for changing identities, yet this is closely related to the power of definition vested in the subject positions. Whether a person identifies with a subject position or seeks to alter this position is followed up on in the section ‘Domination and Resistance’.

Just like in discourses, every identity will have nodal points that concepts will be linked to. Jørgensen and Phillips (1999) mention men and women as such nodal points. Each gender has specific traits linked to them, such as ‘strength’ and ‘football’ for men and ‘passivity’ and ‘knitting’ for women. The discourse will then define actions that people identifying themselves as such should take on in order to be acknowledged as a ‘true’ man or woman. And just

like in discourse, identity is defined not only by what it is, but just as much as what it is not. As a result, our identities are the combination of the subject positions we take, negotiate or are forced into. This is also what is meant by the statement that identity is fragmented. People have subject positions in an array of discourses that will constitute their identity, and most of them will be highly temporary and specific to social space.

Collective identity

Collective identity has the same history in the development of the social sciences as discourse analysis. The existence of groups was seen as something essentialist and natural growing out of structures or inherent qualities. The Marxist conception of classes as intrinsic to the capitalist system is an example of this. On the other hand, the way in which collective identities are formed according to discourse theory, follows closely the pattern of individual identity formation with the construction of a collective 'self'. Central to their formation is the reduction of possibilities, where something is held forth as central to the identity and other characteristics are ignored. This is similar to the process of articulation, which seeks closure in what concepts – or traits in our context – are integral to the identity, and what should be expelled to the field of discursivity (Jørgensen & Phillips 1999).

Important to group identities is the concept of *The Other*. As was said earlier, the articulation process requires a definition of not only what something *is*, but at the same time, and just as important, what it is *not*, meaning that it is relational. This means that for any identity there must be markers common to all members of the group that clearly differentiates 'Us' from 'Them', where the latter is ultimately what constitutes 'Us'. Norval (2000) calls this *frontier formation* in order to highlight that this differentiation takes place on the border between the groups. At the same time, anything that differentiates the members internally, which potentially will constitute other ways of forming groups, will be disregarded and not seen as important for this particular group's identity. Toni Morrison (quoted in Natter & Jones III 1997: 146) shows how race has become a significant category of identity through European contact and exploitation of slaves. Skin colour came to be the marker of difference that came to 'mean' something: 'One supposes that if Africans all had three eyes or one ear, the significance of that difference from the smaller but conquering European invaders would have also been found to have meaning.' In the same way, in Europe until fairly recently or even to this day, any non-white person is categorised as 'Black.' This ignores or hides any difference or similarities that can construct competitive identities between the groups of 'Whites' and 'Blacks.'

Antagonism

Every person has an array of different identities, both individual and collective, that co-exist simultaneously, and whether they are activated depend on the discourses a person operates within. These identities thus exist only as part of discourses and they sometimes overlap creating conflict of meaning. This conflict is strengthened by the way discourses work; in what they expel to their constitutive outside. As repeated a number of times, discourses are constituted by what they are not and this happens in a conflictual way. Torfing (1999: 125) explains this by showing that the constitutive outside of discourse A, is not B or non-A, but anti-A. The example he uses is the discourse of ‘western civilisation’:

[This discourse] is established by the exclusion of countries, habits and people that are all somehow considered to be ‘barbaric’. However, as the chain of equivalence is expanded to include more elements, it becomes clear that what all these elements have in common is only the negation of western civilisation. Thus, as Africa, India, Asia and South America are caught up in the chain of equivalence, the concept ‘barbaric’ is gradually emptied to the point where it can only be defined as uncivilized, i.e. as a threat to civilization. Consequently, the discourse of ‘western civilization’ is established in a confrontation with a constitutive outside which prevents it from being what it is.

In the same way, in the process of articulation, identities exist by being positioned vis-à-vis a threat to that very identity. Identities obstruct one another because they require differing roles or actions from its subjects. This is called *antagonism* and is discourse theory’s term for what we see as political: conflictual issues under discussion. Antagonism occurs because people, like discourses, can never attain closure in their identities. This happens when a presence of an ‘other’ prevents a feeling of totality, a symbol of a person’s non-being. This is called ‘blockage’ of identity and is experienced as such both for the antagonising force and for the antagonised (Howarth & Stavrakakis 2000).

As previously mentioned, antagonism is solved through the use of force as hegemonic interventions to remove ambiguity. This involves the negation of identity as both the negation of alternative meanings and the negation of people identifying with these (Torfing 1999). Jørgensen and Phillips (1999) use the example of the antagonism during the First World War when soldiers’ identification with the cross-national working classes was in direct conflict with the ability to make them fight each other as representatives of different states. Through hegemonic intervention, the working-class identity was suppressed by being undermined by a discourse where a nationalist identity was the main form of identity. This antagonism will be approached from a slightly different angle in the theory presented next.

Domination and resistance

Theories of domination and resistance, or of the elite and the subjected, offer an interesting way of analysing antagonism and the reaction to conflicting identities. This theory deals with repressive contexts where opposition to the status quo is dangerous. Open confrontation or questioning of the roles imposed is therefore not an option in most cases, and the theory deals with how the hegemony is maintained and the forms of opposition available to the dissenters. In the following, I use Scott (1990) in order to explain the theory and adapt his ideas to discourse theory where this is relevant for the topic of this thesis.

Scott introduces the terms *the public transcript* and *the hidden transcript* in order to identify the forms of resistance taking place below the horizon of history so to speak. The idea is to show that even though historical accounts present a picture of the subjected masses as a docile class that does not rebel against the elites in power – even when it would be in their interest to do so – there are subtler forms of resistance that eventually might result in overt resistance. The public transcript refers to what he calls the self-portrait of the elites – of how they want others to see them – and regulates the subject positions available for both the dominant and the subordinates. In the case of the theoretical framework of this thesis, this is a situation where hegemony is imposed, and this hegemony causes antagonism due to conflicting identities among its subjects. Due to the repressive context, though, the opposition to the hegemony takes the form of a hidden transcript. This is the secret discourse of the subordinates, which is rarely accessible to the dominant. On the surface, the subordinates conform to the expectations of the dominant – they *pose*. Below the surface, though, when among their own kind, the hidden transcript is practiced in reaction to the public transcript. Consequently, the conformity of the subordinates is a form of concealment due to the rigidity of the script. In many cases, it is a matter of survival for groups to hide their true beliefs and intentions in the face of inequality. This does not mean that the dominant take what they see at face value, but they rarely have access to the hidden transcript unless some kind of surveillance is in place.

Central to the sustainability of the hegemony, is the concept of unanimity. In order to reproduce the social order, the subjects must give the impression of accepting their roles and living in harmony. Not only must the subordinates seem to consent to the situation, disagreement between members of the dominant group must also be kept to arenas closed to the subordinates. If they reveal the division, this can be exploited by the subordinates to renegotiate their subordination. Likewise, where there is open resistance to the discourse, the power inherent in the subject positions of the dominant groups will have to be applied in order

to set an example. If open resistance goes without reaction, it encourages more disobedience and the unravelling of the discourse. Acts that violate the rules set out by the discourse, be it for the dominant or the subordinates, are called *discursive negation* and it will similarly weaken the power of a discourse.

The hidden transcript denotes competing discourses that oppose the hegemony. Just as Neumann (2001) above argues that any fundamentalist society has atheists, Scott claims that there are rarely any situations of domination where there is not a hidden transcript. He rejects the notion of 'false consciousness' and says that this can only be possible in a situation where individuals are isolated and are therefore not able to identify with others in the same situation. Therefore, there will always be one or more hidden transcripts in situations of antagonism. Furthermore, the more repressively certain rules are enforced – meaning the consequences of opposing them are severe – the more hidden a transcript stays.

Scott is careful to point out that the hidden transcript, just as any discourse, only exists to the extent that it is practiced, articulated, enacted and disseminated. This takes place in offstage social sites that can be protected from the eyes and ears of the dominant and are actively defended by the subordinates. These social spaces are themselves often creations of the hidden transcript. The examples he chooses are typically to do with the situation of the slaves in antebellum United States. Being subjugated to Whites conflicted with discourses of freedom and equality, and overt resistance was rare and would normally result in physical punishment. The hidden transcript of the slaves, therefore, would be formulated in a time and place when their masters were absent. If a slave was castigated, for example, he would say nothing in front of his master, but at night, in the slaves' quarters, he would degrade his master and claim that if the situation had been different, or in another time and place, he would have answered back or gotten his revenge by hitting back.

In discourse theory, hegemony offers three reactions to its subjects. The most typical one is *identification*, which occurs when a subject takes on his identity unquestioningly or willingly. This is typical for most of our roles in society where there is either hegemony or objectivity. Most of us unquestioningly take on the role of patient and the actions and behaviour inherent in this role when going to the doctor, for example. However, when people feel the meaning in their identity is not representative of them, their resistance can take the form of either *anti-identification* or *disidentification*. Anti-identification is a reaction of someone who fights a subject position within the boundaries of the hegemony and thus at the same time reproduces it. In other words, he will not seek to overthrow the hegemony, but rather to improve his own

status within it. Disidentification, on the other hand, is a process of deconstruction – the term deriving from Jacques Derrida. It is a critique that uses the inherent ambiguities and instability of a discourse to rearrange the moments and thus expose the contingency that constitutes the meaning of an identity by someone who claims not to speak from any group identity. This process can also be termed counter-hegemony (Torfing 1999, Natter & Jones III 1997).

In a similar way, Scott explains that resistance can take two forms: either as resistance within the public transcript, which is the least dangerous, or through the hidden transcript, as explained above, with the development of social spaces for its practice and of carriers for its expression (even though this will usually fall within the anti-identification resistance). For resistance within the public transcript, he uses the examples of inmates in a Norwegian prison. In order to improve a situation of seemingly arbitrary and unregulated distribution of privileges and punishment, they draw on the rigid enforcement of rules in other spheres of the running of the prison and their society as a whole. By stressing these norms of regulation and equality that justify the rule of the prison's administration, they can claim that the administration has violated their own norms and in this way create change without questioning the legitimacy of their subordination.

Resistance to the public transcript that does not take the form of open rebellion, however, is based on the infiltration of parts of the hidden transcript into the public transcript in forms that do not cause retribution from the dominant. This takes place through various strategies of deception and disguise where either the message or the messenger is concealed. Concealing the message means using language or symbols in ambiguous ways, relying on the knowledge of codes of meaning that are manipulated, thus lessening the scope for retributive action. Concealing the messenger, on the other hand, allows for more open acts of resistance as the architect is unknown. Rumour is a powerful form of anonymous resistance especially widespread in societies where public communication is controlled. This is because its oral transmission can be moulded to circumstances. Scott (1990: 145) writes that 'As a rumor travels it is altered in a fashion that brings it more closely into line with the hopes, fears, and worldview of those who hear and retell it.'

A more elaborate form of disguise is the turning of parts of the hidden transcript into folk or popular culture with meanings that contradict or undercut the official interpretations. Popular culture, obviously, is less controlled by the dominant. Its expressions can take the shape of songs, tales, dances, or rituals, many of which are repeated across cultures. Another important form it takes is the religious ideologies and expressions of the underprivileged, which implicitly protest against their worldly fate. It is important to note, however, that

resistance just as often takes the shape of sabotage and explicit threats when the person behind can be reasonably safe from reprisal. Scott again uses the black American slaves as an example, saying that their pilfering or theft should also be read as forms of resistance and not only as acts to secure their survival.

Nationalism and narrative

This final section of the theoretical framework presents theories of nationalism and these theories' construction of a national identity. Their inclusion here is not a claim to any political project of independence or separatist tendencies amongst Syria's Alawis, but rather because of certain parallels between this type of collective identity and the situation of the Alawis. The most obvious of these parallels are the clear demarcation of sects in Syria and furthermore, the geographical concentration of the Alawis in one area of the country. It should be mentioned, however, that separatist ideas *were* floated in the 1940s before independence, strengthening the case for drawing these parallels (see chapter four).

Just like the other theories discussed earlier, the academic understanding of national identity has gone from a perception of it being perennial and given at birth, to a socio-political construct. It is closely related to the theory on collective identity, and the way it sees how people form a nation is only a magnified version of finding traits that separate 'Us' from 'The Others'. In the words of Norval (2000: 226): 'National identity is the form, *par excellence*, of identification that is characterised by the drawing of rigid, if complex, boundaries to distinguish the collective self, and its the other.' Nationalist discourse organises the world by mutually exclusive categories of national identity. In other words, all people are divided into different nations and these nations, considered integral units in their own right, should be sovereign, usually within the boundaries of a specific territory. Only when these nations rule and cultivate themselves can they reach true freedom and fulfilment (Kedourie 1960). In other words it is a linking of *national identity* and political mobilisation based on this identity. This identity can be thought of as an extended form of loyalty, which traditionally took the shape of loyalty to one's family, clan or tribe. In the modern form, nationalism extends this loyalty to a much larger group defined according to language, ethnicity or certain cultural traits that differentiate it from other nations (Smith 1991).

It should be noted here that there are differing views on the foundations of national identity. The ethno-symbolist body of theory, for example, claims that today's national identity has much older roots. Smith (1991) claims that national identities have been formed on the basis of *ethnies*; a term referring to pre-modern ethnic communities. These *ethnies* had

traditions, values and symbols on which a contemporary national identity is founded. However, following the constructivist premises of the framework of this thesis, the issue is not whether there are believed continuities between past and present, but the arbitrary way the cultural markers are used to form collective identity. Even in our situation of an identity based on religious differences, differences are never so ‘clearly discrete, non-overlapping and distinct that they “automatically” become the basis for different social groupings...The very sense of being a member of a coherent and clearly demarcated group is not simply given by tradition but raised in certain contexts’ (Calhoun 1997: 32).

National narrative

Of central importance to our context is how nationalism constructs the history of the nation and the tying of this history to a specific territory. This history takes the role of a collective memory of how we came to be who we are as a group. Narrative is the term used to denote how people tell stories; of how they portray both time, space and identity. The idea is that people tell and retell stories organised around events that are linked together. What we normally refer to as a story has two fundamental elements: the story and the narrative. The story refers to the events themselves, in effect the raw materials of a story. The narrative, however, is the mode chosen for telling the story, or of how one chooses to represent the events. Some chose to break down the narrative further and isolate the plot, which is the way the events are linked together to form a chain of causation, but this is of less interest here (Abbott 2002, Cobley 2001).

A narrative’s function is thus to move from a start-point to an end-point with digressions on the way. The digressions fill out the ongoing story and are characteristically what gives a story its form by giving the audience an opportunity to understand the causality of the sequence of events. The narrative can leap backwards and forwards in time and the audience will fill in the gaps and put together the story from the different events (Abbott 2002). The narrative seeks to represent – or ‘re-present’ – events, which, at the same time, necessarily embody both space and time. In order to maintain the interest of the audience, a narrative will often utilise concepts such as anticipation, focus and retrospection (Cobley 2001). In order to illustrate the role of the narrative, we can imagine a situation where actors involved in a conflict all agree on the course of events, but not over how these events may be best represented, or what should be the context that would *explain* the conflict (Hodgkin and Radstone 2003a).

The formulation of nationalist thought is deeply linked with history. Since national identity, like any identity, requires decisions of who and what is considered part of the nation, there must be ‘proof’ of why ‘We’ are a nation. This leads to what is termed an invention of tradition where the nationalists present an intelligible account of *how the nation came to be* in the form of a history of the nation (Breuilly 2000). This takes the shape of a historical narrative that links the past and the present through the chain of events, ‘mythically expanding the nation into a transhistorical, and thus eternal, entity’ (Wodak et al 1999: 1). Again, the power lies in the narrative’s ability to create an impression of causality. Even though cause and effect are not necessarily stated explicitly, by linking together events, they implicitly represent a causal chain (Abbott 2002).

Both nationalist movements and nation states refer to history as a national collective memory, something that is part of all the members of the nation. This history highlights certain events that are central to the story while most events taking place in the same space or time are seen as inconsequential. Another way of describing it is that historians pick specific bits that represent the story they wish to tell, whereas incongruous or undesirable elements must be suppressed and denied (Hodgkin & Radstone 2003b). In the 19th century, for example, European historians actively edited out non-white elements of the European past, presenting Ancient Greece as the cradle of Western civilisation. In this way, they were able to erase influences from Africa and the Near East (Cobley 2001).

Ethnic myths

At the heart of the national narrative, then, is the anchoring of the present in the past. Nationalisms have many ways of narrating their mythical pasts, and their distant origins are typically lost in the fog of time and exist as legends of a nation’s fathers in folklore (Wodak et al 1999). Nevertheless, Smith (1999) asserts that these types of myths can be broken down into component parts – he calls them ethnic myths – that can be recognised in nearly all nationalist historical narratives, and the following typology is adopted directly from him.⁴

The initial myths of a nation deal with *origins*, *ancestry* and *space*. The myths of temporal origin seek to place the emergence of a nation in time. This is essential in order to determine the linearity in time between our forbears and us, or as he expresses it himself: ‘Fixed points in time act as barriers to the flood of meaninglessness’ (Smith 1999: 63). A myth of ancestry to historical characters is essential in order to explain development of the nation, and, further-

⁴ Although Smith cannot be placed within the constructivist paradigm that constitutes the theoretical framework of this thesis, his approach is nevertheless useful for our understanding of how historical narratives are typically constructed.

more, for the symbolic relevance these characters have. This creates an opportunity for creating claims to direct descent and thus articulate the nation as an extended family. Myths of location – and migration – create the spatial element for claims to a territory, which is so central to nationalist ideology. These myths explain where we came from and how we got to where we are now. Just as the myths of origins create temporal barriers, myths of location create territorial barriers against flux and ‘aimless wandering’. A good example of the importance of spatial myths is evident in the Arab-Israeli conflict and both groups’ claims to history.

Tracing the history of the nation through the ages characteristically falls into three epochs. The first one is the myth of *the golden age*, which traces the heroic and glorious past of the historically autonomous nation that was able to organise its own affairs. Closely linked to myths of ancestry, the heroes of the golden age are models in their values and their faith for the present-day nation, especially in the cases where the nation is oppressed. Frequently, archaeological artefacts will gain a new meaning when interpreted in view of the glorious past. In Syrian-Arab nationalism, for example, this Syrian-Arab Golden Age is represented by the Damascus-based Umayyad caliphate of the 8th century, which ruled before the Arab Middle East was taken over and dominated by non-Arab Muslims (Choueiri 2000).

The second subsequent epoch is the myth of *decline*. The decline came about either due to neglect and decadence on part of the nation itself, or because of the invasion of barbarians who conquered the nation and repressed its culture. In some cases, the decline is so sudden or violent that we can speak of a national trauma and the subsequent portrayal of the nation as a victim. The fall of Constantinople to the Turks in 1453 played such a role in Greek nationalism: ‘It also entailed a sense of Greek Orthodox captivity, the *Tourkokratia*, which weighed down the Greek spirit and enchained the true faith’ (Smith 1999: 216, italics in original). Indeed, the sense of being a victim can give the impetus for extreme nationalist ideology justified by and impetus to get even with the perpetrators.

It is this supposed lingering desire to recover lost rights and liberties enjoyed during the golden age that leads to the third epoch. This is the myth of *regeneration*. This is the time of re-establishing the long-lost freedom of the golden age and of the reassertion of the nation and its culture. The heroes of the golden age are then the building blocks and the ideals of the nation reborn. During the Greek war of independence, for example, the Greek leaders would be likened to Achilles, even if Achilles was a mythical and not a historical character.

A few other characteristics of certain nationalist myths are worth mentioning here. One is the *exodus theme* encountered at various points in myths, usually in order to escape injustice

or persecution and search for the land of freedom. Smith (2003) describes Afrikaner nationalism in South Africa as having a special commemoration of the mythical trek of Afrikaner pioneers who escaped British colonial rule by fleeing 'into the wilderness'. There are strong parallels between how they chose to portray this event and the story of the Children of Israel in the Bible.

The second one is that of the claim to a *homeland*. The spatial character of the myths, including the myths of location and migration, means that space becomes a carrier of history. Territories become historical landscapes with symbolic value because they are linked to defining historical events that took place there. The role of Kosovo in Serb nationalism is a case in point. The fields of Kosovopolje were the location of the 1389 defeat of the medieval Serbian empire by their later overlords, the Ottoman Turks. In this way, myths become title-deeds of historical rights to a territory, eventually constituting a homeland, even if the nation no longer lives there. This is crucial in both Zionist and Armenian nationalisms.

In conclusion

The narrative theory presented here at the end constitutes a body of theory on its own, but it is related to constructivism by representing an approach to the construction of meaning. Whereas earlier approaches considered either the producer or the thing it represented as the carrier of meaning, the constructivist approach shows how meaning is socially constructed by the relational representation of it (Cobley 2001). In this manner, the way in which history is 're-presented' in the historical narrative gives it meaning through articulation. This is no different from the creation of any other discourse, even though historical narratives typically take on the form of objectivity, thus appearing natural and uncontested to us. Moreover, historical narratives are formative because the way we understand the past determines how we understand the present (Hodgkin & Radstone 2003a).

As was mentioned in the methodology, the topic of this thesis means that discourse theory is a fruitful approach due to its conceptualisation of identity. When in the field, both historical narratives and discourse theory gives the possibility of 'capturing' the stories of the Alawis and analysing them according to the tools the theories make available. The point of departure will be what the sources say and not a specific theory that lays down causal relationships and sees the data as reflections of these. Identity is context-dependent and it is its contextual nature in Syria that is of interest here. This context is the topic of the next chapter before moving on to the findings in the analysis in chapters five, six, and seven.

4

THE CONTEXT

Syria has become notorious in the West over the past decade as an enemy in the US' war on terror, but most people know very little about internal Syrian politics or of its heterogeneous population. This chapter will attempt to give an understanding of the political forces that have shaped Syria over the last 100 years in order to give a background for the following three chapters constituting the analysis on the construction of Alawi identity in Syria. It is important to understand the role the Alawis have played in independent Syria and how the government constructs its politics in relation to sectarianism and religious extremism to get a grasp on the discourses my Alawi sources use.

This chapter follows a different logic than the analysis, which relies on the voices of my sources. The aim here is to give an impression of how Syria and its sectarian issues are analysed by academics, and furthermore, how Alawis are understood by outsiders. This is to give a different view of the issues and to set the construction of Alawi identity in a wider socio-political context. However, it should not be taken as a 'truth' that is opposed to those presented later, but rather as complimentary to the construction of their world that my Alawi sources give. Furthermore, the wider context is especially important for the construction of the Official Discourse of the regime, which the two main Alawi discourses identified in this thesis are constructed in relation to.

The first section in this chapter introduces the forces that gave rise to independent Syria and the Arab nationalism that has been formative for the official view on sectarian issues. This is followed by the role of the Alawis in the Syrian state and how some explain their politics as sectarian based and others as a result of class cleavages. A brief description of the supposed beliefs and organisation of the Alawi religion is also included here. The last part introduces the language of the present regime and how the regime, from the 1970s, has constructed the Official Discourse according to an ideal of sectarian co-existence.

People and history

Syria lies at a crossroads between the West and the East, between Christianity and Islam. This is seen as a curse and a blessing by Syrians in that it has left a rich cultural and religious

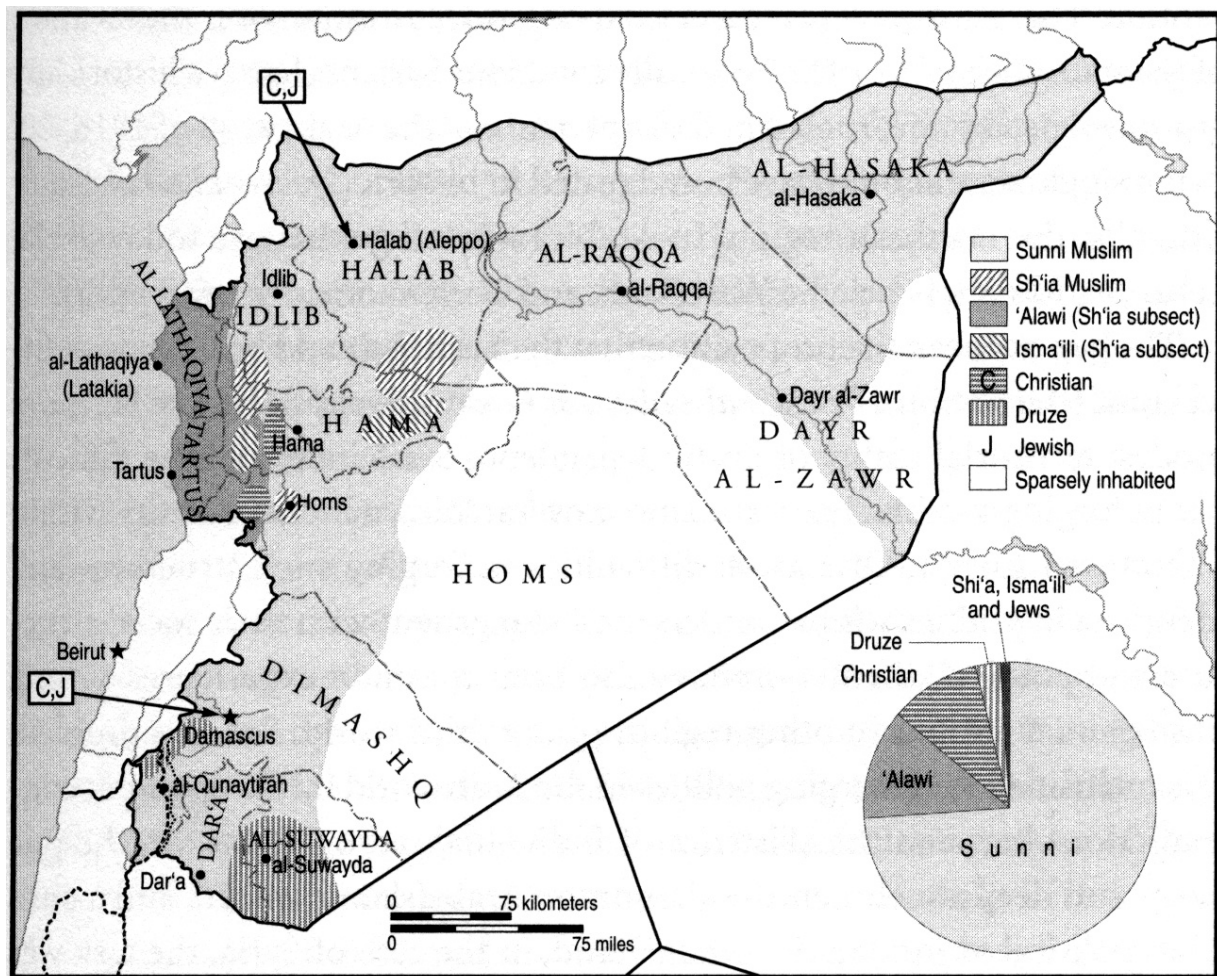
heritage, but also that outside powers have always had interests in the region. When we speak of Syria in a historical context, it is important to understand that we are speaking of Greater Syria, a geographical area with more or less natural boundaries and in many cases described as a cultural unit. Greater Syria loosely comprises present day Palestine and Israel, Jordan, Syria, Lebanon, and parts of southern Turkey. Contemporary Syria was created through a division of the French Mandate, which had been set up through the Treaty of Versailles' division of the Ottoman Empire following its defeat in the First World War.

The Syrian population has remnants of all the historical forces that have swept over the territory and consists of both different ethnic groups and different religious sects. Arabs – meaning Arabic speakers – constitute about 90 percent of the population, the Kurds about nine percent, and the remaining one percent consists mainly of Armenians and Circassians⁵ (George 2003: 3-5). The religious make-up of Syria is more uncertain. The last census that counted sects and religious minorities took place in 1956 at a time when the population was eight million. At present, with a population of 18 million, the estimates are based on relative numbers 50 years and ten million people later. In 1956, the Sunnis constituted 75 percent of the population, the Alawis 11 percent, the Christians of different denominations 10 percent, and the Druze 3 percent (Khuri 1991: 49). In addition, there are smaller numbers of Isma'ilis, Twelver Shi'as, and other Shi'a minorities⁶. Recent estimates roughly follow these relative numbers, but it is likely that they have changed due to different birth rates and emigration, which differs between the groups. It should be noted, however, that even if three quarters of the population are Sunnis, the majority of the Kurds are part of this number. Since the Kurds are largely excluded from political life in Syria, those Sunnis who matter politically are the Sunni *Arabs* who thus constitute about two thirds of the total population (Leverett 2005: 2). The map on the next page shows the areas where the different sects are dominant.

From 1516, Syria was under Ottoman suzerainty based on an Islamic identity. The Ottoman Empire was the seat of the Caliph – the formal head of Sunni Islam and successor of the Prophet. It was ruled along the lines of Shari'a, the religious laws based on the Qur'an and

⁵ Muslims that emigrated from the Caucasus in the 19th century following the Russian annexation of the region.

⁶ Twelver Shi'ism refers to the vast majority of Shi'as and is called 'Twelver' as it denotes the number of imams they consider to be the rightful successors to the Prophet Muhammad (based on direct descent from the Prophet's family). The first imam was Ali and the twelfth and last is in occultation (al-Mahdī) and will reappear on the Day of Resurrection. The Druze and the Isma'ilis are offshoots of Shi'ism. The Isma'ilis are Shi'as of the Sevener tradition, meaning that they diverge from the Twelvers in the succession of the seventh imam and have, over time, developed differently from the majority of Shi'as. The Druze diverged from the Isma'ilis in the 11th century and have developed their own body of religious doctrine more removed from traditional Shi'ism and many therefore see them as a distinct branch of Islam (Momen 1985).
The Alawi relation to Shi'a Islam will be elaborated on further in chapter five.



(From: Leverett 2005: 3)

the Hadith (the tradition of the Prophet Muhammad written down after his death). This guarantees the rights of the religious minorities who were Protected Peoples (*dhimmah*), which meant that Christians and Jews had the right to rule themselves in legal courts of personal law. This was organised as a system of *Millets*, which were largely autonomous units headed by a religious leader of the community who was responsible for administration and taxation on behalf of the Sultan. This religious tolerance is considered one of the reasons behind the stability of the Empire (Cleveland 1994). However, those minorities that were not recognised as *millets*, above all the Muslim non-Sunni minorities, were regularly persecuted. This was especially the case with the Shi'a Muslims, including the Alawis. At the time when European power in Ottoman lands increased throughout the 19th century, the main forms of identity and solidarity was sect, tribe or city (Hinnebusch 2001).

When the French occupied what is today Syria and Lebanon – preceding a mandate from the League of Nations to ‘administer’ the former Ottoman territories until they could govern themselves (Great Britain was awarded Palestine) – they set them up as two different

mandates. Lebanon was established in order to give the Christians of Mount Lebanon autonomy, while Syria was subdivided into five states, of which two were based on the minorities living there namely the Druze and Alawi states. With the exception of the State of Alexandretta, which was ceded to Turkey, the other four states were merged into the Republic of Syria before the Second World War and gained full independence in 1946 (Cleveland 1994).

The struggle for independence in Syria had its roots in Arab nationalism, a movement that took shape in the middle of the 19th century and was pan-Arab in character. Until the first decade of the 20th century, it was only a fringe phenomenon. However, it became a serious political movement when it was adopted by the local elites seeking to forestall the perceived imminent takeover of the region by the European powers. The early formulation of Arab nationalism sought to create a synthesis between historical Arab greatness and its territory. The focus on 'Arab' as the ethnic base of the ideology was a result of the important contributions of Christians and other Arab minorities who sought to create a competing identity to the pan-Islamic identity that was taking shape in the waning Empire. In order to differentiate between the Arab nation as an ethnic base and the Islamic community with its religious base, a history was 'invented' of the early Arabs; of their historic Semitic roots tying them to the historic Semitic peoples of the Middle East. Although there is a glorification of the nomadic life of the Arab tribes of the Arabic Peninsula – especially in relation to their early poetic tradition not to mention the rise of Islam – the linking of the Arab civilisation to the settled Semitic cultures draws a continuous historic line to the present way of living (Choueiri 2000, Khoury 1991).

The decline of the early Arab civilisation is partly attributed to outsiders and partly to a lack of unity among the Arabs. In this way, the nationalists were able to do two things: First, they could create 'The Other' as non-Arabs, and Turks in particular, by linking the decline with the arrival of Turkish and other non-Arab Muslims into the Arab lands during the Abbasid dynasty in Baghdad. Whereas they excuse the excesses of the preceding Umayyad dynasty in Damascus on the luxuries of settled life that corrupted the nomad warriors of Arabia, the later decline is blamed on the non-Arab outsiders. Second, by blaming this decline of civilisation on the lack of a unified Arabic front, including the internal quarrels of the Umayyad dynasty that cost it its stability, the nationalists made a compelling argument for a renewed Arab unity to reclaim lost greatness (Choueiri 2000).

The Syrian Sunni elites who had dominated Syria under the Ottomans stayed in power during the French Mandate partly co-operating and partly opposing the French under the guise

of Arab nationalism. They constituted an urban class of ‘comprador’ bourgeoisie allied with the Sunni religious leaders largely separated from the mass of peasantry still living under a form of feudalism. In order to weaken the power of the local elites, the French encouraged the empowerment of the minorities, including the Alawis, Druze, and Christians. The Muslim sects were the most deprived and thus benefited the most in relative terms. They had a privileged role in the armed forces and over time, they rose in the officer corps while their civilian co-religionists filled the ranks of the emerging middle classes of teachers and civil servants. Seeing that their future laid within a unified Syria (however diminished from its historical size), the minorities threw their weight behind Arab nationalism, which promised equality and inclusion based on linguistic unity and secularism. This was also encouraged by the elites who needed to create a unifying identity instead of tribal and sectarian allegiances (van Dam 1996, Hinnebusch 2001).

The Syrian elite’s nationalist discourse was based on the Western values of independence, constitutionalism, parliamentarianism and personal freedoms. In order to oppose the elites and their entrenched power, a more revolutionary form of Arab nationalism was taking form outside the traditional quarters of the elites. This counter-nationalism, however, had to be formulated using different sources of inspiration. In the hands of the emerging middle classes, it was coloured by class aspirations and with an emphasis on social and economic justice, and stressing pan-Arabism in opposition to the local power bases of the elites. Following independence, several political parties were established with this radical agenda (Dawisha 2003, Khoury 1991).

Through the decades following independence, the military became extremely politicised and praetorian. Different factions and branches seized power at various times, but it was the adherents of the Ba’th Party who would eventually come out on top. The Ba’th Party – meaning ‘Resurrection’ – was an Arab nationalist party in the radical sense with a populist appeal. It was able to forge an alliance between the middle classes and large parts of the peasantry, which brought it into parliament in the 1950s and it eventually seized power in 1963 in a coup d’état. The regimes that followed were fiercely secular and socialist, nationalising all important sectors of the economy and in this way undercutting the traditional elites. Through agrarian reforms and active recruitment in the countryside coupled with social development and bureaucratic expansion, the party broadened its base to between one fourth and one third of the population in the mid-seventies. This was possible due to the fusing of the party with the state, thus, in effect, constructing a one-party state, which asserted control through corporatist mass organisations. In 1970, Hafiz al-Asad, an Alawi from the province of

Latakia who had been Minister of Defence in the government, deposed the President and brought his less radical faction to power and was made president the year after. During the following years, he turned away from the most radical policies of the Ba'th Party through his *Corrective Movement*, including the interests of greater segments of the population. But he also turned the state into a 'presidential monarchy' with no democratic outlets other than the party. The fact that he was an Alawi and that his closest supporters were from the same sect as him, would have consequences for how the regime was perceived by the Syrian population in the years to come (Hinnebusch 1991 and 2001).

The Alawis

As mentioned in the previous section, Alawis are believed to make up about 11 percent of the Syrian population, constituting about two million people. There are also many Alawis in the Arab minority in southern Turkey (above all in the province of Hatay (Alexandretta), which was part of Syria until 1939) and in northern Lebanon (where they are represented in parliament as an autonomous sect). In Syria, they mainly live on the Mediterranean coast in the provinces of Latakia and Tartous and in the coastal mountain range of the Jabal Ansariyeh (meaning the Alawi Mountains), which divides the coastal plain from Syria's interior. There are also Alawi rural communities to the east of the Jabal Ansariyeh, and with increased migration and economic development there are Alawis living in the major cities of Damascus, Homs, Hama and Aleppo. Although Latakia and Tartous are dominated by Alawis, they are also home to large communities of Christians who have traditionally lived alongside them. There are also a considerable number of Sunnis, mostly living in the traditional urban centres of the main towns and cities along the coastline. The Alawis were later arrivals to these areas and some Sunnis feel that they 'were there first.' Landis (08.10.2004) writes that

It should be remembered that in 1920 when the French extended their control over Syria, no Alawites were registered residents of the coastal cities - Latakia, Jable, Baniyas, or Tartus. They were effectively reserved for Sunnis and Christians. In fact, the first French census shows that Alawis and Sunnis lived together in no town with a population exceeding 200 inhabitants!...Alawis shared towns with Christians but not Sunnis. Only after the imposition of French rule did Alawis begin to migrate to the larger cities of the coast.

The two groups live segregated to this day in different neighbourhoods of the cities. In Tartous, for example, the Sunnis mostly stick to the historical old city and the island of Arwad, while the newer neighbourhoods surrounding the centre are predominantly Alawi.

The Alawis are a religious sect within the Twelver tradition of Shi'a Islam. They are Arabic speaking and are not identifiably different from other Syrians. There is therefore no

particular ethnic difference between them and the Sunni Muslim majority. Moreover, according to Alawis and the Arabist ideology of the regime, they are Arabs. However, the colloquial Arabic spoken in the rural parts of this region pronounces the Arabic letter *qāf*, which in many other accents is a glottal stop. This sound is closely connected with Alawis (and Druze) and ridiculed in other parts of Syria and by the more ‘cosmopolitan’ Sunnis living in the cities on the coast. Their surnames can sometimes be identified as typically Alawi, but just as often, they might as well be Sunni. Their given names follow the same pattern. I have come across people accusing Alawis of using Western names, but none of my acquaintances have such names. This is probably an upper-class phenomenon, which one can find all over the world. As for the claim that Alawis give their children Arabic Christian names, they do share names with Christians, but reply that this is their tradition and the names are, as such, not only Christian.

Even though the Alawis are considered only a religious sect, they can also be classified as an ethnic group because of the impermeable boundaries between the sects. Alternatively, they could be termed a *communal group*, but this term has been discarded here because they do not form a coherent political entity congruent with sectarian lines, like their counterparts in Lebanon. The issue here, though, is to recognise that they do not form only a certain branch of Islam, but a community who considers itself culturally and historically different from the other sects in Syria. As Antoun (1991: 10) writes: ‘The terms “Alawi” or “Shi’a” or “Maronite” refer not simply to an ethnic identity or a religious ideology, but also to a territory, a politico-economic system, a wide-ranging cultural repertoire, and a history.’ As will be argued in this thesis, their difference can be traced to the perception that they have been expelled from the Islamic community against their will and how they have always opposed the power of the Sunni Muslims.

Historically, the Alawis were confined to the Jabal Ansariyeh and persecuted due to their status as apostates and heretical Muslims and were considered savage mountain people who were a threat to the settled life of the cultivated plains (their own historical narrative is the topic of chapter five). As they were incorporated into the capitalist system under the Ottoman Empire, they were turned into indentured peasants and exploited. During the French Mandate, however, they had a favoured position together with the other minorities, and it was particularly within the army that they would prosper as other sectors of society were closed to them due to their poverty (Batatu 1999, van Dam 1996).

Fiercely secular, they joined the radical Arab nationalist parties and became very important in the Ba’th Party, especially when the Latakia branch of the party became the

dominant one. The empowerment of the Alawis reached its zenith with the presidency of Hafiz al-Asad and his regime. A typical claim one hears and reads in the press is that the Syrian regime is ‘Alawi’, meaning that the state is by and for Alawis. Van Dam (1996) diversifies this picture in his research on the sectarian character of the Syrian state and its policies. He argues that even though sectarian, tribal, and regional ties were essential for the monopolisation of power following the Ba’th Party takeover in 1963, these ties unified key sectors of the armed forces and the political factions, in effect stabilising the situation in Syria. This continued under the presidency of Hafiz al-Asad in that he placed people he could rely on – from his own town or officer colleagues – in key positions in the armed forces and the powerful intelligence services. Due to his background, many of these were necessarily Alawis. Considering that class and socio-economic status in Syria closely followed sectarian and regional fault lines, it is not surprising that certain minorities became largely overrepresented in the political and military elites when they overthrew the ruling classes as they went on to favour members from their own deprived classes.

In order to consolidate their power, therefore, the new elites relied on people from their own communities and regions, something that is not surprising since it would be easier to find loyal colleagues among people with similar backgrounds. However, this also gave their opponents the means to undermine the regime by exploiting the sectarian character of the regime, which again gave those in power another reason to only trust ‘their own’. Furthermore, the favouring of the earlier neglected provinces and regions of the minorities gave another dimension to the perception of sectarian favouritism, just like the empowerment of the peasantry meant diminishing power for the urban classes who had traditionally held power (van Dam 1996). Hinnebusch (1991: 47, italics in original) concludes that sectarianism *cannot* explain the dynamic of the regime, only how it represents a whole class:

[T]he importance of minority groups, notably the Alawis, has been their role as advance guard of an elite or as class coalitions rather than as sects per se. They played the role of class vanguard, then shield of state formation; they now appear as both spearheads of *embourgeoisement* and restratification, and as the target against which antiregime class coalitions have coalesced.

But many other groups and interests were built into the system, creating what he calls a ‘Bonapartist’ state where so many people and groups – including both Alawis and Sunnis – had interests. This was why it survived the uprising of the Muslim Brotherhood (returned to in chapter seven) in the late seventies and early eighties:

[W]ith few exceptions, the constituency incorporated into the state – the army, salaried bureaucracy, peasantry, Damascene bourgeoisie, much of it Sunni – did not unravel. The Ba’thist state proved a more formidable structure than many had

anticipated. It was clearly built of sturdier cement than mere Alawi dominance and incorporated a multitude of interests beyond the ambitions of a handful of Alawi generals. (Hinnebusch 1991: 44)

However, the Alawis did enrich themselves following the revolution of 1963, something that was even more spectacular due to their dirt-poor situation only a generation earlier. They did function as a privileged recruitment pool for positions in the bureaucracy and the military, but the improvement of peasant life-styles and not least the fact that they seized the opportunities for education both in Syria and abroad was probably also an element to their rise from poverty to middle-class as a group (Hinnebusch 1991).

The ‘problem’ of having Alawis in power in Syria has a second dimension. One of the reasons they have been persecuted and treated badly until modern times was the perception of them by the dominant Sunnis. They would describe Alawi beliefs as *kufir*; the rejection of Islamic faith. This was obviously still the case when the leaders of Alaouites – the separate state set up for the Alawis under the French Mandate – pleaded with the French to reconsider its inclusion in the Syrian Republic:

The Alawites refuse to be annexed to Muslim Syria because, in Syria, the official religion of the state is Islam, and according to Islam, the Alawites are considered infidels....The spirit of hatred and fanaticism imbedded in the hearts of the Arab Muslims against everything that is non-Muslim has been perpetually nurtured by the Islamic religion. There is no hope that the situation will ever change. Therefore, the abolition of the mandate will expose the minorities in Syria to the dangers of death and annihilation, irrespective of the fact that such abolition will annihilate the freedom of thought and belief....We assure you that treaties have no value in relation to the Islamic mentality in Syria. We have previously seen this situation in the Anglo-Iraqi treaty, which did not prevent the Iraqis from slaughtering the [Christian] Assyrians and the Yezidis [in 1933]. (Landis 11.08.2004)

Fairly little is known about the tenets and beliefs in the Alawi religion. This is due to the secrecy that their beliefs are based on, a secrecy that is one of the main themes of this thesis. What has been written about Alawism is largely based on travel accounts from European travellers through the 18th, 19th, and early 20th century, describing a faith based on both Islamic, pagan and Christian influences, or this is at least how they saw it through their own Western eyes. Of the theology of the Alawis, nearly all of it is based on the publication of one of their secret holy books, the *Kitāb al-Majmū‘*, in 1859. It explains that Alawi society is divided between the Initiated and the Masses, where only the former are allowed to learn the inner secrets of the faith whereas the latter group should only know the most basic beliefs and honour the saints and the feasts. The faith revolves around the belief in the cyclical nature of the world, where all religious revelations come in the form of a divine triad of the Hidden

Meaning of God, the Meaning's External Expression, and the Proselytiser. The last revelation was the Islamic one, where Ali, the Prophet Muhammad's son-in-law, was the divinity, Muhammad was his expression, and Salmān al-Fārisī, one of the Prophet's companions, the expression's communicator. The book thus seems to place Prophet Muhammad below Ali, who traditionally has this position in Shi'a Islam, but furthermore to give him a divine status, which is against the teachings of both Sunni and Shi'a Islam and their emphasis on the human nature of them both. This is why they are referred to as *ghulāt* in Shi'a terminology: those who go too far in their veneration of Ali. The book also confirms the accounts of the belief in the transmigration of souls and other beliefs not in accordance with dogmatic Islam (Kramer 1987, Batatu 1999).

What is described in the *Kitāb al-Majmū'*, in addition to other rumours about their beliefs, has led to the declaration of Alawis as unbelievers by orthodox Sunnis, rejecting the Alawis' claim to be Muslims. Also, among the Shi'a, they have a dubious status because they are considered to deify Ali, a practice that is widespread in many Shi'a sects, but not considered acceptable in mainstream Shi'ism. From the Sunnis ruling Syria from the middle ages, and even from Muslim extremists in recent times, it is claimed that the Alawis only take on the guise of Islam in order to protect themselves, but in their hearts they are apostates who should be forced to convert to mainstream Islam or killed. The absence of mosques in Alawi areas and the fact that the religious *shaykhs* felt the need to keep their religion secret have fuelled the speculations about them (Kramer 1987, Batatu 1999).

Whether these beliefs represent the Alawis as a whole, a group of Alawis, or none of them, is impossible to verify. I will present some of the views I have encountered, but they do not represent anything new as such. Furthermore, the *Kitāb al-Majmū'* was revealed by an Alawi who had first converted to Judaism, then Sunni Islam, and finally Christianity, before being assassinated (Batatu 1999). His reasons for publishing the book and the Alawi secrets are therefore unknown and open to speculation. Considering that it is one of several holy books, it should be expected that there is more to their beliefs than this, especially if we try to imagine what kind of view one would be left with of Christianity if it were judged solely on the basis of one of the gospels in the New Testament.

In 1973, eighty Alawi *shaykhs* issued a formal statement, probably on the request of the president, that the rumours about Alawi beliefs were 'slander' and based on the 'burrowing in the past and reiterating inventions by the enemies of Arabism and Islam' (Batatu 1999: 20). They went on to affirm that their book is the Qur'an and that they are Shi'a Muslims of the Twelver tradition. However, there seems to be internal disagreement between different cults

within the Alawi religion on certain issues. According to Batatu (1999), that same year a conference was held in a secret location in Syria in order to come to an agreement on contentious theological issues. Allegedly, the most senior *shaykh* in the conference argued that the deification of Ali was a result of ignorance and of not trying to reconcile these beliefs with the Qur'an. But the disagreements point to divisions between the *shaykhs* present.

The purported divisions are compounded by a lack of religious hierarchy or accepted leadership, as well as the existence of different cults with different traditions among the Alawis. Alawism, as will be followed up on in the next chapter, does not have a tradition of imposing religious rules on its followers and in matters of faith. It is inward-looking and private rather than public and based on outwardly appearances. Religious questions are to be meditated upon, which explains the lack of outward organised religion (Khuri 1991). There are also tribal differences dividing the Alawi community. However, these have all but disappeared in coastal Syria and also seem to have lost some of their power among the younger generations in the mountains (Hinnebusch 2001). None of my sources has placed any importance in these tribal ties, unlike the differences between the Alawi cults, which some say have an impact on beliefs.

At any rate, the belief that the Alawis were heretics was a point of concern for the Alawis from the incorporation of the Alawi state into Syria during the French Mandate. Whereas the French had encouraged the Alawis to define themselves as a separate religion, much like the Druze chose to do, the Alawi leaders insisted on belonging to the Twelver (*Ja'fari*) tradition within Shi'a Islam from the 1920s, and this was renewed when it became obvious that their future laid within a Sunni dominated Syria (Landis 2003). Kramer (1987) writes that the Sunnis were equally eager to incorporate the Alawis and in 1936 it took reciprocal form when the Alawi leaders proclaimed that they were Muslims and believed in the profession of the faith⁷ and followed the five Pillars of Islam⁸. At the same time, the Grand Mufti of Palestine issued a religious decree that the Alawis were good Muslims. Considering that the Alawis claimed to be Twelver Shi'as, Kramer points out that it is remarkable that no Shi'a authority had extended its support to their claim. There were attempts to co-operate with the Shi'a academies in Iran and Iraq after independence, but nothing was ever formalised.

Once the Alawi Hafiz al-Asad came to power in 1970, the issue took on new importance, principally because the new constitution stated that the president of the state has to be Muslim

⁷ There is no God but God and Muhammad is his Prophet

⁸ The profession of faith (Shahādah), the ritual prayer (Salāt), the almsgiving (zakāt), the fasting during the holy month of Ramadan (Sawm), and the pilgrimage to Mecca (Hajj).

– something that had to be included following unrest when any reference to Islam as the religion of the state was removed. Landis (2003) amongst others claims that the policies of the regime to turn the Alawis into good Muslims, both through outside support and reforms from within, have been implemented in order to strengthen the legitimacy of the regime and its president. To gain legitimacy as Muslims, al-Asad turned to the spiritual leader of the Shi'a community in Lebanon, Imam Musa as-Sadr. He recognised them as Shi'as in 1973 at the same time as the Alawi shaykhs issued a similar statement mentioned above, even though the Alawi religious *shaykhs* have never shared their beliefs with any Shi'a authority nor accepted external authority over their religion (Kramer 1987).

The 'secular' state and the Official Discourse

The Ba'th Party had always been very secular and it sought to forge a new Arab unity over what it saw as regressive and disruptive sectarian and tribal identities. Although it acknowledged Islam as culturally and religiously central to the Arabs, it was seen as a result of inherent Arab greatness (Choueiri 2000). However, in Ba'th Party ideology, religion should be secondary to Arab identity and a question of personal beliefs. Yet, the conviction that the Arab identity should be primary did not coincide with how all Syrians saw themselves. The government also had to deal with religious leaders who still wielded considerable influence in their communities, and this was particularly the case with the Sunni clergy. When Hafiz al-Asad came to power, he realised that in order to stabilise the country, he would have to make concessions to the Sunnis. Through his *Corrective Movement*, he sought to redo the most radical secular reforms of the earlier Ba'th regimes. In order to limit the clergy's influence in the political sphere, he co-opted them by giving them increased power in the social realm. Therefore, instead of building a true secular society, the state was secular on the surface, but not in matters of family and personal law. Instead, this was governed by religious legislation for each religious community, meaning that Muslims are governed by Islamic *Shari'a* law and Christians by their churches' religious rules (Landis 08.10.2004).

As political Islam became a stronger force, the immediate reaction was to clamp down on it, with the regime's most extreme reactions during the uprising of the Muslim Brotherhood in the late 1970s and its final bloody culmination in 1982 (see chapter seven). However, al-Asad also bolstered the power of the moderate forces among the Sunni clergy in order to cut off the extreme elements, at the same time as having all mosques and Qur'anic schools under close surveillance and control. In this way, he tried to control the Sunnis by channelling them into acceptable forms of Sunni Islam not opposed to neither him nor the Alawis. However, this

also meant turning the Alawis into good Muslims in the eyes of the Sunnis. The Alawis were from now on just considered Muslims. Even if the president insisted that Alawis are Twelver Shi'as, they were not allowed separate religious courts based on the Shi'a *Ja'fari Shari'a*, but instead came under Sunni legislation. Similarly, any references to sectarian differences were discouraged in favour of an all-embracing Islamic identity. This suppression of sectarian issues is apparent in the renaming of many regions in Syria that used to refer to the religion of its inhabitants. The Jabal ad-Durūz (the Druze Mountains) in southern Syria were renamed Jabal al-Arab (the Arab Mountains) and the Jabal Ansariyeh or the Alawi Mountains are now officially referred to as al-Jabal al-Akhdar, the Green Mountains. Similarly, sect used to be printed on Syrian id-cards, but this practice has now been discontinued (van Dam 1989 and 1996, Hinnebusch 2001).

Instead of allowing the Alawis and their religious *shaykhs* to define themselves, they were forced to conform to the Sunni Islamic notion of what is correct Islam. Landis (2003) says that instead of turning Sunnis into good liberals, Alawis were turned into good Sunnis. The downplaying of sectarian identities is visible at several levels. Organisation of Alawis along purely sectarian lines, is therefore seen as even more undesirable than of the other sects in Syria. When Jamil al-Asad, one of the brothers of Hafiz al-Asad, organised a political organisation that mobilised part of the Alawi community in the early 1980s, it was soon disbanded on the president's orders (van Dam 1996). Similarly, he has reportedly used his influence with the Alawi religious *shaykhs* to tone down those beliefs that are deemed un-Islamic and to conform to Shi'a beliefs. This was especially the case for the 'excessive' veneration of Ali. He also wanted to be a good 'Sunnified' example through his behaviour and he therefore fasted and prayed in the Sunni manner. He reportedly also built mosques in Alawi villages and organised Alawis to go on the *Hajj* Pilgrimage to Mecca (Kramer 1987, Landis 08.10.2004).

The discouragement of a separate Alawi identity is visible in the curriculum of religious education in Syrian schools studied by Landis (2003). For two to three hours each week for twelve years, Syrian students study either Christianity or Islam. However, the Islam presented in the schoolbooks is that of orthodox Sunni Islam, and there is no mention of the Islamic minorities living in Syria or of Shi'a Islam as a whole, or even of the different schools of thought within Sunni Islam. According to the schoolbooks, there is no diversity within Islam. This means that Alawism is never mentioned in schools in Syria – the epitome the Official Discourse – and it falls implicitly under Islam. Syrians, therefore, learn nothing about each other's beliefs and differences, and what they know or think they know is based on rumours

and stories passed on from friends and relatives. There are countless stories about the Alawis, many of which have been retold to me by non-Alawi Syrians, and this is something the Alawis I have spoken to know very well. In many of the conversations I have had, they refer to these *Myths about the Alawis*, which they are powerless to refute since there is no public mention of it. Their defensiveness in relation to these myths forms an important part of how Alawis portray themselves to non-Alawis. Karfan (02.05.2005) gives a good example of these myths from his time as a conscript in the Syrian army:

That is why Karfan accepted his new assignment few months later of becoming the Psychological Warfare Officer (A Baath Party officer who is responsible for the party and propaganda affairs in the unit). The real joke was that Karfan never have been a Baathi in his entire life. The unit commander was an ignorant from Dara'a who thought that just because Karfan is from Tartous and Alawie, then he is certainly a member of the Baath! These are the sort of Myths that many has on the miserable Alawie population who was not lucky enough to be blessed of belonging to the entourage of our Lord the King Lion [Hafiz al-Asad]. Despite the fact that someone like Karfan is on the bottom of the bottoms in the social hierarchy of this country's society, many think that he is Baathi, he is certainly working for the secret service, and he has certainly very well established connections among the upper command! Why? Just because he is an Alawie by birth, regardless of the fact that his belief in religions is not much firmer than his belief in Mickey Mouse.

To replace sectarianism, the regime has adopted an Official Discourse that ignores sectarian differences as potential friction. Nome (unpublished), who has done research on inter-religious dialogue in Syria, describes this discourse as a discourse of harmony. Parts of this discourse were described earlier where a monolithic Sunni Islam is depicted as the *one Islam* that unites all Islamic sects. Additionally, this Official Discourse propagates a view that religious differences are only positive and that no minority is *treated* like a minority, but as part of a whole. The main theme is that all religions are ultimately the same religion and that all believers are therefore brothers. The country – meaning both Syria and the greater Arab homeland – is the unifying factor of all Syrians regardless of faith. The historical narrative in the Official Discourse is thus that all sects and religions have always lived peacefully together, and to the extent that there has been conflict, this has been for reasons other than religion or the perpetrators have been misguided, as is the case with Muslim extremists. Unity is essential to the discourse, and in this way, speaking of sectarian differences therefore becomes a threat to the discourse. Sectarianism comes to symbolise the break-up of the state and is a threat to the ideal of peaceful co-existence.

This is the *public transcript* in Scott's (1990) terms and it defines what is acceptable talk in public, both for the dominant and for the subordinates. And central to the public transcript is, of course, the notion of unanimity. If people do not seem to agree to the transcript, it does

not have any power. With the political situation in Syria, any talk that contradicts the discourse of the government is dangerous, which is why this author has often been called just that when pointing out the faults of the government line. The Official Discourse is consequently the discourse almost all Syrians draw on when speaking about sectarian issues, at least until they trust somebody to reveal their *hidden transcript*.

In conclusion

Antoun (1991) writes that there are two ways we can understand Syria. The first focuses on the mosaic of peoples divided between religions, sects, ethnicity, tribes, clans, regions, extended families and so on and that these can explain history in the way their difference in ‘culture’ has led to clashes. The second one is class-based and understands the conflicts in Syria as social dislocations between different classes, be they peasants versus landlords or the middle classes versus the urban merchant classes. Both seem to be relevant because they in many cases have coincided. When class differences largely follow ethnic or sectarian lines, ‘primordial ties’ can easily be used both to mobilise the classes or to blame them for preferential treatment. Therefore, in the case of Syria, the rise of the Alawis and their seeming hold on power can be explained by factors other than sectarian patronage or loyalty. However, religion and sect are powerful categories in Syria, and when people use these to explain history and social circumstances they become real because people believe them to be real. As certain cases will show through this thesis, categorisation according to sect is essential in the construction of ‘Us’ and ‘Them’, and the willingness to take other differences into account is typically only the case when something reflects badly on the community.

The denial of sectarian tensions in Syria in the Official Discourse only helps to strengthen the notion that sect is a powerful category. It tries to blur the differences between the Islamic sects in Syria and to make the ideal – that all believers are brothers and that there are no major differences between faiths and that those who propagate differences are trying to split the population and create chaos – come true by claiming it is already the case. In the discourse perspective, this Official Discourse came about through a hegemonic intervention to superimpose itself on several different sectarian discourses. It was imposed through the use of force and is maintained through the threat of transgression. However, the strength of the Sunni discourse, which was established through the power the Sunnis have wielded in Syria over time, is apparent in how the Official Discourse seems to grant it the power of definition on important areas, above all the subject positions available within Islam, as long as it does not threaten the civil rights of non-Sunnis.

5

CONSTRUCTING HISTORY

As was mentioned in the methodology, the purpose here is to get an idea of how Alawis themselves ‘re-present’ their story and the narratives they use. The following account is based on my sources and their narration. Not surprisingly, most of them excuse themselves for not knowing enough about their history, and a few have referred me to other sources who are supposed to know much more than them. In other words, this chapter does in no way try to give a balanced or comprehensive account of Alawi history or theology. Instead, it is an account of everyday representations of Alawi history and its principal events, as taught to Alawis at home. In addition, I will draw on the descriptions used on the Arabic-language website *alaweenonline.com* (see page 19) in order to juxtapose the narrative of my sources and a website that, largely, follows the Official Discourse.

The narratives of my sources are surprisingly unvarying, indicating a widespread unanimity in their historical discourse. In all accounts, though, the frontier formation for their identity takes place through the conflict with the Sunnis, which are the Alawis’ ‘The Other’. The perceived hegemony the Sunnis have achieved through their historical dominance is constitutive for the discourses found among Alawis. This discourses, as will be explained, diverge into what I call the Islamic Discourse and the Critical Discourse when it comes to their representation of their closeness to mainstream Islam.

The historical narrative I have encountered during my fieldwork has many parallels to Smith’s (1999) classification of myths in nationalist movements. I have therefore chosen to divide the sections according to his theory, dividing it according to the myths of *origins*, myths of a distant *Golden Age*, myths of a subsequent *Decline*, and finally the myths of *Regeneration*. To begin with, though, the different names of the Alawis and their origins and beliefs will be explored.

In the beginning, there was the name?

The name chosen here, Alawis (‘alawīūn), is the name used for the Alawis in Syria today, both by themselves and in the Official Discourse (to the extent that they are mentioned at all). Whether the Alawis have always referred to themselves thus, is unknown, but to quote from

an e-mail I received from one of my sources: ‘There is no first name for Alawis. We’re called Alawis because we belong to the school of al-Imam Ali Ibn Abi Taleb...and are the followers of this great teacher Ali.’ Ali was the son-in-law of the Prophet Muhammad and was the fourth caliph, the rightful successor of the Prophet and the chosen leader of the Islamic community according to the Sunni Muslim tradition, after the Prophet’s death. The Shi’a Muslims, on the other hand, diverged as a sect in the belief that the Prophet’s successors should only come from his own family – the *Ahl al-Bayt* – and Ali was thus the last rightful caliph. Alawis place great importance on Ali – in some accounts elevating him to near divine status – and acknowledge the twelve imams that the Shi’as consider the ‘true’ successors of the Prophet, thus officially placing themselves within the Shi’a tradition in Islam.

A second name used for the Alawis found in historical accounts and sometimes used by Sunnis in Syria is Nusayris (nuṣayrīūn) or sometimes Ansaris (anṣārīūn). The name stems from Mohammad Ibn Nusayr who was a student of the Shi’a eleventh imam and who is considered the founder of the Alawi religion. The reason for its unpopular status among Alawis is the derogatory nature it has attained. By accentuating the name of the person they are supposedly following, they become followers of a human being rather than God or his prophets. Alawi, on the other hand, has the divine and Islamic ring worthy of their religion and draws attention to the teacher they follow: Imam Ali.

When inquiring further about this name, two of my sources have also mentioned that there is another theory to the Nusayri name, which is only derogatory and invented by outsiders. By being a diminutive form as the same root as Christian (naṣrānī), it means in effect little Christians. This refers, they say, to myths about them that allege that they mix Christianity with their beliefs. A second derogatory name one of my sources mentioned is ‘people from the mountains’ (sha‘b al-jibāl). This refers to the geographical origins of the Alawis and emphasises their wild and ‘uncivilised’ nature. In the same vein, the Alawis are told to ‘go back to their mountains’ in offensive statements.

The Alawi name seems to be entrenched in Syria at present, possibly due to its use in the Official Discourse, and carries a neutral or positive meaning and an Islamic character. Therefore, those who speak of them in deprecating terms, above all the Sunnis who want to imply that Alawis are not Muslims, still use the term Nusayris (van Dam 1989). Interestingly, the website *alaweenonline.com*, which has as its stated goal to build a bridge of trust between Alawis and the rest of the Islamic community, consistently use the term *Alawi Muslims*. This is consistent with the content of the website, which follows the Official Discourse of Islamic unity very closely. By employing such a term, they narrow the gap between Alawis and other

Muslims by saying that ‘We are Muslims of a certain kind’ – as one uses the term Shi’a Muslims – instead of just being ‘Followers of Ali’. The website, in its exploration into the differences between Shi’as and Alawis⁹, which they characterise as miniscule and based on misunderstandings, claims that the Alawis and the Shi’as never separated. They portray the Alawis as complete Shi’as who only disagree on what was ultimately confusion over Ibn Nusayr’s claim to be an imam.

Once, when speaking about the topic of names, the two Alawis present were annoyed at my question about what the Sunnis call them. They said that even the term Alawi to them is meaningless as they are just Muslims, even if they have somewhat different beliefs than the Sunnis. It has been the Sunnis, after all, who have forced the name on the Alawis in order to make a distinction between the two sects. In other words, the majority chose to expel them to their *constitutive outside* and these two Alawis point out that the Alawis have never sought to take this position. The Sunnis, however, have hijacked the Muslim name by taking their name from the *Sunnah*, the tradition of the Prophet. This is the first indication of the Sunni discursive hegemony, which will be revisited throughout this thesis. Through their historical dominance, they acquired discursive power and were able to define the nodal points ‘Islam’ and ‘Muslim’ accordingly. The antagonistic relationship of Alawi discourses to this hegemony is the topic of the last section of this chapter.

Origins and beliefs

The origins of the Alawis are shrouded in the fog of time and politics. This is especially the case for how my sources begin their historical narratives. Whereas the majority align their history with that of Islam, and of Shi’a Islam in particular – a discourse I have therefore chosen to call the Islamic Discourse – there is a minority that diverges radically from this viewpoint. This discourse is referred to as the Critical Discourse and it emphasises roots and beliefs that are not acceptable to mainstream Islam today. This past is the most mythical and is based in antiquity. One source in particular says that the Alawi holy books trace their *ancestry* back to the Greek civilisation and mention Alexander the Great as an Alawi.

The Critical Discourse affirms the Islamic beliefs of Alawis in the person of Ali, but it claims that Ali was only the last and most important prophet in a long line of revelations stretching back to the Greeks. The revelations are manifestations of God and take the form of a Trinity, not unlike that in Christianity according to one source. The most recent manifestation was a trinity of the Prophet Muhammad, Imam Ali and Salmān al-Fārisī, one of

⁹ <http://www.alaweenonline.com/modules.php?name=News&file=article&sid=105>

the Prophet's closest companions and a later supporter of Ali during the conflict over who was to succeed the Prophet. Batatu (1999: 18) explains this trinity as Ali being the (hidden) meaning of the deity (al-Ma'na), the Prophet Muhammad his manifestation (al-Ism) and Salmān al-Fārisī as the gate through which the message is delivered (al-Bāb). In other words, Ali is the most central point and the line between the divine and the earthly seems blurred. The Alawis also recognise the other Islamic prophets, the same we find in the Old and New Testaments, but accordingly appearing in trinities as well.

Another element in Alawi beliefs termed *esoteric*, and therefore not acceptable Islam, is the belief in the transmigration of souls. Like many other sects in the Middle East and Asia, they believe that when a person dies he will be reincarnated in accordance with the life he lived. The rebirth can take the shape of both humans or of animals. This process works as a purification of the soul, where it will move upwards in stages until it finally becomes a star and takes its place with God. Although this belief was told to me by the aforementioned source in a confidential manner, this tenet is well known and other sources otherwise adhering to the Islamic Discourse also discussed this freely.

The Islamic Discourse traces the Alawi origins back to the 9th century and to their divergence from Shi'a Islam. Their ancestry is Islamic and doctrinally fixed in that religion. However, my sources with academic backgrounds – while speaking of the transmigration of souls – acknowledge roots in beliefs and practices predating Islam. They differ from the Critical Discourse, though, in placing the reasons for this in the oppositional character of Alawism and Shi'ism and that this position meant that they sought ideas that were contrary to the orthodox Sunni views. One of these sources specifically mentions Christian and Kurdish influences as possible unorthodox sources.

At any rate, where the Islamic Discourse situates Alawism's temporal origins in its deviation from Shi'a Islam with the teachings of Ibn Nusayr, it converges with the Critical Discourse. From this point, the narratives of all my sources follow more or less the same path, a path they describe as sharing with the Shi'as. The numerical and political superiority of the Sunnis led to repression and persecution. From having been spread all over the Middle East, but concentrated in Iraq and Persia, the Alawis migrated towards the western part of Greater Syria where they were able to live under more secure circumstances for a while. They thus describe their story as being a sect that was spread over the Islamic world, but was forced to flee, in the form of a first *exodus* or a great trek, to lands that today constitute Turkey, Syria, Lebanon, Jordan, Palestine and Israel. This spatial element is interesting because they were later concentrated even further into where they live now due to renewed persecution.

However, one of my academic sources said that there are also Alawis living in Iran, Iraq, Turkey and the Balkans, but that they have different names and it would require research to identify them. This story is reminiscent of the story of the lost tribes of Israel in that they became separated from their people and now live in unknown lands far away.

The Golden Age

What can be described as the Alawis' Golden Age, albeit brief, is the time after their migration to Syria and their establishment of an Alawi state. This does not mean that my sources depict this as a peaceful or easy time for the Alawis, but they were able to manage their own affairs in a corner of the Islamic world. The epitome of their autonomy was in the 10th century with the state of Aleppo, a frontier state bordering the Christian Byzantine Empire. Their greatest hero was its most famous ruler Sayf ad-Dawla. He is famous in Islamic history for his struggles against the Byzantine Empire and Alawis are eager to point out that he was an Alawi. The fact that he has never been acknowledged as an Alawi is something they see as a Sunni conspiracy to divest the Alawis of the credit they deserve.

Aleppo soon succumbed to pressure from both the Byzantines and other Muslim states and the Alawis' position became a difficult one. However, a balance was somewhat restored for a period with the arrival of the Crusaders to the Holy Land at the end of the 11th century. They established kingdoms all along the Mediterranean coast and my Alawi sources describe the relationship between the Christian Crusaders and the Alawis as one of mutual co-operation. This description of the Crusades is unusual as the Crusades are usually depicted as a disaster in Arabic history. To Alawis, apparently, it was good fortune and one of my sources describes this co-operation as 'the beginning of a long and solid historical relationship between Christians and Alawis', which is how the relationship with Syria's Christian majority is described today and which will be examined further in chapter six. There is an element of *ancestry* in the co-operation with the Crusaders in that there was widespread intermarriage between Crusaders and Alawis according to some, something that they say explains the fair complexion of many Alawis today.

Alawis and Crusaders apparently found common cause in battling the Sunni Muslim forces, the Alawis' traditional oppressor, above all after the resistance of the Islamic forces gained momentum in the 12th century under the standard of Saladdin, and later on under the Egyptian Mamluk forces. In Arabic history, Saladdin is a great hero who rallied the Muslim forces under the banner of Jihad and re-conquered Jerusalem from the Christian infidels. Nonetheless, in the Alawi narrative, he was the one who laid the foundation for the Sunni

Muslim resurgence and subsequent persecution of the Alawis. It should be mentioned, however, that the co-operation between Alawis and Crusaders is sometimes also portrayed as an alliance of necessity along the lines of ‘my enemy’s enemy is my friend’.

The Decline and Trauma

The Golden Age was brief, though, and with the defeat of the outside helper, the Alawis started their descent into a very long decline. This period is also the one most of my sources feel most secure talking about, as it contains the most defining events of Alawi historical narrative. It contains the *trauma* of the sect so to speak by being uprooted and marginalised, not to mention oppressed and massacred, for the next six centuries.

Widespread persecution started properly in 1266 when the Mamluk Sultan Baybars, who is another hero in the Middle East for expelling the last Crusaders from the region, issued a decree stating that the official religion of their empire would be Sunni Islam and that people confessing other faiths would not have access to public positions in administration or education. According to a source from Tartous, this first meant that the Alawis, having been a prosperous group in Aleppo and the other major cities in Syria, were marginalised. Then in 1305, something took place that embodies the trauma of the Alawis and laid the groundwork for the persecution they have experienced ever since. In this year the Islamic scholar Ibn Taymiyyah, whose writings became an important source of inspiration for 20th century Salafist Islamists and their use of *takfir*¹⁰, issued a fatwa (religious decree) declaring that

the Nusayris are more infidel than Jews or Christians, even more infidel than many polytheists. They have done greater harm to the community of Muhammad than have the warring infidels such as the Franks [Crusaders], the Turks, and others. To ignorant Muslims they pretend to be Shi’is, though in reality they do not believe in God or His prophet or His book...[W]ar and punishment in accordance with Islamic law against them are among the greatest of pious deeds and the most important obligations. (Pipes 1990: 163)

According to my Alawi sources, Ibn Taymiyyah’s fatwa was very influential, and what had earlier been repression and maltreatment now turned into persecution and brutal killings.

The most famous massacre of this period is the so-called Kasrawān Massacre, the name deriving from the Kasrawān region in today’s Lebanon. In history books, this is called a massacre of Shi’as, but my Alawis sources say this was primarily a massacre of Alawis where ‘everyone’ was killed or captured and the few who escaped went north to the relative safety of their present heartland in Syria’s coastal mountains. Just as with the case of Sayf ad-Dawla of Aleppo, this is yet another historical account that erases the Alawis from history.

¹⁰ The labelling of other Muslims as infidels because of their deviation from ‘true Islam’

Their absolute historical nadir, which is referred to in all my conversations on the topic, came after the Ottoman conquest of the Mamluk state in 1516. Under the sultan Selim I, the Alawis were massacred on an unprecedented scale that is described as both gruesome and cowardly. One story goes that thousands of Alawi religious sheikhs were summoned to Aleppo as representatives of their people for what was believed to be official negotiations with the Turkish Sunni officials of the city. Instead, gathered in a city square – which according to one person is still today called Heads' Square (Sāhat ar-Ru'ūs) – they were beheaded one by one. At the same time, other massacres took place, and some say that about 100,000 Alawis were killed at the hands of the Sunnis. This epoch represents the outer limit of Alawi history where their whole existence was in jeopardy. Sometimes, when mentioning that Alawis do not pray in mosques, which is deplorable to other Muslims, they give historical reasons for this. Alawis apparently used to pray in mosques, but since the Sunnis would find them congregating there, mosques became places of massacre. Consequently, they forgot this tradition and have appeared even more as unbelievers to the Sunnis, even though the Sunnis caused this outcome.

At this time, the Alawis were driven out of Aleppo and the other major cities, including the fertile plains of the region. This was the second *exodus* of the Alawis and their great trek led them into the Jabal Ansariyeh – the Mountains of the Alawis. These mountains, separating the Mediterranean coast from inland Syria, were both inaccessible and inhospitable and had provided refuge to both the Alawis and other persecuted Shi'a sects such as the Isma'ilis and the Druze for centuries. Confined to these infertile mountains, they were mostly left to themselves due to their defensiveness, and in this way, they retained their autonomy. The Jabal Ansariyeh thus came to constitute the Alawi homeland and where they 'belong' even if they now live elsewhere. Following their exodus, the decline became a reality. One man described the following centuries to me as a time of 'backwardness' when they were effectively isolated from the rest of the world, banished to a life on the existential margins.

Other sources have pointed out that the Alawis were slowly drawn into a feudal system by the Sunni landowners of the lowlands in the 19th century. They thus became a caste of indentured farmers and servants of their Sunni overlords. Some say that families would routinely be forced to sell their daughters as maids – sometimes when they were as young as six years old – to Sunni households, an arrangement that often meant that they were in reality sex servants. Attempts to revolt against this injustice would be ruthlessly put down by the Ottoman authorities, a situation that persisted until about 60 years ago.

Domination and resistance

Following the exodus to the mountains, however, many Alawis stayed behind in their Sunni dominated and hostile surroundings. This is a second occasion where Alawis describe their community as losing members during a great trek. These lost Alawis were not lost in the sense that they were never seen again, though. Instead, they ‘went underground’ hiding their beliefs from both authorities and neighbours and pretended to be good Sunni Muslims. In Islamic terminology, this is called *taqiyyah* and is a religious doctrine found especially among the Shi’a and Shi’a minorities. The doctrine permits a believer who is under threat to conceal his beliefs so that his life will be spared, provided that he is true to his faith in his heart. In appearance and acts, Alawis would pretend to be Sunnis and not even tell their children of their ‘true’ religion until they were of an age where they would understand the need for *secrecy*.

According to one person I spoke to, to this day there are Alawis living in Aleppo who’s families have been living there ever since the massacres, yet holding on to their beliefs privately through generations. He said that due to the length of this concealment, the Alawis have lost countless families who have forgotten who they actually are. Because of their fear of being found out and killed or driven out, they would raise their children as Sunnis and never tell them of their origins. The children would then grow up believing themselves to be Sunnis and, therefore, in effect, actually becoming Sunnis. Another claim goes that even for the last census in Syria that recorded sectarian background in 1956 (Khuri 1991), many Alawis living in the Sunni dominated cities of Syria did not dare reveal their religion to the authorities and thus wrote that they were Sunnis. This means that the total number of Alawis in Syria today is higher than the official estimates based on this census.

Concealment or camouflage of one’s beliefs and intentions, according to Scott (1990), is a form of resistance among subordinates in situations of danger to life and property from the dominant. Due to the rigidity of the *public transcript*, they expel the overt resistance to below the horizon of the dominant. To Alawis, secrecy is a matter of survival of the community and is essential to Alawi identity. Primarily a topic of the following chapter, secrecy and concealment is perhaps the principal identity marker for Alawis even in contemporary Syria. Discursive ambivalence, meaning that there is always room for denial of accusations of unacceptable beliefs or behaviour, attests to the danger felt from the dominant group and is a resistance technique for unstable circumstances or shifting power.

The Alawi *taqiyyah* has a second element, which was mentioned in chapter four. Most Alawis belong to the group of uninitiated Alawis that do not have any formal religious

education, which goes for all my sources to my knowledge. They are therefore not expected to know much about the religion nor do they have religious obligations. Most Alawis learn about their beliefs from parents and relatives and typically admit to having too little knowledge to be an authority on the subject of tenets. Such a concentration of knowledge of the faith to an elite caste of initiates is yet another form of resistance with a *hidden message*. By protecting the lay people from possibly unacceptable beliefs, they keep dangerous knowledge away from great parts of the community. There is personal security in the ability to claim to know nothing of beliefs deemed unacceptable by the dominant. One cannot be held responsible for what one does not know.

Yet, this religious dissimulation is dangerous to the subordinates. The ambivalence can be used against them as ‘proof’ of not following the public transcript, which is what the Sunnis have seized upon historically. By keeping parts of their beliefs concealed, they allow an interpretation of their secrecy to mean that what they hide *must* indeed be unacceptable beliefs. Furthermore, by prohibiting their adherents of revealing tenets, the religious leaders keep full control of what is kept hidden. Reviewing a book by Gregor Voss, van Dam (1989: 208) writes:

For there appear to be no publications as yet which have been authorized by the Alawi religious leadership as representing a definitive view of Alawi religion. To date the Alawi religious leaders are still strongly opposed to the publication of an authoritative account of Alawi religion or the scriptures on which it is based. This, in turn, continues to provide opponents of the Alawis with opportunities to create or to keep alive doubts about Alawi religion itself.

Indeed, by keeping the tenets so close even from their own community, it only helps to strengthen this speculation against them, and minor differences in such things as prayer can be interpreted as probable heresy.

The Regeneration

It would take another outside helper for the Alawis to re-establish justice. Not having been part of the narrative since the Crusades, the Europeans now reappear, represented by the French. After the First World War, the Arab provinces of the Ottoman Empire – the Empire having been on the losing side in the war – were occupied by the Western powers. The occupations were made permanent as de-facto colonies in the Treaty of Versailles in 1919 when Syria and Lebanon were put under French mandate by the League of Nations. From 1920, what would later become Syria was established as five different states, which, gradually through the 1930s, were merged into the modern state of Syria.

To Alawis, the French system of ‘divide and rule’ became a great opportunity for them to be included in the Syrian state. In their colonial pursuits, the French favoured minorities and set them up against the traditional elites. In Syria, this meant facilitating the access of Alawis, Christians and other minorities to positions in government and armed forces. Alawis describe this turn in history as *regaining* the rights they should have had all along. Again, we find that this Alawi historical narrative is in an oppositional position to official Syrian history, which views the French Mandate as an imperialist venture to keep the Arabs under European domination (according to sources). The positive opinions of the French for both the Alawis and thus for Syria as a whole is widespread among my sources. This is based on the economic opportunities that were secured for them by the opportunity to migrate to the cities, in addition to recruitment in the armed forces and positions in regional administrations. One academic from Latakia says that the bad stories about the French are probably based on the misbehaviour of the colonial subjects from places such as Africa who they used to police their colonies. In this way, he excuses the actions of the French on their non-French forces and does not hold them accountable in the stories of maltreatment of Syrians.

One of the states set up by the French during the Mandate was the state of Alaouites – being the French word for the Alawis. As we have seen in the previous chapter, the leaders of the Alawi community tried to dissuade the French to include them in the state of Syria when the mandate was ending, preferring any alternative option. This was not unique to the Alawis, though, as all the minorities in Syria feared for their rights in a Sunni dominated independent Syria (Kramer 1987). When bringing up the subject of the independent Alawi state today, though, all Alawis I have broached the subject with consider this to be a very bad idea, even if they are apologetic to other French policies. One person told me it was a conspiracy to divide the Syrian population to strengthen French rule while another acknowledges the Alawis’ participation in this, but adds that it was a very bad idea because states should on principle not be established on the basis of religion. Instead, he stresses that Alawis are Arabs and that this identity should be the foundation of Syrian identity and not religious differences. Of course, few people would ever admit to supporting such an idea as separatism is unmentionable and is connected to the Kurds, who are virtually outcasts. The Arab identity is very strong and as long as Alawis are full Syrian citizens and see Syria as their own country, the idea of secession will be alien to them. This is apparent in the answer of a third source, who says that Alawis today only see their own situation of inclusion. This is especially the case with young people, he says, who do not appreciate the situation their grandparents lived under at that time, which explains their wish to secure their autonomy.

Syria's first Alawi president, the late Hafiz al-Asad who ruled Syria from 1970 to 2000, also has a good reputation among Alawis. Although most will admit that mistakes were made during his years in power, they see him as someone who developed the country for all Syrians, especially the peasants and the poor, which most Alawis were, irrespective of religion. And just as importantly in a country that had experienced severe political instability, he brought stability. At the same time, a few people are very critical to the damage he has done to the Alawis as a group by being perceived as someone who favoured Alawis over other groups in the country, a topic that will be discussed further in chapter seven.

Antagonism and discourse

The historical narrative of the Alawis as represented to me by my sources can be summarised as a history of not being accepted by the majority. This conflict centres on the debate of the 'Islamicness' of the Alawis and the discursive power of the Sunnis. The Alawis refer to themselves as Muslims, yet have historically been rejected as such by the *closure* of Islamic discourse, which expels supposed Alawi tenets to its constitutive outside. Of course, just as the Alawis construct the Sunnis as their discursive other, the Alawis take the same position for the Sunnis. They are thus just as necessary for the construction of the identity of the majority.

The way my Alawi sources present their alternative discourses highlights the Sunni hegemony, a hegemony they seem to concede to, but not respect. Their descriptions of their religious beliefs diverge into two deviating discourses mentioned earlier. The discourse most people draw on, the Islamic Discourse, positions Alawi beliefs squarely within the Islamic tradition, hence the name. The Critical Discourse, however, although it admits to its roots in Islam, seeks to define itself according to principles other than the Islamic ones and freely uses concepts, which, within the (Sunni) hegemony, are far from 'politically correct.'

Yet, when first raising the topic of beliefs with Alawis, they immediately draw on the Official Discourse presented in the previous chapter, although they in many cases later – after assessing the opinions and objectives of this author – modify their explanations. The Official Discourse downplays any differences between Muslims in Syria and presents the Islamic religion as monolithic, much like the content of the Syrian schoolbooks for religious education. Instead of challenging the Sunni hegemony, it is a form of resistance that seeks to use the norms and rules of the hegemony against itself, much like the example of the strategy of the inmates in the Norwegian prison mentioned in chapter three. In this way, they can create change in the hegemony without challenging its legitimacy.

The website [alaweenonline.com](http://www.alaweenonline.com) adopts this approach by publishing articles on theological subjects to do with Islam, Shi'ism and the Alawis. It emphasises the Alawis' respect for Ali and on that foundation argues that Ali always followed the Prophet both in words and deeds. In this way, they say, Alawis are no different from Shi'as who are accepted as Muslims by the Sunnis. In an article on the definition of Alawis, they write the following:

The absolute definition, which describes the real Alawis, is nothing but the constancy of the way of the Prophet Mohammad. In other words, Alawis turn to the religion of Islam and nothing else. This was also the way of Ali Ibn Abi Taleb and the other followers of the Prophet Mohammad...Even though Imam Ali was known for his special gifts and glorious history he was still a faithful follower of his master, the Prophet Mohammad, just like everybody else. After all, believers are brothers.¹¹

On another account, they excuse the differences 'some' Alawis have portrayed to having been persecuted and driven to isolation, which created some strange and esoteric beliefs on the surface. This, however, was only a misunderstanding because of ignorance. Representing the 'true' Alawis, these authors write: 'We are the sons of the Alawi cult by words and deeds. And we do insist that there is no prayer apart from the known Islamic prayer, which is unambiguous and has no mystery to it at all'¹². They here take on what they feel are *the myths about the Alawis* and seek to refute them. The reference to the prayer, for example, refers to beliefs by non-Alawis that Alawis pray in a heretical way.

The Islamic Discourse

The Islamic Discourse diverges from this Official Discourse due to its antagonism to the Sunni Islamic discourse. What characterises it is that it does not try to suppress the beliefs that are considered non-Islamic, but instead tries to argue that these beliefs *are* actually a part of Islam, only that the Sunnis have usurped Islam for their own benefit. This view is of course why this discourse stays in the *hidden transcript*. My two most religious sources both say that the Qur'an is the foundation of their faith, but say that its content is not necessarily accurate. When I asked if this meant that there were lies in the Qur'an – something that would be considered heretical to the majority of Muslims as the Qur'an is considered to contain the direct words of God – they were quick to point out that they were not lies as such, but rather alterations in the first copies. One hypothetical example they mention is passages about the good treatment of Muslims, whereas the original message was actually about people,

¹¹ http://www.alaweenonline.com/modules.php?name=Encyclopedia&op=list_content&eid=5, translated from Arabic by source. Downloaded 01.11.2006

¹² <http://www.alaweenonline.com/modules.php?name=News&file=article&sid=103>, translated from Arabic by source. Downloaded 09.10.2006.

regardless of their religion. The fact that the Qur'an is written in classical Arabic means that the difference to the modern understanding of Arabic creates even more mistakes.

My two sources emphasise that the way the Prophet is portrayed in the Qur'an and especially in the *Hadith*, the religious traditions written down in the centuries following the death of the Prophet, is not the same understanding Alawis have of Him. In their view, he was not a warlord and was only depicted as such in order to appeal to the warmongering tribes of the Arabian Peninsula of his time. Instead, to Alawis, he was a teacher and a man of peace; he was the creator of civilisation in unifying the tribes; an advocate of non-violence, very much like Gandhi. In any case, the interpretations of the Qur'an have turned out to be the biggest problems in Islam. In many cases not only the *Hadith*, but also later theological philosophers such as Ibn Taymiyyah, have in practice acquired a state of infallibility on par with the words of the Qur'an itself.

In effect, they say, the Sunnis have turned a divine message of freedom and civilisation into a rule-bound system of religious oppression where they set themselves above God in their judgement of others. This is contrary to everything the Alawis believe in, a belief that is based on the direct link between the believer and God and thus where no man can judge another man's religion by his actions. Therefore, they hold, the Sunni way of judging other Muslims by their actions become meaningless because God does not judge us by our actions, but by our intentions. In this way they explain how Alawis' apparent disregard for important tenets in Islam – most important of which are the Five Pillars of Islam – has nothing to do with not respecting them, but with their relationship with God. For example, Alawis do not need to pray in mosques, which Sunnis place great emphasis on, because Alawis pray in their hearts. Similarly, we will be judged by our actions towards others and not our actions towards God. At home, what an Alawi child is taught before the worship of God is the respect and treatment of others.

Consequently, the Islamic Discourse reconstructs the meaning in Islam and focuses on different tenets than the Sunnis, yet tenets that are not easily refuted due to their universal acceptance such as the ultimate divine judgement and respect and tolerance of others. Their theology according to my sources, therefore, is constructed as the extreme opposite to the most extreme Sunni beliefs and emphasises tolerance and respect not only for other Muslims, but just as importantly, for other religions also. This is because we all ultimately believe in the same God and no religion or sect can claim to know the definitive religious truth, they say. Of course, no sect would undermine its own position by saying that other beliefs might be truer than theirs, so the openness to the truth of other religions is probably a result of the perceived

intolerance of the Sunnis. Orthodox Sunni Islam becomes the constitutive outside of the Alawi Islamic Discourse, representing everything that they are not, yet whilst accepting the stated ‘facts’ of the Qur’an. What they contest is the meaning the Sunnis place in the text and not the text itself. The *ideal* of the Prophet and of Imam Ali – who we would call human rights activists today – has been forgotten in the politics of the Sunnis, an ideal they say that is now found in European societies more than in the Islamic world.

The Critical Discourse

While the Islamic Discourse draws largely on Islamic elements and rhetoric, the Critical Discourse is representative of those who place themselves much farther away from mainstream Islam. This is probably why those speaking within the Critical Discourse are more confidential in their manner, whereas those using the Islamic Discourse speak openly and are more relaxed about doing so in public places. While the Critical Discourse confirms the Islamicness of their beliefs, they see no need to ‘grovel to the Sunnis’ and therefore place themselves far away from Islam in religious terms. They are not afraid to use vocabulary that is unacceptable in Islam, such as calling the Alawi revelations a Trinity, which is a problematic element in Christianity in Muslims eyes as it casts doubt on the oneness of God, the most central tenet of Islam. They also refer to different influences, such as Greek philosophy mentioned in their origins and an affinity towards Christianity due to similar beliefs. One man pointed out the worship of saints, which they share with Syria’s Christian community. He went on to say that his religious brother feels more Christian than Muslim in religious terms and that his room is full of crucifixes and effigies of the Virgin Mary. Yet, he says, this does not conflict with the Islamic tenets of his belief.

Others drawing on the Critical Discourse mention the Five Pillars explored in the Islamic Discourse, only going further than the latter in pointing out its erroneous interpretation. They were never meant to be taken literally, they say. Instead, they have symbolic meaning for the faith, but are not an obligation on the believer. Many Alawis fast during the holy month of Ramadan, but there is no obligation for them to do so. What is particular about the Critical Discourse though, is its admittance to there being religious secrets in Alawi beliefs. Whereas the Islamic Doctrine downplays this and tries to reconcile the differences to orthodox Islam, the Critical Discourse highlights them as non-Islamic. Most of my sources did not wish to elaborate on these secrets apart from the known ones such as the belief in the transmigration of souls, which is even acceptable within the Islamic Discourse. However, those who do are clearly uneasy about certain aspects and only speak in times and places they are comfortable

with. At the same time, there is an element of pride apparent in the way they speak about their faith and not at all something they feel embarrassed about. This can be interpreted as resistance to the Sunni hegemony, however with a hidden messenger in Scott's (1990) terms. The aspect of resistance is explored more thoroughly in chapter seven.

Several of these sources also question their own answers while speaking, saying that they do not know if they should tell me this. Some excuse themselves by saying that these things are more open now in this time and day, above all due to modern communication and the internet. Others will admit to differences, however declining to go into details. One man from Tartous, for example, said Alawis pray differently from other Muslims, and although he wanted to show me how they do it, he said he had been taught that God would punish him if he told a non-Alawi this.

In conclusion

The way Alawis construct their history is as one of suffering and trauma. Although the Alawis do not call themselves a nation, the way they narrate their history is thus very similar to narratives found in nationalist movements that draw a direct line from the distant past to the present and which in spatial and temporal terms explain how 'We' came to be who we are and how we ended up here. There are two exoduses in the Alawi narrative, first to Greater Syria as part of the plight of the greater Shi'a community, and a second one where they were driven out of the cities and fertile plains and up into the mountains. This trauma almost led to their extinction and they were only able to survive due to the hostile yet defensible terrain of the Jabal Ansariyeh. Some apparently also identify with other groups who have been persecuted by the Sunnis. One woman wrote to me about how the Armenians experienced similar treatment: 'Do you know the tragedy of the Armenians? We have the same history with the Sunnis... We're feeling weak because of our painful history.'

In narrating history and linking this with their beliefs, my Alawi sources 're-present' a history that is discursively dominated by the Sunnis. The Sunni hegemony has written history in a way that expels the Alawis from the Islamic community and makes them not accepted because of their supposed beliefs. They acknowledge the existence of this Sunni dominance, but do not respect it. The Alawi discourses clearly illustrate this antagonism in their attempts to re-narrate both history and religion in order to press their claims to being Muslims. Whereas the Islamic Discourse seeks to resist the hegemony by rearranging the elements associated with the nodal points, the Critical Discourse goes much further in its claims to being unique and presents a starker belief in its right to define itself irrespective of the

stipulations of the hegemony. This is unlike the Official Discourse, which seeks to place Alawism firmly within the Sunni tradition of the hegemony and goes as far as denying tenets admitted to by the other two discourses.

The differences identified between the three discourses point to conflict within the Alawi community in the representation of their history and beliefs. These differences could stem from definite theological differences among Alawi religious *shaykhs* of different branches of Alawism. When I have questioned my sources on such intra-Alawi differences, they have all said that they are minor and of no importance. Of course, admitting to internal differences is to admit to weakness and division and could be a reason why no one has wished to talk about this in their perceived position of subordination to the hegemony. Another reason could be that this is a theological discussion taking place within the circles of the Alawi initiates and thus not something normal Alawis concern themselves with.

How the Alawis see themselves at this point in time is affected by how they interpret history. History determines how we see the present. However, history is also interpreted and represented according to how one sees one's current situation. The historical narrative and relation to the dominant Sunnis must be seen in a dialectical relationship. The following two chapters deal with how Alawis construct their social world and the contemporary politics in Syria.

6

CONSTRUCTING SOCIETY

Discourses are constructed by what they expel to their constitutive outsides and identities follow this relational pattern, constituting themselves as everything they are not. ‘We’ are constructed by the construction of ‘The Other’ and it is this *frontier formation* that ultimately constitutes ‘Us.’ It is therefore in these borderlands that the identity is constructed and the differences thus become the core of the identity. This chapter is about this frontier formation and how Alawis constitute themselves through the social construction of ‘The Other.’

Just as in their historical narrative, the Sunnis are the constitutive outside of the Alawi collective identity. The Sunni discursive hegemony – centring on their power of definition of Muslim identity and ‘correct Islam’ – creates forms of resistance among Alawis and creates a feeling of inferiority in the public sphere. Yet, their counter-discourses in the form of hidden transcripts show that although they place themselves at the bottom of the hierarchy of sectarian identities in Syria, they see themselves as socially and culturally superior to their adversary. This phenomenon is strengthened by sharing a position of opposition to Sunni power with the Christian minority who they construe as their partners, but also as role models.

The issue discussed in this chapter is how this forms the basis for constructing their society with a focus on culture or way of living and the markers they use to differentiate themselves from the Sunnis.

‘Us’ and ‘Them’

Alawi identity is not necessarily over-arching or brought into play in many situations. As is the case with all identities, Alawi identity comes to the fore only in particular contexts and is often overshadowed by other identities. At the same time, it is an important identity in the way all religious identities are important in Syria, and it hovers in the background more or less continuously, being used as an explanatory or causal factor on many issues.

Through questions to Alawis about who they – the Alawis – are, the impression is that their sectarian identity is not one they focus on at first. Typically, they will draw on other identities to define themselves; most importantly the fact that they are Syrians, Arabs and Muslims. Syrian public discourse is characterised by its focus on a wide Arabic identity rather

than a nationalist Syrian identity. Both schoolbooks and the media use a pan-Arab viewpoint just as the official name of the country is The Syrian *Arab* Republic (Landis 2003). Alawis are no different in this and my sources are keen to point out that they belong to a greater and overarching group and present themselves first and foremost as Arabs and Syrians.

This corresponds to the Official Discourse by its discounting of sectarian identities and that these are not the topic of open debate. The rule of thumb when speaking to someone you do not know, therefore, is to adhere to this discourse and speak along acceptable lines. Yet, when showing an interest in the social differences, how their society seems to be different from other parts of the country, people are quick to want to elaborate and speak more of their society presented in sectarian terms as an Alawi society.

There is a clear perception among the Alawis of being a separate group sharing certain traits that make them different from other Syrians. Thus, when constructing their group's identity, the first thing almost every Alawi I have spoken to focuses on is its liberal character. Just like any characteristic, 'liberal' is relational and they use comparisons to both Syrian society and Europe to elaborate. Many Alawis will explain that they are culturally quite different from the rest of Syria and will draw on other discourses, such as the relative liberalism of Mediterranean cultures, and link them with an Alawi discourse to construct this idea. What characterises the Critical Discourse is that it is more westward looking than the Islamic Discourse, which is more linked to an Arab identity. By presenting themselves as Mediterranean, these Alawis will make a cultural link with Europe, which corresponds to how they also narrate history and its origins in Greek philosophy and co-operation with the Crusaders. The Christians also play an important role in this construction, being constructed as culturally similar to them and equally tolerant and open-minded.

The Islamic Discourse, on the other hand, typically presents Alawi liberalism in terms that are more religious and within a broader Arabic context. However, they distance themselves from the Sunnis just as much as those in the Critical Discourse in how they choose to live their lives within Islam as they define it.

When speaking to Alawis about how their society differs from that of the Sunnis – about how they form the frontier – there are a few markers that people persistently return to. This mainly deals with how Alawis are not rule-bound the way Sunnis are. The widespread availability of alcohol and the open consumption of it is one thing they focus on. In Syria, alcohol is freely available and drinking either beer or spirits is fairly common in many parts of the country. But Alawis will point out that although it is allowed throughout Syria, Alawi society is more relaxed about alcohol and does not frown upon people drinking, of course,

unless it is excessively. Still, drinking does not seem that widespread and it is often limited to having a drink with a meal or to younger people's parties. But in Alawi discourse it becomes a sense of pride because it is something allowed, unlike in Sunni society where people might drink, but it is certainly not permissible according to religious rules. So instead of being something some do and according to their own wishes, it becomes a symbol of Alawi liberalism versus Sunni conservatism.

What is more an issue of pride, though, is the role of women in society and the relations between men and women. Alawi women, they say, are both much freer in how they choose to live their lives and they also take part in society to a much greater extent than Sunni women. To juxtapose, they speak of how girls are supposed to behave in the stereotypical Sunni society, where they have to wear a veil and cover up as much of their bodies as possible. Dress thus becomes an important marker for girls' liberty; being able to dress as they wish and typically showing a lot more skin than anywhere else in Syria apart from the upper-class neighbourhoods of Damascus. And again, as is the case with alcohol, they emphasise that there are no rules for women's clothing and covering one's hair is not required or customary, even if many older women do. Indeed, due to the construction of Sunni society as conservative and strict, an Alawi woman should consequently not wear a veil since this becomes a symbol of religious repression of women.

Likewise, interaction between men and women in Alawi society is not controlled the way it is in Sunni society. To illustrate this, my Alawi sources explain that having a girlfriend or a boyfriend is quite common and not frowned upon, unlike among the Sunnis. Furthermore, once a couple decides to get engaged, they are allowed much more leeway than Sunnis are in order to get to know each other and the other's family properly before they get married. In general, interaction between the sexes is less restricted. Just meeting and chatting to someone of the opposite sex is easy and while speaking about this issue, my sources point to the street outside to men and women chatting or use themselves as examples of how they met someone in a shop or restaurant. This is very different to Sunni society, which they describe as highly traditional in its gender roles, whereby non-related girls and boys are not allowed to interact and marriages are arranged by their families.

Alawis typically also use their own families as examples to explain how they differ from Sunnis. When I have been invited into people's homes I will meet their mother and sisters and shake their hands as they present me. They will also sit with me and partake in the conversation just like any male member of the family. Sunni girls on the other hand, they tell me, would never shake my hand or sit down to chat in this way, in many instances never even

coming out to greet the guest at all. Sometimes, they use my own position as a Westerner and non-Muslim in the same way. One source told me that some orthodox Sunnis would never even shake my hand due to my (lack of) religion. Thus, by using extreme examples of 'The Others' he makes clear implicitly that what 'They' are, 'We' are not.

Several of my sources also use contemporary events to show how the reaction of the Alawis is proof of their relaxed attitude towards religion and society, as opposed to the extreme reactions of the Sunnis. One such example is the torching of the Norwegian and Danish embassies in Damascus after the publication of the caricatures of the Prophet Muhammad in the Scandinavian media in February 2006. They say that even though Alawis did not like it, they would never dream of reacting with anger and violence. Unlike the Sunnis, who perceived this as an insult to their religion and wanted to punish the perpetrators, the Alawis are liberal minded and thus not provoked by it. Above all, Alawis would never dream of taking something like that personally. This highlights what they present as a lack of collective religious thinking and it thus becomes yet another marker to differentiate themselves from the extremist Sunnis.

Inter-sectarian relations

It is an ideal in Syria for the sects to live in harmony and for people not to place importance on religion. This is also official policy and conflicts with a sectarian tinge tend to be covered up in the media. With Alawis, like with all Syrians, when jumping straight to the question of inter-sectarian relations, the first reply will invariably correspond to the Official Discourse and that there are no problems with them and other sects and that people deal with each other on an equal basis and that religion is not important.

As sectarian harmony is such an ideal, people do not want to be seen as biased, prejudiced or old-fashioned. This seems even more important to Alawis because they have to live up to the image of being open-minded and liberal. Often they will employ vagueness rather than admit to having negative views of other sects. Once, in a conversation with the guardian of an Alawi shrine in the Jabal Ansaryeh about the purpose of the shrine, the old man explained that all people are brothers and worship the same god, naming Alawis, Christians, Jews, and Muslims. When asked if this included Sunni Muslims, he mumbled something and went on to change the subject. In this case, his silence on the subject probably meant that his view of the Sunnis was too difficult or negative to be shared with strangers.

In most cases, whenever I have asked about someone's relation to other sects that live in their town or region, they will answer that sectarian background is not important. Typically,

they will use themselves as examples and explain that they have friends from all kinds of backgrounds. Yet, when inquiring further about their friends, it turns out that in most instances, the non-Alawi friends they talk about are all Christians and only rarely Sunnis. This does not mean that Alawis and Sunnis do not mix, because they do in many situations. But genuine friendship between Alawis and Sunnis seems to be related to education and class. In the instances where I have come across this, it has been either with the upper classes, intellectuals, or in cases of socially marginalised people, such as gays or Westernised youth who seek friends with similar outlooks as themselves. A representative of the Critical Discourse says outright that this is the case with him. Even though he has many acquaintances that are Sunnis, these are all people he spends time with because of his work or studies. Of the people he spends time with of his own choice in his spare time, every one of them is either Alawi or Christian. He goes on to say that he expects the same is the case for his father, even though he has spent time with all kinds of people through his job in the army.

The one instance where people freely admit to religion being an issue is in the case of marriage. In Syria, cross-sectarian marriages are not very widespread. My younger and more liberal sources have a fairly laid-back attitude towards this at a personal level, but say that the social consequences are so big that it is preferable to avoid the problem altogether and not even consider someone from another sect as a potential partner. On the surface, Alawis, who claim that someone's religion does not matter and who want to portray themselves as open-minded, champion their liberal views on mixed marriages. Typically, they will use family or friends who have married non-Alawis and use this as examples of religion not being important. This, just like the religion of their non-Alawi friends, turns out to be only part of the story.

In most cases, the marriages they speak of turn out to be between Alawis and Christians and not between Alawis and Sunnis. Furthermore, in the examples my sources have used, they tend to be between an Alawi man and a non-Alawi woman. Due to the patrilineal tradition in Islam, the religion of the father determines the child's religion and so, as long as the father has the 'right' religion, the religion of the mother is unimportant. This means that a woman from your own community marrying someone from another sect is seen as less acceptable than the other way around. They thus use the Official Discourse of religious harmony as an ideal, but forget to mention that the harmony is not complete.

This ideal is also apparent in stories about 'model communities.' One such ideal is the village of Dwerta outside of Tartous. Most people I have spoken to about this portrays it as a village where Christians and Alawis live together and marry one another as if they belonged

to the same sect. Although this seems far-fetched, other stories claim that there are also Sunnis and Shi'as living there and that everybody marries and gets along. The way it is presented, especially when even more sects are introduced into the mix, shows that it is how the Alawis want to see their society: free of prejudice and sectarian thinking. Dwerta is thus a living example of the Official Discourse and its success as an ideal. Whether the situation there is as described or not is of less importance as the story about it is a symbol of the possibility of sectarian co-existence, at least for Christians and Alawis.

Therefore, while *wishing* that religion were not important, from both conversation and observation among Syrians of different sectarian backgrounds, sect does play a prominent role in their interpretation of their world. This is no different among the Alawis. Typically, if I mention an acquaintance from another town, especially if it is a mixed town, one of the first questions I will get is 'Is he/she an Alawi/Christian/Sunni?' depending on the situation. There is nothing extraordinary about this as people all over the world have prejudices and need to be able to place others in categories in order to understand 'who they are.' Many Alawis, like most other people, seek to have their preconceptions confirmed by continually placing things in the predetermined sectarian categories.

In general, due to the stability and the taboo of sectarianism, people deal with each other as individuals. Yet, an indication of the sensitivity of the subject of religion is the fact that, as we have seen, religion is not *supposed* to be an issue. Just inquiring about someone's religion to his face is considered extremely impolite and is not done. As a foreigner, one can play ignorant of this fact and still ask, but even though people will answer, it is obvious from many reactions that they are uncomfortable with a direct question. This unease seems more prevalent among Alawis than other groups.

Since religion is so important for how someone one meets can be categorised, Syrian society has invented ways to circumvent the direct question. Instead they will ask for the family name and where 'one's village is', the Syrian version of where one is from 'originally.' Karfan (18.03.2005b) has an entry on this particular game in his blog:

Usually in Syria people ask you "where are you from?" just to figure out whether you are Sunni, Alawi, [Druze], [Isma'ili], and whether you are Kurdi or Christian. Tartous, the city where Karfan comes from, has a population of both Sunnis and Alawis. You will be immediately asked in such situation: "where from in Tartous?" Karfan used to play around with people by saying a fictitious name of an area that does not exist and watch his asker straining themselves to find out whether it is in the Alawi or the Sunni side by inquiring where exactly is this area and whether it is in the City (Sunni) or the outskirt (Alawi). But the game of "where are you from?" was mastered by all Syrians; it is an essential skill for living here.

Hiding one's background and religion thus becomes very difficult unless one wants to resort to outright lying.

Relations between Alawis and Sunnis

The biggest sectarian divide in coastal Syria is between Alawis and Sunnis. Alawis define themselves above all in relation to the Sunnis and use the stereotypical image of them as traditional and conservative when constructing themselves as their exact opposites. When speaking about the Alawi-Sunni divide, my Alawi sources hold opinions ranging from disdain to indifference, but as already mentioned, they will differentiate between individuals and the group itself. Very often, they will speak of their scepticism towards Sunnis, but in the same breath speak of a Sunni they know who is different. They will explain that this comes down to them not being like the 'typical' Sunnis. It is Sunni *society* that is the problem and not the fact that people are born Sunnis.

This is connected to the fear Alawis inherit from home; stemming from a conviction that Sunnis, in essence, believe that they are the only ones who know the true Islam, and this truth must be spread by force to other Muslims who have chosen the wrong path. In the end, the dislike of Sunnis boils down to the perception that Sunnis do not like them. This constructs the Sunnis in a direct line to the historical narrative that centres on the persecution and oppression of the Alawis. One of my sources, a representative of the Critical discourse who places the Alawi religion very far from mainstream Islam, expressed this in one of our conversations on the topic by saying: 'I don't know why they hate us!'

This is based on the depicting of the Sunnis as religious fanatics who judge Alawis according to extremist views following religious interpretations like those of Ibn Taymiyyah (see page 58). Another of my outspoken sources says, while speaking of how Alawis do not pray in mosques and that their women do not wear a veil, that in Sunni eyes 'we are infidels because we don't follow these rules. And extreme Sunnis believe that if one kills a heretic one will go to Paradise after death.' This view, he says, is more a matter of upbringing and education than religion as such. The problem is that as many as 40 percent of Syrians do not receive a proper education and are instead given religious education in a mosque. This gives them an inherently religious fundament to their whole understanding of Syrian society and its sects. At the same time, Syrian society is becoming more open and tolerant, but this is a process mostly found in the middle classes. My source's biggest worry is the potential that lies in Sunni doctrines and not the fact that a majority of Sunnis hold these extreme beliefs.

Not surprisingly, of my sources, the ones with least interaction with Sunnis seem to be the most categorical and least ready to admit to Sunnis being a heterogeneous group. Sources from Latakia, which is a very mixed city, seem more open to there being 'different' Sunnis than those having grown up in the Jabal Ansariyeh. Age also seems to be an issue in the perception of Sunnis. Unfortunately, most of my sources are between 20 and 40, but even they tell me of how their parents and grandparents see things differently from them. In most cases, they will say that the older a person is the more critical he is of the Sunnis. They attribute this to the elderly having experienced what it is like to be discriminated against, which was still the case as late as the 1940s. One girl of a Sunni father and an Alawi mother told me that her grandmother on her mother's side had confided to her that she had actually never accepted her daughter's marriage to a Sunni. To her, the injustice she had lived under was living memory, as her childhood memories were of Alawis being mistreated and physically abused in public by their Sunni overlords. The younger generations, not least the ones who grew up after the sectarian troubles culminating in 1982, have only experienced the peace and stability they have had from that time onwards. To them, their parents' and grandparents' horror stories are therefore more history than reality.

Very few people will admit to there being sectarian conflict between Alawis and Sunnis. Many of my sources will voice their concern and scepticism of the Sunnis of the region and of the country, but if an explicit word such as 'conflict' is part of the question, most of them will reply in the negative and say that only a few extremists want conflict. Yet sometimes the comments get nastier when people feel they have been treated badly due to their religion.

A very few of my younger sources use much harsher words and describe the general situation as both parties hating each other and seeing the situation as a battle being waged between the two groups. One source of mixed background, and who admittedly describes many aspects of Syrian society as beset with conflict, describes the situation in the mixed city of Latakia as a demographic battle where both Sunnis and Alawis see population as constituting power. This means that if an Alawi girl marries a Sunni man the Alawis 'lose' members as this couple's children will add to the Sunnis' numbers. I came across another story, also from Latakia, where I was told by a person working in public administration that there was grumbling among the Sunnis in the department because the head of the department – conventionally a Sunni according to unwritten rules – had now been replaced by an Alawi, something which my source described as upsetting the status quo. In any case, it is rare to come across such extreme points of view and even if any of my other sources held such

controversial convictions, I would never expect them to admit to them because they do not go well with their self-portrait of being hated, but not hating themselves.

Relations between Alawis and Christians

As was explained above, the Christians are the Alawis' 'alibi' for their tolerance and open-mindedness to other religions. When Alawis speak of sectarian co-existence and that they have no prejudices against other sects, they are usually referring to Syria's Christian community. In the Alawi historical narrative, they refer to Christians in a favourable light, and many of my sources have used this narrative to explain the good relationship between Alawis and Christians. More importantly, though, they say that Alawis and Christians are culturally very similar and that both groups are both tolerant and open-minded. There is also a case of shared fate in that the two minorities both feel dominated by the Sunni majority. One of my academic sources emphasises this point, saying that having a common foe draws the two communities closer together, although he is quick to point out that this would not have been the case had they been very different in culture and outlook.

There are no major differences between the two Alawi discourses when it comes to describing this relationship, but the Islamic Discourse focuses more on the social similarities between the two groups, employing many of the same markers they use to differentiate themselves from the Sunnis. Tolerance and liberalism is highlighted and a shared history in mixed villages and regions are pointed out. Some of those using the Critical Discourse additionally mention theological similarities to the Christians to strengthen their link. One source explicitly explained the Alawi trinity as very close to the Christian trinity and maintained that this shows shared beliefs. Others have also pointed out how Alawis and Christians share their beliefs in saints and share many shrines around the mountains of coastal Syria.

There seems to be a certain pride among many Alawis in their association with Christians, as if the Christians form an ideal that they want to be like. This is more prevalent among the members of the Critical Discourse, but other Alawis also seem to hold Christians in high regard. This is possibly because the Christians as a group in Syria have done well for themselves, but also because they share the same religion as Europeans. The lifestyle associated with Europe, in many ways also an ideal for many Alawis, is therefore somehow projected onto the Christians of Syria. One member of the Critical Discourse said that the relation to Christians is the crux of the problem with the Sunnis, saying: 'This is why they hate us; because we are like the Christians'. Another one said outright that he wishes he were

a Christian and not an Alawi. This is the quintessence of the Alawis' dilemma. They present themselves as culturally very close to the Christians, but they are Muslims. Once they identify with the Muslim identity, they become victims of the Sunni hegemony, which has the power to construct this identity. What my source means when he says he wishes he were a Christian, then, is that if he were, he would be able to live as he does now, but be judged by different standards because that lifestyle would be expected of a Christian. However, as a Muslim, albeit an Alawi, he is the victim of the Muslim identity constructed by the hegemony and what it imposes on its subject positions as acceptable behaviour.

Hegemony and disguise

There is a sense of frustration among my Alawi sources because there is no way for them to get through to non-Alawis in general to let them see 'the real Alawis'. Sectarianism and religious identity is not a topic of public debate and there are no arenas for Alawis to communicate their views as a group, something I will return to in chapter seven. The restrictions originate in the Sunni hegemony and are a result of the antagonism between the hegemony and Alawi discourses. As was the topic of the previous chapter, the Alawi anti-hegemony discourses redefine parts of the Islamic religion to accommodate their beliefs, but this is not possible to do publicly due to the repression of public debate of sectarian issues. Furthermore, if they did, Alawis feel they will be labelled as apostates and infidels, a label they feel they have suffered enough for already through history.

The Alawi *taqiyyah* – the concealment of religion – is described by my Alawi sources as determining how Alawis choose to live their lives. The guiding principle behind this is the threat they feel to their community from the Sunni majority. They explain this by the historical experiences of the Alawis and how they have been persecuted and massacred throughout the ages and that the Sunni extremism that drove these events is still to be found in the Syrian-Sunni population. From how they describe contemporary Syria, one sometimes gets the impression that the stability that the Alawis are now experiencing is just a respite from the 'natural order' where they are on the receiving end of maltreatment and injustice.

This vulnerability could also explain how some Alawis seem to reject their own backgrounds and say they wish they were not Alawis, like my source mentioned above. There also seems to exist a group of Alawis, although I do not have reliable information on this, that seem to go in the opposite direction. These are rejectionists who go further than the Official Discourse and want to be like the majority instead and prefer to hide the fact that they are Alawis. My impression is that those who look up to the urban upper classes of Damascus see

the Alawi ways as not suitable when seeking integration in wealthy and cosmopolitan circles. Therefore, this is possibly more the case for Alawis living in non-majority Alawi areas (and not covered in my fieldwork). Being Alawi then becomes a restriction to aspirations, which is apparently widespread according to Karfan (28.03.2005), who writes:

Everybody knows, especially those Alawies who tried very hard to integrate with their Sunni surroundings after moving to the main cities, that they will never be accepted by the Sunnis. There isn't a single Alawie house in Damascus without a story or two on failed experiences in... what you may name: go out of own skin attempts. Alawies are still bad Muslims.

All my sources, though, live in Alawi-dominated areas and in this context they are proud to be Alawis. This is also clearer when I, as the interested foreigner, show a positive attitude in what makes them different from other Syrians. Yet, the defensiveness in regard to the Sunni majority, especially when faced with Sunnis even on their own turf, is still present. Being part of Islam means that the main tenets are unassailable and the following example highlights this: I walked past an Alawi acquaintance and his group of friends in Tartous and was invited to join them. After a while, a Saudi Arabian tourist stops and asks them in Arabic for the time of *al-Maghrib*, the sunset prayer. This question caused some confusion among my friends, probably because of the difference in dialect, but also because *al-Maghrib* is also the Arabic name for Morocco (meaning 'The West'). They therefore started answering as if the Saudi Arabian wanted to travel to Morocco. When it became clear that he wanted to know the time of the prayer, they immediately excused themselves and said that they did not understand properly, nor could they answer his question, because *they were all Christians*.

Being Alawis and thus Muslims, they felt that they should have understood such an important question, especially when asked by a Saudi, who Alawis joke about by saying 'Everything is "God is Great" to them!' (*kullu allahu akbar*). Instead of just saying they were ignorant of the call to prayer, which is not an acceptable answer for the Muslim identity, they chose to conceal that they were Alawis and took on a Christian identity instead, which was the only socially acceptable way to be oblivious to the Muslim prayer. The fact that they all positioned themselves in the same way in the face of a Saudi 'religious extremist' shows how internalised such an act of concealment is. Their reactions were only an issue afterwards because I asked about it. The only reply I got was that it is 'easier' when dealing with such a fellow.

This is an instrumental use of identities that is not confined to the Alawis due to sectarian prejudices and the belief that one is treated according to one's sect. An illustrating example is the role of women and what is expected of them. An Alawi woman will have more freedom of

dress and behaviour than a Sunni woman will if we go by how the society around them perceives them. I know a Sunni girl in her mid-twenties who uses this to her own advantage. She dresses and behaves in a very liberal way and is automatically taken to be non-Sunni (i.e. probably Alawi or possibly Christian) excusing behaviour that would normally be frowned upon if she was judged by Sunni standards. Only by seeing her travelling with a foreigner, it is clear from their questions that they presume she is either Alawi or Christian since a good Sunni girl would supposedly never behave in such a way.

This girl often confuses people because of her behaviour, at the same time as her accent is that of the city and associated with the Sunnis. She says that she will take on the role people expect of her since people believe what they want to believe anyway. At one point, we went together to a public office to sort out some paperwork. In the office, she realised she knew one of the clerks and we went to speak to him. The clerk, an Alawi, invited us to sit with him and at the right moment in the small talk that followed, in order to confirm his supposition that she is Alawi, he asked casually for her family name. Her name is common among Alawis, but also found among Sunnis, so the clerk went on to ask about where her father is from. Since her father grew up in an Alawi village, the clerk now believed she was Alawi. After we left she told me that she saw no reason to let him believe otherwise as she was convinced that he gave us better service than he would have given us had he known that she is Sunni. However, this concealment of identity is a dangerous game, something the aforementioned girl herself admits to. In her own words: 'The Sunnis will definitively kill me if the Islamists seize power because I behave like an Alawi.'

According to many of the Alawis I have spoken to, this instrumental use of identities to conceal one's own, is widespread among Alawis and is part of their *taqiyyah*. One says that it depends on what tradition a family belongs to, as this differs from region to region, but that it is more widespread among those who live in Sunni dominated communities. Some families in mainly Sunni cities would never admit to being Alawis to a stranger. Their women will cover themselves when leaving the house and they will adhere to Sunni practices to complete the charade. This is very similar to what I was told about Alawi families staying in Aleppo after the massacres and keeping their faith a secret, which is summed up by one man saying: 'We hide because we are weak, because we're a minority. We do not want to be killed.' As mentioned in the previous chapter, some use this as a reason to claim that the number of Alawis in Syria is much higher because many did not dare admit to being Alawis in the last census, which is the basis for all later estimates for the sectarian balance in Syria.

The Alawis' outward appearance and behaviour thus seem to depend on where they are and how threatened they feel. This is comparable to my observations in different parts of coastal Syria where Alawis live. Places are graded according to 'Alawiness', which means how mixed they are with Sunnis. Whereas the Jabal Ansariyeh is constructed as the Alawi heartland and is closely tied to their historical narrative as the place where they sought refuge from Sunni oppression, the coastal plain, and especially the cities of Tartous and Latakia, is described as one of 'recent arrival' where they are less 'in their element'. Hence, their mountains are where they organically belong. Of course, through their historical narrative they lay claim to greater areas where they now live because this is where they were driven out from during the massacres. One source from Tartous told me that his village is outside Tartous in the mountains. However, they are 'originally' from Aleppo and were driven out by the massacres.

This discursive construction of place is connected to the Sunni hegemony and its strength. Where it is stronger, represented by the presence of Sunnis, Alawis display less of the differences they describe than they do where it is not felt in their daily lives. This difference can be illustrated in the following observation. During the month of Ramadan, when all Muslims are supposed to abstain from food, drink and smoking during the daylight hours – and when many Muslims who drink alcohol during the rest of the year do not – Tartous and Latakia are experienced differently. As has been explained, many Alawis interpret the religious rules, and especially the Five Pillars, as symbols rather than strict rules to be followed (e.g. praying in the mosque) and even when they do follow them, they are not concerned by others' disregard of them. In the mountains and in Tartous, which only has a small minority of Sunnis, people eat and drink openly and the restaurants stay open during the fasting hours. Alcohol is also sold and consumed openly, although some of the bigger restaurants catering to Syrian tourists refrain from selling alcohol throughout the month. In Latakia on the other hand, a city that is divided between Sunnis and Alawis (both groups seem to claim they are the majority), there is a lot less open disregard for the fast. Finding an open café downtown during the day is difficult, and the restaurants do not serve alcohol at all.

This grading of places is apparent on the local level also. Alawi girls are, according to my sources, not comfortable going to the Sleibeh neighbourhood, a Sunni part of Latakia notorious for its conservativeness. And a place such as a bus station can take on a sectarian character as the following example shows: In a group of young people of mixed religious backgrounds, a girl was leaving on her own to go to the bus station to catch a microbus to her village outside Latakia. One of the young men, a visitor from another part of Syria, was very

concerned about her going all by herself as she might be harassed by the ruffians who hang out in such places as bus stations. Everybody else, the girl herself included, replied that there was no need for concern as this bus station only serves the villages in the region and these are all Alawi. This explanation was all that was needed as it meant that not only are the people there Alawis, but the fact that she is there means she is an Alawi and will be treated accordingly.

Finally, if we take the building of mosques in Alawi areas to be a symbol of the strength of the hegemony, it gives an impression of how Alawi resistance works. As we saw earlier, my sources claim that Alawis do not have a tradition for praying in mosques first of all because they pray in their hearts and secondly because they lost that tradition because it became a site where massacres of Alawis took place. If this is the case for Alawis in general, it would mean that they do not have the need for mosques (shrines are not counted as mosques). However, there are mosques in every Alawi village I have ever been to, although there seem to be fewer than in Sunni towns and villages. The building of mosques would, in this perspective, indicate that they were built for appearance only and are thus a material outcome of the Sunni hegemony. On the surface, there are mosques to indicate that Alawis are Muslims in the way Muslims adhere to the rules of that identity as defined by the dominant, whereas the *hidden transcript* allows that these are not used as prescribed by the hegemony.

In conclusion

From the theoretical framework in chapter 2, identity is viewed as relational and is constituted both as what is intrinsic to it and, just as important, everything it is not. The Sunnis have become the Alawis' 'The Other' and the previous chapter explored the historical and theological reasons for this. But this is also the case in the social sphere and Alawis construct their collective identity in this sphere above all in relation to the Sunnis. In discursive terms, there is antagonism where the Sunni and the Alawi identities overlap as Muslim identities. Alawis present their identity as blocked by the Sunni hegemony of the right to define Muslim identity, something that becomes clearer in that several of my sources feel socially more Christian than they feel Muslim. The constitutive outside of Alawi identity is thus not non-Alawi, but anti-Alawi. In other words, their identity is restricted and also threatened by other identities, above all Sunni identity.

In order to define themselves as a group, Alawis make stereotypes of orthodox Sunnis in order to define who they are not. By using examples of strict Sunni practices in relation to alcohol and women's behaviour and clothing, they portray themselves as the opposite of this

and therefore as liberal and tolerant. Some also seek to link their (cultural) identity both to the Christians and to Europe in order to distance themselves further from the Sunni threat. And it is exactly this threat that is essential to their identity. Many of my sources describe the Alawi relationship to the Sunnis as one where they are hated by them. Again, this point is intensified by their stories of how many Alawis in mixed areas hide their religion because it is not acceptable and they fear they will not be respected. This will turn into maltreatment and persecution in a potentially hostile future.

Not surprisingly, the feeling of a restricted identity seems to be felt more in places where Alawis are exposed to a perceived judgement from Sunnis, such as in the mixed towns and cities of the coast. In the purely Alawi areas of the mountains the perception of Sunnis is even more stereotypical, but at the same time one gets the feeling that they have ‘carved out’ a place for themselves where they can live out their identity freely and in practice expel the hegemony from their daily lives.

Yet, Alawi identity is not static and contemporary events affect how it is constructed. This is the case in the role of the regime and its policies towards Alawis and Sunnis, but also contemporary events in Syria and the wider region either weaken or exacerbate issues explored thus far. This political context is the topic of the next and final chapter in the analysis.

7

CONSTRUCTING POLITICS

The two previous chapters have dealt with how the Alawis construct their identity, first of all based on a historical narrative and theological issues, and secondly on social issues relative to their perception of ‘The Other,’ mainly the Sunnis. This chapter focuses on how the Alawis construct their identity based on the political developments in Syria. Their, in many cases, involuntary connection to the regime is an important issue in how they present their political situation. Those few who feel comfortable to be critical, describe a situation where new political *myths about them* are created through the mistakes of the regime and their inability to address these issues under the present circumstances. The Alawi discourse of contemporary politics is closely bound to their historical narrative and the fear of the Sunnis is the overriding issue. Political events outside Syria also have an impact on Alawi identity, and, as will be discussed towards the end, the Islamic Discourse and the Critical Discourse differ when it comes to how Alawis see their effect. Overall, though, the hidden transcript is surprisingly uniform when presented by my sources, as the construction of politics will show.

Proving history right

Throughout this analysis, the focal point of Alawi identity has been the threat they feel to their community from the majority Sunnis in Syria. This fear and scepticism is constructed through the historical narrative – retold orally through generations – of being oppressed, subjugated and massacred. However, this is not ancient history to Alawis as stories of ill-treatment are as recent as the 1940s. Having reached their epoch of *regeneration* and re-establishment of their rights with Syrian independence, events during the first part of Hafiz al-Asad’s reign would prove to them that their freedom and way of life had not yet been secured, and that the hatred of the Sunni population towards them had not yet abated.

In 1976, six years after President Hafiz al-Asad seized power in Syria, the Syrian Muslim Brotherhood launched an armed uprising against the Syrian regime that would last until 1982. The Muslim Brotherhood is an offshoot of the Sunni Islamist movement of the same name that was founded in Egypt in the 1920s. It had existed in Syria for decades and its primary goal had been to replace the regime with one committed to and based on the Salafist version

of a pure Islam – wanting to return to a Golden Age of their own: that of the first three generations of Muslims that were uncorrupted by conquests and pre-existing civilisations (Smith 2003). During the uprising, they sought to mobilise the Sunni population of Syria against the regime by portraying their struggle as a religious war against the heretic Alawi regime through the declaration of Alawis as neither Muslims nor Arabs (Landis 08.10.2004, Leverett 2005).

The discourse of the uprising is not closed in Syria today, something the different descriptions of the conflict attest to. The conflict is over representation, and the narrative of my Alawi sources presents the events as motivated by sectarianism. This is contrary to the Official Discourse of the regime, which defines the conflict as politically motivated. Wedeen (1999) shows that the regime, both during and after the conflict had struggled to represent it in political terms in order to negate the religious anti-Alawi slogans of the Muslim Brotherhood. By describing the insurgents as conservative, religious extremists that were enemies of the progressive and inclusive state, they downplayed their own minority religious backgrounds by claiming to be representatives of all modern-minded Syrians. The parties in the conflict were therefore not Sunnis versus Alawis, but rather extremists versus Syrians of all creeds. Yet, even if the regime refused to enter into a secular debate, reprints of a number of history books portraying Alawis in a favourable light were allowed to be sold in bookshops around this time (van Dam 1989). Whether the regime was successful influencing Syrians with its secular interpretation of the conflict is difficult to say. However, considering the historical ambivalence and subsequent lack of power of definition Alawis have in religious matters discussed in chapter five, this is doubtful.

Yet, the Alawis who feel comfortable talking about this subject portray this conflict as a sectarian conflict and a direct attack on the Alawis in the same way the Muslim Brotherhood argued. To them, the Muslim Brotherhood is the continuation of extremism among Sunnis that has existed above all since the fatwa of Ibn Taymiyyah in the 14th century (see page 58). One of my sources describes the conflict as one where *almost all* the victims that were singled out were Alawis and where all the perpetrators were Sunnis. The acts of violence of the Muslim Brotherhood are described by these sources in terms very similar to how they describe the historical persecution of the Alawis. It was principally characterised by brutality and cowardice. Furthermore, due to the (cowardly) guerrilla tactics of their warfare, there was no way their victims could protect themselves against the attacks.

The fact that the conflict is recent history, gives their historical narrative contemporary evidence. Additionally, personal experience and first-hand accounts gives any narrative a

guarantee of certainty (Hodgkin & Radstone 2003a). Therefore, when my sources relate stories of their families' – or their friends' families' – direct experience of the conflict, it gives increased strength to their representation of the conflict. A man from Tartous told me the story of the killing of the husband of his aunt during the uprising. The husband was an officer in the army and was on his way to work one morning. He was killed by three men who had all dressed up as women wearing the traditional Sunni dresses that cover both their bodies and their faces. In this cowardly way, they were able to hide automatic weapons under the loose garments, and he was gunned down in cold blood on the street. Not only does the account give the impression of relative innocence in that he was on his way to work as on any normal morning, but the reasons for his murder was condensed in my source's summary: 'He was killed because he was an Alawi.'

Landis (08.10.2004) tells a similar story about his father-in-law:

My father-in-law, a retired Alawi Admiral of the Syrian Navy, was on the Brotherhood hit list and nearly assassinated by a neighbor who turned out to be a member of an underground organization. Needless to say, this had a profound effect on the family (a neighbor from a family they liked).

A second event that appears formative, yet not discursively closed, for the Alawis as a group was the bloody culmination of the uprising. In 1982, after years of conflict and increasing boldness on their part, the Muslim Brotherhood seized control of the city of Hama, one of their most important bases of support. Wanting to set an example, and having made membership of the organisation punishable by death two years earlier, the regime sent in the army and levelled part of the city, killing more than 25,000 people according to a 2006 report of the Syrian Human Rights Committee¹³ although other sources cite numbers between 10,000-15,000. At issue here is that the stories of the massacres tell that the perpetrators were Alawis under the command of Hafiz al-Asad's brother Rif'at al-Asad. The fact that Alawis constituted the crack units in the attack gave them the opportunity to get their revenge on the Muslim Brotherhood and the Sunnis in general.

These stories were told to me by the Alawis themselves, seeking to disprove this *myth*. They were eager to show that this is how Syrians in general tell the story and that it unfairly reflects very badly on Alawis. On the contrary, they say, the units partaking in the attack were made up of Syrians from all kinds of backgrounds. One source uses his father as an example. He told me that he was a soldier in one of the units that fought in Hama and that, even though he confesses to not knowing a lot about it, he has been told that the unit was composed of men

¹³ <http://www.shrc.org/data/asp/d5/2535.aspx>, downloaded 10.01.2007

representing Syrian society, meaning that they belonged to different sects and religions, including Sunnis. To strengthen the argument, I was offered to speak to his father myself to have the story verified. Interestingly, in this context – where Alawis are placed on the perpetrating side – my source tells the story of this event in the conflict as a war between extremists and Syrians (similar to the Official Discourse) and not as a sectarian struggle, as was the case for the conflict as a whole. It would seem that in a situation where he admits to Alawis being on the perpetrating side, they are representatives of Syrians and not of themselves in a sectarian struggle.

An ‘Alawi’ regime?

Closely coupled to the fear my Alawi sources feel for their Sunni neighbours, is the perception Syrians supposedly have of the regime being ‘Alawi’ – meaning that it is primarily *by* and *for* Alawis. This is another of the constitutive *myths* and is how the Muslim Brotherhood portrayed the regime during its uprising. Chapter four outlined the background to this claim, but the issue here is to get an impression of the Alawis’ opinion on the matter. None of my sources disputes the fact that Alawis have played an important role in the developments in modern Syria. Nevertheless, the role of the Alawis’ are ‘re-presented’ by them as members of a coalition of progressive-minded groups and people and not as an exclusively Alawi project. A few of my most critical sources, though, say that it has been a big mistake by the Alawis in power to have such a central and visible role in the regime. Their role reflects back at the group and this is something they are afraid that they will have to pay for at some point.

Typically though, when confronting Alawis with the claim that the regime is ‘Alawi’, they instantly answer that this is not so. The immediate reaction in several cases has been to point out that the number of Alawi ministers in the government is very low or that the important Sunni families of Damascus are more powerful than all Alawis put together. In many cases, my sources have pre-empted my questions when the topic has turned to the religion of those in power by saying that the Alawis have not benefited as a group just because the president is Alawi. They here implicitly refer to a *myth* of how all Alawis benefit from the regime due to belonging to the same sect as those in power. The power of this myth on the self-perception of my Alawi sources becomes clearer when questioning them further on their initial reaction.

They categorically deny that the Alawis have benefited because of their religion. To the extent that the Alawis have benefited, it has been through the economic development of the region, which had anyway lagged behind due to centuries of neglect by the authorities. Instead, they say, the nepotism of the regime is well known, but this is based on personal

connections and the patronage of powerful families regardless of sect. To demonstrate this, they typically mention the difficult financial situation of themselves or their families or the lack of amenities in the villages where they are from. One Latakian said that this is something non-Alawis living in Alawi areas are well aware of, but that Syrians in other parts of the country all believe that all Alawis are well off from government money.

A young man from Tartous said outright that he feels that no one represent the Alawi community as a whole. To him, the regime only represents itself, whereas the others sects in Syria have representatives – usually religious leaders – that the authorities deal with on a regular basis. These leaders also have the opportunity to raise questions pertaining to their community publicly. Unlike these groups, the Alawis are treated as if they don't exist – he here refers to how the Alawis fall under Sunni *Shari'a* law against their will – and do not have their own say in the government's treatment of them. To put it differently, he sees no opportunity to challenge the Sunni discursive hegemony as long as his sect does not have a public face other than the regime. Instead, he yearns for public representatives defending Alawi interests, not Alawis defending regime interests. The Alawi Khudr¹⁴ (30.08.2006) elaborates on this issue. He writes that Alawis used to feel represented by the regime as long as they saw an improvement in the fortunes of the Alawis, but that this feeling has been severely weakened by the full-fledged alliances between the traditionally powerful Sunni families and the Alawi families with political power. This, he writes, shows that the regime is more interested in the perpetuation of its power than in the communal interests of the Alawis.

Not only do my sources disagree to the claim that the regime as 'Alawi' (although it is important to point out that none of them comes from wealthy or important families), but a few of them criticise the regime directly for having caused many of the sectarian problems in the first place and thus damaging the Alawi name. This, they feel, is very harmful in the hypothetical situation where a new regime cannot guarantee the rights of the Alawi community.

One of these reasons was mentioned in chapter four where it was described how the Syrian curriculum disregards Syria's Islamic minorities and presents Islam as only the orthodox Sunni understanding of it. The religious education does not have even one reference to Alawis – nor Druze or Isma'ilis, or even of Shi'a Islam as a whole – on any level of the school system. Discussion of Islamic diversity is not to be encouraged (Landis 2003). One

¹⁴ See page 18 for explanation

person I spoke to in Tartous about this said that it would be inconceivable for a teacher of religion (or any other subject for that matter) even to mention the term ‘Alawi’ in the classroom. Doing so would get him into a lot of trouble with the school authorities. This lack of openness in religious matters is perceived by Alawi critics as a big mistake on part of the regime because of the simple fact that ignorance leads to intolerance. At the same time, the Sunni monopoly in education is described as yet another proof that the Sunnis are the ones with actual power and get to impose their religious views on the population as a whole, despite the supposed secularism of the regime. Karfan (23.03.2005) describes this precisely, yet in harsher words, in his blog:

Nine hundred years of living next to each other and still all what we know about each other is a bunch of lies that are regurgitated from generation to generation. We have a great unofficial and official policy of uprooting sectarianism and tribalism: Ignoring their existence!!...Most of the rest of us know about Martians more than they know about Kurds or [Druze] who have been living here for thousands of years...[O]ur fathers "failed generation" spent sixty years loosing their Don Kichotian wars and chasing dreams while forgetting to make us know each other better and build us a solid identity.

Along similar lines, a second policy of the regime has been the downright suppression of Alawi religious mobilisation, as mentioned in chapter four. Unlike Christians and Muslim sects, the Alawi are not allowed to establish religious organisations. My Alawi sources disagree on the reasons for this, but they do confirm that the attempts to organise the Alawi religion has been barred by the regime. It may have weakened Alawi religious identity and solidarity, but Alawis I have spoken to do not necessarily see this as negative. One of my academic sources believes this prohibition was a good idea, above all because any formal religious hierarchy is contrary to the beliefs of the Alawis, which emphasises the individual’s right to keep his relationship with religion between him and God. Secondly, he said, formal organisation of the religion might lead to increased influence from other Islamic sects leading to a more rule-bound and less tolerant understanding of religion.

A few critical voices ascribe more sinister motives to these policies. They speculate that the reasons behind are to keep the country divided and ignorant of other groups and sects and thus keeping them uneasy about ‘The Other’ – a topic returned to in the next section below. Furthermore, for the Alawis in particular, these policies are supposed to thwart any alternative political forces to develop among them that may challenge the regime. This view also has proponents in academic circles abroad. Perthes (05.10.2005) expanded on this theory in his article, claiming that the only credible alternative to the present regime comes from the possibility of a counter-coup from within the Alawi community itself. This theory was

discussed among Alawis in my presence as well when rumours were rampant after the supposed suicide of the Alawi Minister of Interior, Ghazi Kana'an, at the height of the perceived instability of the regime during the autumn of 2005 (see 'Political circumstances' below). According to Scott (1990), rumours are important forms of resistance, and in this case, the fact that it was not rejected out of hand by those present, could be an indication of the strength of an Alawi hidden script.

Karfan (28.03.2005) lends his voice to the most extreme critics, who see the suppression of the Alawi religion as an attempt to keep the Alawis down for the regime to stay in power:

"King Lion the 1st" long ago realized how much he relies on the support of his sect to stay in power, and realized who much dangerous would be to rely on something that can be easily manipulated such as religion. He then diverted this lurking danger to his rule by imposing an overwhelming Sunni-fication policy on the very Alawie sect that supported him...The Sunni-fication attempt did not work simply because it was not meant to work in the first place. While "King Lion the 1st" and his thugs were trumpeting this integration policy, they were at the same time systematically building a culture of separation and segregation between Alawies and Sunnis, and between all sects and ethnic and religious groups in Syria for that matter. The real reason behind this policy was never integration with Sunnis or establishing an acceptance for the Alawies by the Sunnis. The real reason was to deprive the Alawies from any solid unified religious ideology that might one day pose a fatal danger on the rule of the King. To turn them into meaningless tribes ranked by how much they support the King.

For the most part, though, my sources are fairly apologetic towards the regime on these issues. Even when they strongly disagree with the policies, they give an impression that maybe the regime has good reasons to do these things. The academic source mentioned above, for example, thinks that the reason for not mentioning Alawis in the school curriculum is the regime's desire to promote unity in the population. This, he says, might be the reason they teach similarities rather than differences in religious education. Whether the apologetic arguments are uttered because of a fear of being too critical or an indication of a belief in the ultimate good intentions of the regime is hard to say. However, the latter reason does not rhyme well with how much the nepotism of the regime bothers them or their support for the regime as outlined at the end of the chapter. A third possibility has to do with the *taqiyyah* and that they cannot imagine their own religious beliefs out in the open and being taught in school or organised publicly.

There seem to be generational differences among Alawis when it comes to the feeling of representation the regime gives them. This difference was explained earlier as being connected to personal experiences. Older Alawis have to a greater extent than the young experienced a different life of more hardship and greater inequality in their regions. To them, the regime of Hafiz al-Asad created opportunities for them to climb the social ladder and leave

the countryside and poverty behind. They might therefore feel that the regime represents them more because they felt their living standards improve in the last half of the 20th century. Young people, on the other hand, have only seen their opportunities decrease with the deteriorating economic situation.

This supposition is backed up by Khudr (30.08.2006) who writes that ‘Most of us have not lived the unjust circumstances that our fathers and grand-fathers were subjected to by the Sunnis. As such, we do not have the same appreciation as our fathers of the Alawi rule that the late president Hafez Assad brought.’ Additionally, he points out an important difference when it comes to the modest background of the early Alawi leaders and their function as role models:

Our fathers’ support for Hafez was driven largely by their resentment for the wealthy bourgeois that Hafez and his Baath claimed to oppose and which imbued their movement with much of its legitimacy. The followers of Rifa’at al-Assad used to recount to us in the seventies how they admired him because he would pick up a dirty used tuna can from the floor and drink tea from it. I wonder what those people think about him now that he uses golden utensils in his multi-million dollar villas in France and Spain? ... Unfortunately, we are watching how the Alawi rulers and many of their children, are becoming the very same thing they taught us to despise.

Overall, it would seem that the regime is falling prey to its own rhetoric in the form of discursive negation (Scott 1990). The Official Discourse claims that the regime represents all Syrians equally, and Alawis should therefore be represented on the same level as other groups in Syria. However, many Alawis actually feel under-represented compared to other groups and this undermines the belief in the Official Discourse. The language of sectarian harmony is negated in the same way by being proven wrong in the anti-Alawi policies of the regime.

The durability of fear

It would be an overstatement to claim that Alawis live in fear in general. Rather, it is a mixed feeling of scepticism towards the Sunnis and the myths they believe in about the Alawis, and of insecurity for what might happen in the future if radical elements gain a position of power. The Muslim Brotherhood’s uprising proved to the Alawis that many Sunnis still see them as heretics and thus religious targets in their holy war for Islamic purity. Although many of my sources speak of increasing openness and tolerance in Syrian society in general, they see a parallel development of increasing devoutness in the Sunni population and a rising influence of puritanical interpretations.

Due to the non-existence of a public debate or openness on sectarian issues, little is known of the strength of extremist sentiments in the Sunni population. Yet, stories are told and retold among friends and family, and many people read news and analyses from abroad on the

internet. Most people I have spoken to about the future of the Alawis are convinced that the Sunni extremists have a strong following and that they will want to have their revenge on the Alawis when they get a chance.

One source living in the city of Latakia said that she is convinced that the extremists will gain power at some point in the future. When that happens, she says, the Alawis will experience massacres rivalling those that took place under the Ottoman Empire. Exemplifying how the extremism is spreading, she told me that she herself has seen it in Damascus. In the main market area, one can now see posters with quotes from Ibn Taymiyyah and other religious extremists who are famous for their calls to kill those that do not follow their teachings. Other stories abound, such as the supposed dissemination of flyers in the late summer of 2005 warning the 'Alawi unbelievers' that the day of judgement is imminent (Landis 14.09.2005).

Those of my sources who travel abroad or are very internationally minded are the most critical of all. Possibly, these sources are also the ones who dare to speak most openly because they feel more protected than the Alawis living in Syria on a permanent basis who are exposed to the surveillance of the intelligence services. Another possibility is that they more actively seek alternative views online or in the media in languages other than Arabic. In any case, these critics portray the regime as further aloof from the general population than other sources and as more interested in its own survival than the survival of the Syrian population. By sabotaging true religious harmony, they could present themselves as the only viable alternative in a society on the verge of chaos. In the words of Karfan (23.03.2005):

Our fathers then found this [the coup of Hafiz al-Asad] as a chance to get rid of their seven hundred years of segregation and being treated like semi-human beings, and they helped him up. Soon after, they noticed that instead of building a real secular civil society in which they and other minorities can guarantee being treated equally by our Sunni big-brothers, he and the gang around him were more concerned in building their own bank-accounts and influence. When he noticed that he is risking that many Alawis are starting not to buy his bullshit, then he resolved into convincing them that if they do not side by him, their historical depressors, the Sunnis, will kick their asses back to the top of the cruel mountains they once came from. The stupid Muslim-Brother gang helped him in his mission by hunting down every single poor Alawi they could get their hand on. The "White Knight of Tadmur" [Rif'at al-Asad] helped even more by doing the same to the Sunnis.

In other words, in order to hold on to power, it has not been in the regime's interest to promote true inter-sectarian understanding. Instead, in order to boost its own legitimacy, it has instilled a fear of civil war in the population by enhancing news related to the threat of Islamic extremism at the same time as discouraging any type of open sectarian dialogue. These critics see catastrophe looming ever closer the more corrupt the government becomes. The more the

regime seeks to hang on to power the more it harms Alawi interests because, in the event of a collapse of the regime, Syrians do not differentiate between Alawis in general and the Alawis of the regime.

However fabricated some people think the idea of eventual sectarian strife is, the fear of civil war comes up on a regular basis whenever inter-sectarian relations are discussed. Apart from history and the extremism of the Muslim Brotherhood, my sources have pointed to two things that exacerbate their fear: the experiences of the neighbouring countries and the role and language of the overseas-based opposition.

Many of Syria's neighbours have experienced sectarian strife, and these influence people's perception of whether something similar could happen in Syria. Lebanon suffered 15 years of civil war from 1975-1990 and positions in government and parliament are allotted on a sectarian basis. The Syrian government even uses the term 'lebanonisation' in official rhetoric when warning of the dangers of sectarian thinking (Nome, unpublished). Iraq proves another case in point where a fairly stable dictatorship, not unlike that in Syria, presided over a range of different sects who suddenly went for each other's throats once the stability of the regime had disappeared. Even though my sources have always been careful to point out that Syria is more peaceful and stable than both Lebanon and Iraq, they express themselves in a way whereby one gets the impression that communal harmony is something artificial and ephemeral rather than natural and stable.

When it comes to Syrian dissidents based abroad, these also influence the feeling of what is to come inside Syria itself. Unlike the internal opposition, which speaks the language of religious harmony, the language of the dissidents abroad sometimes differs. One example is a letter by Farid al-Ghadry, the current president of the Syria Reform Party, a US-based opposition party, who in October 2006 called for the Alawis to 'return to their mountains.'¹⁵ Repeatedly, people come up with examples like these to show that nothing has changed and that the Alawis will still be the target of reprisals when the time comes.

This fear is, not surprisingly, more noticeable in times of heightened tensions. During my fieldwork in Syria in the autumn of 2005, international pressure on Syria was growing. This was a result of the UN investigation into the assassination of Rafiq al-Hariri in Lebanon and a more aggressive stance towards Syria from the Bush administration. The government of Bashar al-Asad was showing signs of stress and there was speculation both inside Syria and in international media of the imminent collapse of his regime either through a popular uprising

¹⁵<http://faculty-staff.ou.edu/L/Joshua.M.Landis-1/syriablog/2006/08/should-syria-and-israel-negotiate.htm#c115697233538484447>, downloaded 12.09.2006

or through an internal coup. There was increasing speculation of what might happen and some of my sources were fearful of the future. This feeling was exacerbated by rumours that Alawi families living in Damascus were making preparations for a situation where they would have to move to safer – meaning Alawi – areas on short notice.

Political circumstances and their impact

The theme so far in the role politics play on how Alawi identity is constructed has been the role Sunnis and Sunni extremism plays in constituting a threat to the Alawis. However, events abroad influence how this threat is felt in the Alawi community. In short, the more threatened Syrians feel by forces abroad, the less they seem to emphasise the threats from inside Syria. The way people spoke about their fears and anxieties in the autumn of 2005, when there was a fear that the regime might collapse under the pressure from both abroad and inside Syria was centred on their concern for their personal safety in an uncertain future. During the summer of 2006, on the other hand, when people were rallying to defend their country from the perceived imminent Israeli attack to punish Syria for its support for Hezbollah during that summer's war, sectarian issues were less pronounced and people were more hopeful.

There are mainly two reasons for this. Firstly, an overarching Syrian identity is strengthened when there is a need to come together against an external enemy. This is especially the case when the enemy is a traditional enemy like Israel or when people believed that Syria was next on the list for invasion by the United States after Iraq in 2003. In these cases, Alawis have told me that they feel more accepted as both Arabs and Syrians because the Syrian identity trumps sectarian identities in the national interest. Second, where the regime is seen to defend Arab rights, as they did during Hezbollah's war against Israel that summer, or when the regime supports the Palestinians in their struggle against Israel, this reflects back on the Alawis. This is ironic since Alawis feel that people's negative feelings of the regime reflect unjustly on the sect because of the background of the president and other Alawis in power. However, when an Alawi is seen to fight for an Arab or Muslim cause and the support of the regime increases, they have reason to be proud of their backgrounds also.

The reactions to Hezbollah's perceived victory over Israel are interesting for the construction of Alawi identity. Support for Hezbollah and its leader, Hassan Nasrallah was near total in the Alawi communities I encountered. But then again, this support was just as ardent among my Syrian-Christian acquaintances and was therefore, in my opinion, for political and not religious reasons. However, the fact that Hezbollah is a Shi'a party and that Alawis also define themselves as Shi'as was mentioned by some of my sources as having a

positive influence on the perceptions about Alawis. There is a long history of animosity towards Shi'as in the Sunni Muslim world and these sources believe that this animosity has also reflected on the Alawis in a negative manner. This began to change with the Iranian revolution as Sunnis started respecting the Shi'as for their achievements (obviously, as long as they did not feel threatened), and has grown stronger with Iran's and Hezbollah's strong stance against Israel over the last few years. This link to their namesakes is seen to strengthen their claims to be Muslims, at least amongst the less extreme parts of the population.

However, the internal Alawi discourses are affected by these events also. Although I have never come across any Alawi claiming not to be Muslim, the two Alawi discourses identified in this thesis differ in their attitudes towards Islam in general. Adherents to both the Islamic Discourse and the Critical Discourse have shown great scepticism towards Islam – due to the Sunnis' power of definition – throughout the various topics of this thesis. This is blamed on the alienation they feel from the majority Sunni Muslims of Syria who, they feel, do not accept them as Muslims. This alienation is strengthened by Muslim extremism elsewhere, above all in Iraq, which stands for a Muslim identity they do not recognise as even remotely related to their own. Its impact is more apparent in the Critical Discourse, where several of my sources who use it say they *wish* they were not considered Muslims at all. In many ways, they describe the Muslim identity like a prison. It becomes a label by which they are judged by non-Muslims by all the negative associations created by Sunni Islam in both conservatism and extremism.

The Islamic Discourse takes a somewhat different view. My sources drawing on this discourse are equally worried about the role of extremism, but seem more relaxed in their identity as Muslims. They speak instead of the importance of showing that Islam is more than the conservative understanding of the Sunnis and that the ideal of the Prophet is now to be found in the tolerance of some European countries rather than in some backward-looking Arab societies. However, this difference between the discourses is not surprising. Those of my sources drawing on the Critical Discourse are the least religious, whereas the opposite is the case for those espousing the Islamic Discourse. Criticising one's own religion is obviously less acceptable when one is a devout believer.

As an extension of this topic, I have asked several of my sources about the impact the aforementioned conflicts have on the Muslim identity of the Alawis. Again, the two discourses diverge in the answer. The sources within the Critical Discourse reply that Alawis feel less like Muslims and closer to the Christians because of what they see abroad. They say

they cannot relate to the logic of the Islamic way of thinking and they share values with the Christians more than with other Muslims. In other words, they emphasise culture more than they do religion, which corresponds to my remarks on religion above.

Those within the Islamic discourse have a different answer. They emphasise the growing religious and political strength of Shi'a Islam and that this is affecting the Alawis as well. One source in particular underlines the impact the secretive nature of the Alawi religion has. Unless you are an initiate, you will not have access to the Alawi religion and doctrines apart from what you have learned at home. The solution, therefore, which one of my academic sources said he is doing, is to look for information elsewhere. In this case, it is easier to turn to the Sunni and Shi'a teachings than to stick only to what one has learned at home. Couple this with the sole teaching of the Sunni version of Islam in schools, and the result is the mixing of the Alawi religion with other sects in Islam.

This is not necessarily a bad thing, I have been told, since studying and finding one's own way to God is in the spirit of Alawism. However, several of my sources display concern for this situation also because they are afraid it will mean that Alawi culture will be influenced by the other sects. One girl I spoke to said that the close ties the Syrian regime has forged with Iran is frightening. The image of Hezbollah and Iran is having an impact on Alawis, she says, and with the free access Iranians have to come to Syria to spread their ideas of Islam, Alawis could become influenced by both their theological ideas, but more worryingly, their rigidity in matters of society and culture.

Alawi support for the regime

It is neither the scope of this thesis nor an aim in itself to be able to generalise about whether Alawis in general support the regime more or less than other groups in Syria. However, due to the simple conclusions sometimes drawn that because Alawis play an important role in the regime this means that Alawis in general support it, I would like to diversify this picture somewhat.

Although talking about the regime, and especially the ruling cabinet, is something most Syrians are extremely wary about, I have built up a picture from a variety of reactions, guarded comments and a few private conversations. However, after having read this chapter, there will be no surprises in the ideas outlined here. As for the support of the regime, my sources have opinions ranging from complete support and confidence to complete disgust for it. Of the former group, it consists mostly of people who are both very political and who support the Ba'th Party and its ideology of Arab nationalism. It is hard to gauge this group,

though, since praising the regime is what Syrians do by default when speaking with people they do not know well and trust. The use of posters and pictures of the president and his family in shops, taxis, and any other public space in Syria attests to this. Even my most critical sources have ‘proof’ of their support of the regime on their walls, a strategy Wedeen (1999) describes as deflecting unwanted attention since *not* having it is more unusual than the other way round. The most critical group consists of the least political people who just want change to the status quo, no matter the consequences. They are also the most self-critical ones and place least importance on an active Alawi identity and solidarity.

Yet, most of my sources fall into a middle category where they would either want extensive reforms to the current regime or a new regime completely – but *in an ideal world*. The earlier explanation of how my sources see the ‘Alawiness’ of the regime reflects how the majority of them see the situation. Many of them are extremely sceptical of the regime and its intentions, viewing its policies as unsustainable in the long run. Moreover, they say they want democratic reforms and an end to the nepotism and patronage that is choking the country.

However, they do not see any alternatives to the present regime in today’s Syria and are therefore its silent supporters. These silent supporters of the regime seem to base their passive support on their anxiety of what a new political situation could bring. This is largely because they fear that the Sunni extremists will play a powerful role. As noted, the Muslim Brotherhood plays a central role in the opposition abroad and the signals from this opposition regarding the role of the Alawis in a new Syria are mixed. For those who have clarified their ideas, such as Farid al-Ghadry, they have been about the expulsion of the Alawis from government positions rather than ideas for a peaceful normalisation of the sectarian balance.

The result, therefore, is a situation where many Alawis prefer a dysfunctional regime that protects their rights as Syrians, rather than something unknown. It would be preferable to have a new and more democratic regime that could reform the economy. But at present, a new regime might just as well lead to the persecution and expulsion of the Alawis from the cities of Syria.

In conclusion

Inquiring about Alawi solidarity to a man I spoke to in Tartous in the summer of 2006, he replied that Alawi identity is not very strong and that Alawi solidarity is only activated in times of threat to the community. Yet, the stories from most of my sources indicate that danger is all around. True, the threat is hypothetical and not something they have to deal with in practice, but it is real in that the consequences were felt only 25 years ago during the terror

of the Muslim Brotherhood. Despite the issue's banned character, it still endures in the forefront of people's minds and as a living and contemporary example of their historical narrative. Its strength not only derives from its proximity in time, but also from its impact on the private sphere because friends and relatives were killed. The narrative follows that of their historical experience with its focus on persecution and massacres and is characterised by its brutality, cowardice and terrorist tactics.

In the political conflicts of Syria, Alawis feel they are hated by 'The Other' because of the mistakes of the regime. It is a myth, they say, that we gain in any way from a shared religious background. Instead, the nepotism so visible is about personal relations with powerful families, both Sunni, Christian and Alawi, and not sect. Some, therefore, present their shared background as a curse rather than a blessing: 'If you build a city, few people will hear about it. If you destroy a city, however, everybody will hear about it.' This was how one of my sources described the situation of the Alawis in Syria. Whereas many Alawis helped build the country after independence and even opposed the regimes of Hafiz al-Asad and Bashar al-Asad, the few disgraceful ones contaminate their whole reputation.

The Official Discourse of the regime seems to have negated itself in the representation of my Alawi sources. By not living up to its norms of non-preferential treatment of certain sects, the leeway given to the Sunnis to portray their version of Islam as the only legitimate one in the school curriculum and the suppression of Alawi religious organisations, it negates itself. Instead of providing security for the Alawis in a future Syria, the impression is that even though there is progress on some fronts, ignorance of Alawis is still thriving. This feeling of being misunderstood is intensified by a lack of good representatives. Their only public representatives, the Alawis of the regime, only represent themselves and not the Alawi community. To add to this, the public sphere is closed for the raising of sectarian issues, and any mentioning of differences coinciding with sectarian differences is taboo. There is a clear sense of frustration among my Alawi sources, therefore, of not being able to state their own case for the rest of the Syrians to hear. It should be mentioned, though, that this view is a minority view in that most of the sources of this thesis have declined to speak about political issues. Whether this silence means a support for the regime and its policies or a fear of being critical is impossible to know.

Briefly, on the political future, my sources are hopeful that things will work out for the best and that their fears of the future will be unfounded. But to quote the girl mentioned earlier as anticipating new massacres: 'If worst comes to worst, we are ready to defend ourselves and what we believe in.'

8

CONCLUSIONS

A first-time visitor to Syria will experience Syria as a tolerant society where the sects live side by side without noticeable friction. This is also the case in practice, but people's experiences are more multi-faceted once they go beyond the Official Discourse they instinctively draw on when speaking about sectarian issues. This thesis has divided Alawi identity according to how they speak of their history and beliefs, their society, and the political situation in Syria. When we see all these issues together, there are certain over-arching matters that materialise in the Alawis' perception of their world.

The Sunni hegemony

What becomes clear the more my sources have spoken about themselves is how their identity is shaped by the Sunni hegemony. Although there is antagonism between the Alawi discourses and the Official Discourse, their discourses are constructed mainly in opposition to the Sunni discourse. Although this has only become clear to me through the final work on the analysis, the way the Alawis describe their group in religious terms indicates a situation of near-objectivity. As was explained in chapter three, objectivity is the enlargement of the hegemony into what is seen as 'natural'. The power of the discourse is not apparent and is only visible through the fact that the order of things is not questioned. This does not mean that there is no antagonism within the Sunni hegemony. As was shown in chapter four, there is a battle between different understandings in Sunni Islam, but only within the confines of the hegemony. Yet, its near-objectivity status becomes even more apparent when academics not part of the discourses play by its rules. When Pipes (1990) and others conclude that Alawis are 'definitely not Muslims' (see page 2), it is because they themselves write from within the hegemony and has been subjected to the power of definition it contains.

There is of course a second hegemony in the form of the Official Discourse, but I have chosen not to call this a hegemony because it does not appear to have power other than on the surface. It was installed with the regime of Hafiz al-Asad through a hegemonic intervention caused by the overlap of Sunni and other discourses in Syria that restricted one another. By using the power at its disposal, the regime was able to force an overarching identity meant to supplant antagonistic sectarian identities. However, this discourse, and especially the

identities within it, do not seem to be widely respected and are contested within hidden transcripts of not only Alawis, but probably also the Sunnis. The strength of the Sunni hegemony is apparent in its influence on the Official Discourse in its denial of any Islamic diversity in Syria and the presentation of Sunni Islam as the only legitimate interpretation of Islam.

This in itself undermines the Official Discourse and gives it less legitimacy. This is because the power it accedes to the hegemony means that it rejects the minorities that it claims to include. From the Alawis' point of view, the Official Discourse negates itself when it claims that Alawis are part of Islam, but at the same time portrays Islam as nothing but Sunni Islam. The further claim that Alawis are accepted by Syria's non-Alawi Muslims, further intensifies this when most Alawis seem to believe that the opposite is the case, at least among powerful segments of Sunni society. This is topped by a denial of a separate Alawi tradition in Syria even by its own members in power.

The creation of the Sunni hegemony goes back to the division between Sunni and Shi'a Islam in the first century of the religion. The hegemony, of course, has never been static, but in Alawi eyes it has controlled Syria almost continuously since that time. In this way, all Islamic history becomes political and thus contested. The quote at the beginning of this thesis seems innocent enough on its own. However, when I enquired about it to one of my sources, she pointed out that it was meant to cement Sunni power in Syria when the caliph Mu'awiyah took over as head of the Islamic community following Ali's assassination. They interpreted Islam to fit their own political goals of war and conquest instead of what the Alawis see as the true, peaceful message of the religion. The quote, therefore, refers to the 'truth' of Islam as propounded by the Damascus-based Umayyad dynasty, which meant that the great conspiracy against Islam, in the form of Sunni Islam, was victorious and hijacked history. This conspiracy has been maintained by all later Sunni empires, including the Ottoman Empire and its policy towards Shi'as and Alawis. Having the power of definition, Sunni Islam's terms of itself and others are those that all Muslims and non-Muslims alike use, hence the name of 'Those that follow the Tradition' kept for themselves and the labelling of the minorities as deviating from this.

Yet, the existence of the Sunni hegemony does not mean that Alawis are, by definition, rejected from Islam. Instead, it means that the hegemony constructs what is acceptable Islam and what is not. As long as Alawis adhere to the rules that are deemed to make a Muslim, they can define themselves as such.

The Islamic Discourse and the Critical Discourse

In the face of the hegemony, therefore, Alawis have the option either to identify with its subject positions or to oppose them. Even though there are surely Alawis who choose *identification* in the interpellation of the Muslim identity, this is not the case among the Alawis I have spoken to. They oppose the hegemony, yet within the boundaries of the hegemony. This is *anti-identification* and means that they do not reject the hegemony as such, but instead try to improve their standing within the hegemony. This mode of resistance is very typical of the Islamic Discourse, which claims that there is no conflict between the message of Islam, as expressed through the Qur'an, and Alawi beliefs. By stressing the Qur'an's role in Islam, they use the main tenet in Sunni Islam to undermine the logic of the more extreme elements in that community, which place great importance on later Islamic scholars. By criticising these later additions, which they claim have become more holy than the Qur'an itself, they place themselves squarely within the heart of the Islamic tradition's belief in peace, tolerance, and God as the only judge. Sunni Islam thus becomes a political project for the domination and suppression of all those who question their right to lead all Muslims.

The *anti-identification* is also apparent in the Critical Discourse, which also fights the hegemony within its boundaries. However, there are also elements of *disidentification* in parts of this discourse in its rejection of acceptable Islam as a whole. As mentioned, this view is quite marginal among my sources, but there are those who place themselves outside the hegemony. They do not even try to make their views more acceptable in an Islamic perspective, essentially saying that they have the right to be both Muslims and Alawis regardless of what the Sunnis preach. They are more eager to define their sect on their own terms and draw on discourses other than the Islamic ones. This is why they willingly bring up pre-Islamic influences of Greek philosophy and do not see this as conflicting with calling themselves Muslim at the same time. This view finds the Islamic label an obstruction to their views because of what the hegemony defines as Islam. One of my sources therefore admits to wishing that the Alawis did not call themselves Muslims, which is the case with the Druze community in Israel (Landis 2003). Had this been the case, they would definitely have more freedom of definition, but at the same time been second-rate citizens in an Islamic Syria.

The two discourses exist as hidden transcripts out of view from the dominant. Being threats to social stability, there is no arena for a discursive battle to take place and they are constructed in an oppositional manner only among Alawis. Concealment is therefore central to the Alawi hidden transcripts. Although the regime presents the most immediate threat in its ability to apply force behind its views, what is constructed as the biggest, yet more

hypothetical, threat is the Sunni community of Syria. The hegemony is so strict and the consequences for transgression so frightening that the Alawis guard themselves against possible futures. The role of the regime in this then becomes a defender of the Sunni hegemony in its institutionalisation of its dominance. This role increases the possible later danger because there is no room for open debate. A secular policy on the part of the regime would open the field to parts of the hidden transcript, at least the parts deemed most acceptable to the hegemony.

From discourse to identity

What do these discourses mean for Alawi identity? Discourses construct identities and identities are, as such, products of the discourses' social construction of reality. When Alawi discourses are constructed as counter-discourses to the Sunni hegemony, this means that Alawi identity is constructed in the same way. What materialises from this are the two discourses presented above. However, on the level of collective identity, it is constructed in practice as a representation of 'Us' and 'Them' where the Sunnis nearly always constitute the group they define themselves in relation to. They are the Alawis' *constitutive outside* and represent everything the Alawis are not. This constitutive outside is more than just non-Alawi; it is instead *anti-Alawi*. This defines the antagonism that is so apparent because it represents the blockage of identities. Through its existence, Sunni identity obstructs Alawi identity and hinders its closure. This, of course, works the same way for Sunni identity, where Alawis and other competing Islamic identities are anti-Sunni and block Sunni identity. The intervention of the Official Discourse was the reaction to this antagonism, but it was only successful on the surface. Now, the construction of Alawi identity takes place away from public view and in the form of hidden transcripts.

What is special about Alawi identity, though, is the level of threat it feels from 'Them'. Not only are the Sunnis intolerant and socially conservative, they also hate 'Us'. This hatred is proven through the historical narrative, which centres on the traumatic experiences of persecution and massacres throughout centuries of Sunni rule. Its continued potency was proven in the uprising of the Muslim Brotherhood and its use of rabid anti-Alawi and sectarian propaganda. Now that political Islam is again gaining strength all over the Arab world, including inside Syria manifest in the regular shoot-outs between militants and the armed forces, this only strengthens the fear and the resistance it creates.

Fear thus guides Alawi identity to the extent that the Alawis have gone underground both in the concealment of their beliefs and even as a community. Historically, it has even led to

the involuntary assimilation of Alawis into Sunni communities because they have concealed their identity even from their own children. Yet, they now find themselves in the ironic position of supposedly being in power since key figures, including the president, are Alawis. This, however, only adds to the defensiveness Alawis feel because the Sunnis have gained yet another card, this time political, in their perceived hatred against them. A lot of the construction of Alawi identity consequently deals with refuting all the myths they believe other Syrians have of them. These mostly deal with how much the Alawis have enriched themselves as a sect because of their link to the regime.

In conclusion

Much research done on the Middle East is criticised for being too conflict oriented. The tone in this thesis is indeed one of conflict. This does not mean that the Alawi-Sunni relationship is necessarily only one of conflict. Alawi identity is not strong in the sense that it organises people's everyday experiences or makes them act as a group. However, it is a fallback identity meaning that when people feel threatened, it becomes very important. On the surface, there is no conflict. Yet, the way Alawi identity is constructed shows that there is a deep-seated scepticism towards the Sunnis and their intentions in a different social order in the future.

This is why some Alawis argue that they should open up completely and reveal everything about Alawi beliefs, come what may. This would at least set the stage for an open sectarian debate before it is too late and the myths about them decide the Sunnis' reaction. This is of increasing importance now that the chasm between Sunni and Shi'a Islam is growing wider and more violent with the sectarian civil war in Iraq and its repercussions in other parts of the Middle East. This does not mean that Syria will be faced with similar problems, but should push come to shove, sectarian identities will be strong forces for political mobilisation, not to mention who is perceived as the enemy.

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