

Gregor Voss: „*Alawīya oder Nusairīya?*“ — Schiitische Machtelite und sunnitische Opposition in der Syrischen Arabischen Republik. Untersuchung zu einer islamitisch-politischen Streitfrage. (Dissertation zur Erlangung der Würde des Doktors der Philosophie der Universität Hamburg, 1985). Hamburg 1987.

“Alawi or Nusairi” is a critical analysis of Alawi and anti-Alawi writings which examine the question of whether or not Alawis should be considered true Muslims, and—in the case of various anti-Alawi polemical writings—whether from a religious point of view it should be permitted for Sunni Muslims to go as far as to kill Alawis on the grounds of the allegation that they should be considered as “enemies of Islam”. Generally, the term Nusairi is used by those who want to imply that Alawis are non-Muslims, whereas “Alawi” (derived from the name of Ali ibn Abi Talib, son-in-law of the Prophet Muhammad) is preferred by those who are of the opinion that Alawis are to be considered Muslims (in this case Twelver Shi’ites). Given that Alawis have now dominated the Syrian political scene for almost 25 years, during which time they have more or less monopolized political power, the question of whether they are Muslims or not has gained particular relevance, as it has proved possible for opponents of the current Alawi dominated Ba’th regime in Syria to exploit this issue as a way of undermining the regime.

Voss notes that Sunni propagandists generally claim that the policies of the Alawi dominated Syrian Ba’th regime have in fact been determined by the sectarian background of its rulers. But whereas from the mid-1960s until the end of the 1970s, this alleged interaction between political behaviour and an Alawi sectarian background was often dwelt upon in Sunni polemical writings, this theme had gradually by the 1980s become so self-evident to its authors, that they started to concentrate more on formulating purely religious arguments, thereby reducing the discussion mainly to whether Alawis should be considered as Muslims or not (‘Alawiya or Nusairiya). Such anti-Alawi writings were intended not so much to stimulate a purely theological theoretical discussion as to prepare the ground for a religiously motivated large scale Sunni Muslim movement aiming at toppling the Alawi-dominated Ba’th regime by force, this being “legitimized” on the basis of the anti-Alawi radical Sunni thesis—derived from a Fatwa of the fourteenth century Hanbali jurist Ibn Taymiya—that it would be permissible to liquidate Alawis. In fact, Syrian Muslim Brotherhood Mujahidin had since 1976 been carrying out a campaign of indiscriminate killings against Alawis, whether Ba’thists or not, so as to provoke a large-scale sectarian confrontation. This confrontation finally reached a climax in February 1982 in Hama, when a Muslim Brotherhood insurrection was bloodily suppressed, with reportedly as many as 25,000 deaths.

The Syrian Ba’thist regime has hardly ever employed religious arguments in its official response to the anti-Alawi propaganda and polemical writings referred to above. There are two reasons for this: firstly, as the Ba’th considered itself as a secular Arab nationalist organisation, it generally refused to enter into a religious debate. Secondly, official reactions to anti-Alawi sectarian polemics and propaganda in similar “religiously inspired” language, would not only create the impression of confirming the allegations that the regime was dominated and

inspired by the Alawis, but, even worse, would most probably stimulate sectarian controversy and antagonism. Nevertheless, reprints of a number of earlier publications which were regarded as shedding a favourable light on Alawi history were occasionally allowed to be sold in Syrian bookshops. These included Muñir al-Šarif *al-Muslimūn, al-‘Alawīyūn. Manhum wa-ayna hum?*, Damascus 1946 and 1961, and Muḥammad Amin Ġhālīb al-Ṭawīl *Ta’rīkh al-‘Alawīyīn*, Beirut, 1966 and 1979, prefaced by the well known Alawi Shaykh ‘Abd al-Raḥmān al-Khayyir. These books did not of course elaborate on the anti-Alawi polemical writings published in the late 1970s and early 1980s.

In 1980 a Syrian Alawi lawyer from Lattakiya, Hashim ‘Uthman, published a book under the title *al-‘Alawīyūn bayna al-Uṣṭūra wa al-Ḥaqīqa* (The Alawis between legend and truth) (Beirut, 1980), which Voss describes as an “unofficial reaction” to the confessional attacks of the radical Sunni opposition (p. 62). Although Hashim ‘Uthman does not refer directly to the various anti-Alawi publications which appeared at the time, he does go into the arguments put forward by the Syrian opposition, and seeks to refute and disprove them. In fact, the major part of Voss’ study is built around the book of Hashim ‘Uthman, which is unique of its kind since no other similar pro-Alawi apologies have appeared. Voss carefully analyses ‘Uthman’s arguments, reviewing and comparing most of the Alawi and anti-Alawi publications ‘Uthman refers to.

Whereas Voss on the one hand detects many weaknesses in the anti-Alawi polemical writings, he also uncovers various inconsistencies in Hashim ‘Uthman’s book. Hashim ‘Uthman is shown on various occasions to use sources as they suit him, regardless of the fact that these same sources might elsewhere completely contradict his arguments. Voss also detects variations in opinion between Hashim ‘Uthman and the prominent Alawi religious leader Shaykh ‘Abd al-Raḥmān al-Khayyir on the origins of the Alawis and their history. But whereas Voss’ critical analysis of the various pro- and anti-Alawi publications provides us with a highly interesting survey of most of the published literature on the subject known to exist, it does not give us a definitive authoritative description of what Alawi religion really is. 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.

After reading the book, several questions remain as to the importance one should attach to the book of Hashim ‘Uthman, the more so as this plays such a pivotal role in Voss’ study that without it the scope of his dissertation would probably have been much more restricted. First, one wonders whether Hashim ‘Uthman’s book should really be considered as an “unofficial reaction” inspired by the Syrian regime. Or is it a personal reaction by an Alawi personality whose study was allowed to be published outside Syria (i.e. Beirut)? The fact that Hashim ‘Uthman’s book is allowed to be sold openly in Syrian bookshops would support Voss’ thesis that it can be considered as an “unofficial reaction”. Furthermore one would like to know the views of other Alawi personalities, both religious and secular, on Hashim ‘Uthman’s book, not in the least also because of the apparent inconsistencies and contradictions Voss has detected. How would they react to ‘Uthman’s theses, and what status would they ascribe to his work? To what extent are the relatively few available sources (particularly few from the

Alawi side) really representative of the discussion in Syria on the subject, as Voss maintains (p. 5)?

Notwithstanding such unanswered questions—and it must be admitted that it would be far from easy to get clearcut answers to them—Voss' work should be highly recommended to all those interested in the subject of sectarianism and the position of Alawis in Syria and Alawi religion in general. Voss has clearly rendered scholarship a service by helping to fill a gap in the existing research on this subject. In order to fill this gap completely more work remains to be done. Whether this task can be carried out satisfactorily will depend to a great extent, however, on the willingness of Alawi leaders and individuals, both clerical and lay, to provide the missing answers.

Finally, two observations on factual details. It should be noted that National Command in Ba' thist terminology is not *al-Qiyāda al-Waṭanīya* (pp. 11, 45) but *al-Qiyāda al-Qawmīya*. Furthermore Voss associates the name of the Syrian Alawi dominated group "Fursān al-Jabal al-Akhḍar" (The Knights of the Green Mountain) with the name of the Libyan mountains of Cyrenaica, thereby failing to notice that al-Jabal al-Akhḍar in this case should be of course the Jibāl al-'Alawīyīn (The Mountains of the Alawis), the name of which has been stripped of its sectarian component, as the name "Wādī al-Naṣārā" (The Valley of the Christians" close to Safita) was not so long ago changed into "al-Wādī al-Akhḍar" (The Green Valley).