

# Ethnic and Other Divides: The “Other” and Oral Sectarian Culture in Syria

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**This article by Ahmed Khalil forms part of a special series focused on Oral Culture and Identity in Syria. It is the outcome of an ongoing partnership between SyriaUntold and openDemocracy’s North Africa West Asia [1] in a bid to untangle the roots of sectarian, ethnic and other divides in Syria.**

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Up until March 2011, when popular protests against the Syrian regime erupted, public and forthright discourses about sectarian beliefs or sectarian representations of the “Other” were simply taboo. This prohibition was imposed not only by the pan-Arab nationalist regime ruling Syria but also by Syrian society and social conventions between different sects. The concept of coexistence rather than citizenship governed relations between the sects of Syria. Citizenship provides a framework for political, legal and human rights. It is the outcome of human progress, upheld by international law as well as the constitutions of multiple nations.

To speak frankly and put what I am describing into a realistic context, let me give a few examples of the narratives commonly used by the Alawite community in reference to other sects. These narratives represent a largely imaginary perception of the “Other.” They fan a sectarian fear that originated in some of the historical experiences of the community in Syria and the broader region – particularly the Ottoman occupation of Syria and Lebanon, and its legacy of backwardness, sectarianism and displacement.

## The Alawite perspective on other sects

I was born and raised in a town in the countryside of central Hama, a governorate characterized by sectarian and ethnic diversity. I lived there until secondary school. Despite a general state of peace and coexistence between the communal components of the governorate and the absence of wars or major incidents between its sects, each of the communal components harbored fears from the “Other,” a fear reinforced by dominant sectarian beliefs.

When I got engaged to an Ismaili girl from Salamiya, most of my relatives expressed revulsion and tried to thwart my engagement in every way possible. Only my father, my brother, and my sister accepted to go with me to seek her hand, and only reluctantly so. As soon as we finished reading our Fatihah they raced home. "If your brother ever marries that Sam'ouli girl consider yourself divorced," threatened my sister's husband using a derogatory term for members of her religious community. News of my engagement became the talk of the town, and many deemed it to be only natural coming from a person like me: a former detainee, practically an outsider and even a renegade.

About two months ago, a relative of mine, a soldier currently serving in Daraa, married a widow from Hauran with three children. He was severely condemned and ostracized, first because his wife is a Sunni and second because she is a widow, i.e. not a virgin and older than him. More importantly, their marriage occurred during a fierce war for which the Alawites blame the Hauranis and the governorate of Daraa. Her people were the spearhead of the "universal conspiracy" against Syria.

In another example that highlights the thorny relationship between various sects in Syria, one of my relatives, who is a cleric, likes to boast to his neighbors and relatives that no Sunni has ever entered his home in his lifetime. This inspires respect from his fellow townsmen—or at least most of them.

The most popular attitude towards intermarriage is reflected in the proverb: "He who marries from outside his sect dies of a sickness that is not his." This view holds especially true for the Alawite community. Whenever a casual marital disagreement becomes public knowledge, as it can happen in any family, people blame the argument on an abnormal marriage from outside the sect.

In order to belittle and demean the Ismaili sect, members of this community are often called Sam'oulis Sam'ouliyin. Conversely, other sects call the Alawites the Nusayriya or Nusayriyin, which the Alawites hate and associate with intentions to lessen their value.

Another saying popular in our village goes, "Eat at a Salmouni's [Ismaili] and sleep over at a Christian's." Here, Alawites consider that Christians do not care about being clean and do not properly "purify" themselves with water after coming out of the restroom. However, Christians are faithful and trustworthy, as opposed to Ismailis who cannot be trusted as far as to sleep in their houses.

On the other hand, Ismailis have a proverb which says: "The enemy of your grandfather cannot be your friend." In other words, the Alawites hate the Ismailis and hold a grudge against them. The saying refers back to the 1920s battles that took place in the Syrian coast (now Tartus governorate) between Sheikh Saleh al-Ali and his forces (Alawites) and the Ismaili community.

Furthermore, there are clearly delineated norms with regards to sects and food. For instance, Alawites eat only the meat of male sheep, cows and goats. As such, the majority of Alawites would not go to Sunni or non-Alawite butchers lest the carcass be female or improperly slaughtered according to the Islamic criteria; fataayes as such meat is popularly called.

In the Syrian coast, there is a common belief that Christians become very ugly and wrinkled as they grow older, partly because they eat pork but also because they asked the Lord for freshness and beauty for their youth.

The Alawites accuse the Murshidi sect (an offshoot of the Alawites since the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century under the leadership of Salman al-Murshid) that they have a special festivity of vice wherein married men and women indulge in promiscuous ceremony, with the lights off and everything getting messed up.

Alawites in our area are convinced that Bedouins are mean and deceitful, and one must always be wary of them. The area had been inhabited by Bedouins living in tents or goat-houses, working in sheep herding and caring for the herds of the village. The relationship between the villagers and the Bedouins is therefore characterized by an employer-employee dynamic, that is, the owner of the herd on the one hand and the Bedouin working for him on the other.

## **A sectarian state at its core**

Of course, the Syrian regime, especially over the last fifty years, has been manipulating sectarian tensions and indirectly perpetuating such sectarian concepts in order for inter-sectarian relations to remain superficial and fraught with fears, cautions and profound mistrust. For instance, I studied in a large school that received students from all the neighboring villages and different sects. Our principal (a member of the ruling Baath party) would come to our class at the beginning of every year, survey the students and their backgrounds, and identify the sect and political orientation of each one of us.

As we began to meet new colleagues and be socially more conscious, and with visits and close acquaintance with friends from all sects, the sectarian system entrenched in our heads since our childhood began to break down. In contrast with anecdotes and narratives that filled up our reservoir of knowledge and shaped our perceptions of "Others," leftist and Marxist beliefs that we held in our early adolescence came as antidotes to old consciousness.

As a result of that socialization and the conversations we had together, we were categorized by the Baathist principal as enemies of the Baath. At a later stage, when we were detained, we discovered that our friendships and conversations were indeed reported to security services. The authorities and their security apparatus were keen on preserving the system behind traditional sectarian relations, and were concerned about any signs of new consciousness or different social practices from what they want to promote among their subjects. All of this was, of course, covered up by fake propaganda about "national unity," "nationalism" and "social cohesion," while any social research or scientific approaches to sects in Syria was most severely prohibited, including any attempts to discuss sectarian relations in the media, cultural forums or anywhere public sphere. As such, mutual ignorance and fears as well as illusions about the Others were only reinforced.

In the army, compulsory military service makes it inevitable that people from different sects and tribes blend into each other. As a former detainee, I did not serve in the army, but rather "served" seven years in jail. My relatives and I nevertheless know what the army is made of, especially the social relations that exist among its members. One cannot discuss sects in the army, since the security control over the army is too strict and scary. Yet despite the apparent camaraderie between recruits, an undeclared sectarian discrimination does exist with regards to privileges, allocation of posts and leaves of absence.

## **Mixed marriages and honor**

Going back to my engagement, a funny observation is worth mentioning here. When a young man completed his studies in the West, Russia or Europe in general, and marries a Western woman, people would flock to his house to meet the new lady. Such marriage may even be a source of pride for the man's family! Nevertheless, if he marries a woman from his own neighbourhood but not from a different sect, it would be a bombshell of doom and gloom! Some attribute this tolerating of marrying to foreign women to the so-called "Khawaja [foreigner or aristocrat] complex."

Of course, such reaction is not equal in all sects. For instance, the toughest reactions are known to exist among the Druze, which could go as far as murdering, especially Druze women marrying from outside their sect. In other sects, such as the Alawites and the Christians, disapproval does not exceed boycott. In the case of the Sunnis, intermarriage is relatively more accepted, and poses no troubles in the case of the Ismailis.

Likewise, marriage between an Alawite man and a Shiite woman raises no issues. In spite of ideological differences between the two sects, there exist some intersections that make them “allied” or mutually understanding of each other to a large extent, especially their reverence for Imam Ali bin Abi Talib, the fourth Caliph.

For women, marrying a man from another sect is often more difficult, and its punishment is sometimes murder.

However, intermarriage among influential, wealthy or well-known families, especially those occupying high echelons of power, no threatens will be posed. For example, the filmmaker and artist Nayla Atrash was married to the late actor Khaled Taja. Despite the Atrash being a Druze and Taja a Sunni Damascene, their family did not object to their marriage. Perhaps it is more accurate to say that nobody dared defame this marriage. The same applied to the marriage of Jamal Khaddam, the son of Abdul Halim Khaddam (Sunnis) from Hanan Khairbek (Alawite). Among the most famous incidents of this sort are, among others, the President and the Sunni First Lady, as well as his brother Maher and his Sunni wife.

Therefore, “honor crimes” are rather committed by poor people against other poor people. Power could not care less about sects and religions; it is more into keeping society fragmented and disintegrated.

What significantly perpetuates this sectarian state of affairs is Syrian legislation. For instance, “honor” criminals murder are penalized with a maximum of seven years imprisonment, and it was capped at two years before 2011. Furthermore, minors are encouraged to commit such crimes because their penalty would not exceed a few months in prison.

### **Keeping secrets and reincarnation**

One of the most striking issues with regards to the image of the sectarian Other has to do with death. It is known that Alawites believe in reincarnation, i.e. the concept that a person’s soul separates from their physical body the moment he dies and assumes another creature, which is necessarily another man or woman. If the deceased person was good, his soul will necessarily enter into the another person’s body. Many stories are told among the Alawites about people who “surpassed their generations,” that is, had been other persons belonging to certain other families.

As one of our young neighbors began to grow up into a woman, the story of her so-called previous life began to circulate in the village. She had been an Israeli bomber pilot whose aircraft was shot down during the October war of 1973. She died and was reborn in our village. This return to life in an Alawite family meant that the soul of that Jewish girl was “pure.” Alawites believe that the majority of the Sunni souls are impure, so when they assume new bodies they often become animals or perhaps disabled people. Moreover, if an Alawite person’s soul is evil it will be reincarnated as an animal (snake, dog, donkey, etc.)

Alawite stories and beliefs go even further. They also hold views on the color of people. An albino has a cursed soul, and must have committed many sins in his past “generations.” A very brown

person is often considered “black-skinned,” which is one example of racist ideas contained in these beliefs. For example, most Alawites are convinced that all Palestinians are dark-skinned, so my family members could not believe that some of my friends were Palestinians, just because their skin was too white or yellowish-brown. Only one Palestinian friend was recognized because of his dark skin color.

The Alawite faith is kept secret from outsiders and non-initiated Alawites. If it happens that an Alawite leaks it to a non-Alawite, God will transform him into an animal, make him blind or paralyzed. This contributes to a general fear of any “leaks” about the Alawite religion. Even revealing the religious belief to women, including Alawite women, makes it likely that the revealer will be handicapped or somehow punished by God. This is often explained by the conviction that women are unworthy of carrying the Secret, and are fundamentally short of reason and faith.

*“Alawites also believe that Sunnis have a secret religion that is different from the one taught in schools and mosques. Alawites cannot be persuaded otherwise. They believe that Sunnis have a secret code that conceals their real beliefs vis-à-vis other sects, beliefs which make them inclined to hate non-Sunnis and even willing to kill them when they get the chance.”*

Alawites almost all agree that the Sunnis hate Imam Ali. It is difficult to convince an Alawite that, for the Sunnis, Ali is the fourth Caliph, the Prophet’s cousin and one of the first believers in the Muhammadian Message, and that he is held in no lower regards than the rest of the Caliphs Abu Bakr, Omar and Othman... These three caliphs, as is widely known, are condemned by the Alawites who believe they conspired against Ali after the Prophet’s death and even wanted him dead.

Before the Syrian uprising that evolved into a civil war, relationships between Syrian sects and communities were, in my opinion, governed by *taqiyya* [dissimulation] or even hypocrisy. This mirrored the relationship between the political regime and the population, as fearing tyranny often produces *taqiyya* politics: appearing differently from what lies in the inmost parts of people.

Syrian people from different sects mix at work, in governmental jobs, in private companies, in agricultural fields, in commercial establishments and shop. They drink tea and sometimes eat together... but this relationship remains superficial, limited to the necessities of coexistence in one geography under one rule. But once intermarriage is involved, that seemingly solid relationship soon disintegrates and even turns ugly and hostile. Syrian laws, especially Personal Status Law, reinforce this ambiguous relationship between Syrian sects. Whoever wishes to marry any Muslim woman (Sunni, Alawite, Ismaili...) has to publicly espouse Islam in the Sharia court.

When a brother kills his sister because she married an outsider, not only does the Syrian Penal Code label the killing as an “honor crime,” but it also mitigates the sentence substantially. This increases sectarianism and maintaining pre-modern state concept. These can, as soon as circumstance are favorable, lead to severe hostility and war. Tyrannical regimes generally keep this latent hostility for use when need be, especially when people dare to revolt against their rulers and aspire to justice and freedom.

### **Sectarian concepts as a source of conflict**

Sectarian beliefs and narratives, which are conveyed behind closed doors, act as a psychological and emotional reservoir absorbed by young children. Conceivably, this reservoir controls their behavior and thoughts as they grow up, making them view the sectarian Other through the ideological perspectives into which they were indoctrinated during the first ten years of their lives. This applies to all sects in Syria.

Sectarian doctrines flourish spectacularly during times of war, which creates the most appropriate climates for shedding that mask of love and peace that people were forced to put on. War reveals the ideas that define and describe the Other, and become the guiding principles to violence, murder and death.

“The sectarian ‘Other’ is the one enemy wishing to kill me and rape my wife, so I must “have him for lunch before he has me for dinner.” This has been the case since early 2011, when the ideological basis for the Syrian civil strife was ripe after decades of encouragement.

Hints of these divides were already on display in 2004 which witnessed moments of notable sectarian unrest, including the Kurdish uprising in Qamishli and riots in Masyaf. In March, Qamishli witnessed hostilities between Arab visitors from Deir Ez-Zor and local Kurds after a football match. In Masyaf a disagreement between two bus drivers at the bus terminal, one Ismaili and the other Alawite, escalated. Had the disagreement been between two people from the same community, the problem would have been merely a quarrel, but since sects were involved, the dispute in the diverse city evolved into a prolonged state of hostility, conflict and mutual avoidance between Alawites and Ismailis.

*“One of the most significant “weapons” of the massively destructive and corroding war in Syria is the intercommunal doctrines and oral narratives circulated by the members of each sect with regards to other sects.”*

Most of these doctrines narratives have been outright fabrications, handed down through generations and nurtured through political manipulations by tyrannical authorities, ultimately becoming facts that justify the brutality we witness nowadays in the form of massacres and mutilations.

This sectarian factor that emerged during the years of the Syrian war had been enshrined under the two Assads and exploited in political conflicts, most notably during the conflict between the Muslim Brotherhood (in 1979 and 1985). I believe that the exploitation of the sectarian factor by the regime has been a major reason for the survival of the Assad dynasty throughout this period. The role of sectarian fanaticism was evident during the now seven-year-long civil war. Indeed, this factor was exploited by both warring sides to create the perception of a Sunni-Alawite conflict, which was encouraged by regional powers and the regime alike.

The question here is, how feasible is it to stamp out these oral representations of the Other from social relations in Syria?

Perhaps these narratives and oral cultures devoted to the hatred of the Other will only disappear under a secular democratic system, wherein various components of Syrian society open up to each other, and in-depth research is conducted publicly and candidly into the beliefs and doctrines, and is publicized both on the media and in the public sphere. Would we live to see this dream come true? Perhaps.

**Ahmed Khalil**

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**P.S.**

• SiryaUntold, 08 June 2018:

<http://syriauntold.com/2018/06/the-other-and-oral-sectarian-culture-in-syria/>

- Ahmed Khalil is a Syrian writer based in Germany. He was born in 1966, and graduated from the Faculty of Law in Damascus University. He has published three books: *Haunted with Her Loss* (collection of poems); *Death Square* (short stories); and *Theater Defeats the War* (a series of articles about Syrian theater during the war). He is a regular contributor to many Arabic newspapers and magazines.

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## Footnotes

[1] <https://www.opendemocracy.net/north-africa-west-asia>