Introduction to Muslim diversity:

Alawite & Alevi Traditions

The Australian Muslim Women's Centre for Human Rights

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The Australian Muslim Women's Centre for Human Rights

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Introduction to the guide

In 2013, the Australian Muslim Centre for Human Rights (AMWCHR) received funding to develop the leadership capacity of young people from Muslim minorities, to facilitate the capacity of Muslim minorities to engage with the Muslim majority community in Victoria and create an opportunity for dialogue between young people from different communities.

The project was developed in the context of the Syrian civil conflict and its increasing impact on the welfare of Australian Muslim youth. Following a small number of threats and minor incidents, the AMWCHR and community leaders formed a working group to address the rise in tensions and develop strategies for maintaining community goodwill and safety. From this working group, this project was developed.

This publication focuses only on the Alawite and the Alevi traditions because the conflict in Syria, and now in Iraq and Kurdish territories, has brought these communities to our attention in Australia. Most services in Australia, however, have very little understanding of these communities' traditions. This guide seeks to fill this gap by providing a very basic introduction to these groups.

'We have … decided to use the terms 'branch', 'group' or 'tradition' … by way of respecting the various communities we are about to explain.'

Language used

The issues of diversity, identity and different groups within one faith community all generate difficulties around the use of language. Groups which form around essential questions such as what does the message (religion) of God mean and how should that meaning be reflected in practice, generally strive to find and embody the ultimate truth to these two questions. Hence, they can feel diminished by simply being labelled as a sect or a school of thought. We have, therefore, decided to use the terms, 'branch', 'group' or 'tradition', as appropriate, by way of respecting the various communities we are about to explain.

Why a guide about Muslim diversity?

This publication is not a complete description of the diversity of the Muslim faith. As previously stated, this guide focuses only on Arabic Alawites and Turkish/Kurdish Alevis, with some information on Shiism because both traditions emerge from or have a great deal in common with the Shia branch of Islam.

Muslim diversity lies at the heart of the formation of Islam and yet, a great number of Muslims are not aware of that diversity or the nature of the differences between the different branches of Islam. In Australia, there is still less awareness of Muslim diversity and its impact on Muslim identity and migration to this country.

Muslims continue to be thought of as an homogeneous community, and the diversity that is recognised among Muslims relates only to differences in ethnicity, culture and language. But in fact, there are enormous and complex forms of diversity in how Muslims have come to understand Islam.

this guide is … designed to act as an antidote to the many myths and fabrications which exist today about minority Muslim communities that have left them vulnerable to vilification and violence.'

While Muslim diversity has been a source of great strength for Islam, it has also been a source of difference that has been manipulated and utilised to generate conflict; invariably, this conflict has been based on political rather than doctrinal or theological differences. Hence, what should be a source of dynamism and growth for the Muslim spirit has instead become a source of its vulnerability and struggle.

Despite Muslim migration to Australia dating back to the 1860s and the fact that today Muslims are migrating here from all over the world, the diversity among Muslim Australians has been largely invisible. We believe that highlighting this diversity not only allows us to avoid the sectarian tensions that are occurring overseas, but additionally, brings a greater public understanding of Australian Muslims as a set of rich and dynamic communities, complementing Australia's already impressive diversity. It also will assist us to enhance the inclusion of minority communities within the mainstream Muslim community.

Finally, this guide is also designed to act as an antidote to the many myths and fabrications which exist today about minority Muslim communities that have left them vulnerable to vilification and violence.

How to read this guide

This guide is about diversity. It focuses on differences within the Muslim community, most especially when those differences have become problematic or led to conflict. Hence, this is *not* an account of how Muslims generally relate to diversity in their midst. As previously stated, a great number of Muslims are not aware that this diversity exists, having grown up in Australia or in a country where Muslim minorities do not exist. Please note that this guide also does *not* focus on the Muslim diversity that is celebrated or integrated well into the Muslim community generally – even though this is by and large the situation in Muslim countries and Muslim civilisations historically. Rather, the guide's focus on difference and conflict is to assist us here in Australia to understand the diversity inherent in the broad Australian Muslim community and its link to the situation currently in the Middle East which has placed pressure on communities here.

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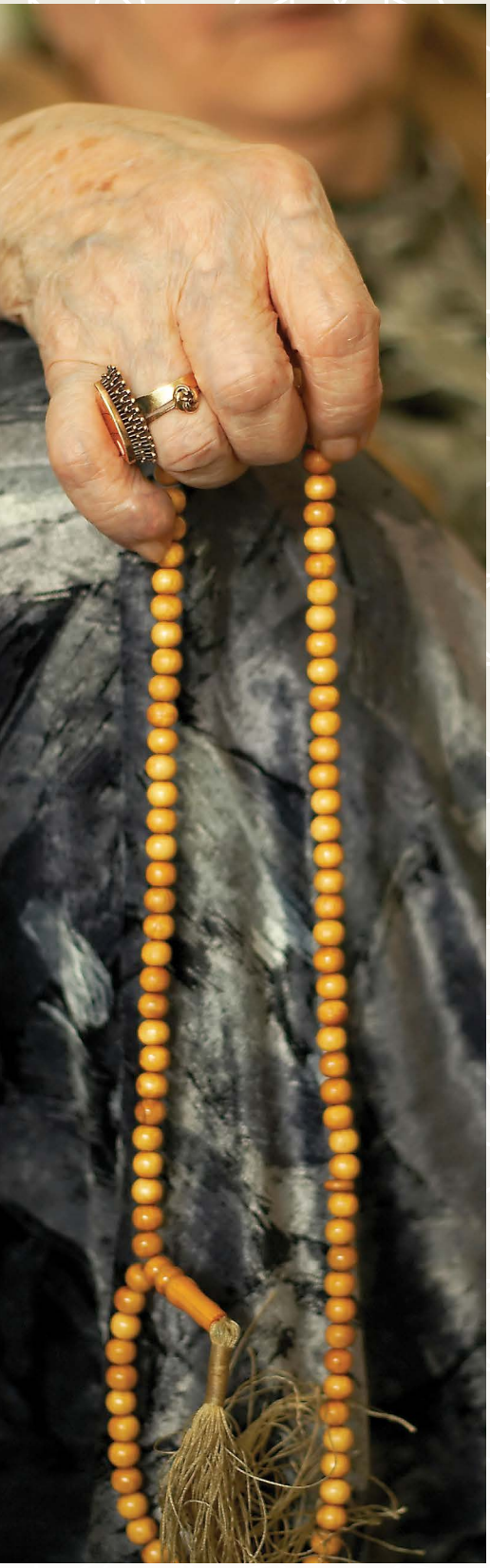
The guide seeks to represent enormously complex and historically-bound events and differences in communities in a limited space. This guide does not reflect all the diversity in Islam, nor does it provide a full account of the groups profiled. Further reading is recommended but we see this guide as a beginning.

It is enormously difficult to adequately reflect the nature of the differences, and at times, the depth of feeling which communities may have about practices they have developed for the purposes of worshipping God. It is also difficult to adequately reflect *why* subtle but very important shifts in focus or emphasis in some traditions in Islam have led to conflict. But in the worship of God, many people feel there is a lot at stake and one must get it right. Additionally, these shifts in focus or emphasis, for some, means an undermining of Islam's coherence because diversity ultimately leads to confusion for Muslims as to what one should be practising and how one interprets Islamic doctrine and belief. Some fear this can lead to fragmentation and perhaps even the collapse of Muslim identity and religion.

Finally, at some level this guide provides information in summary form and focuses on providing descriptions of minority communities. No information is provided on the *majority* Muslim community which is the Sunni Muslim community. There is already a wealth of information on what is often referred to as 'mainstream Muslims'. This guide assumes basic awareness of Islam and Muslims in Australia.

For the sake of brevity, the guide generally refers to Sunni Muslims as a group without detailing their diversity. Sunni Muslims are also a diverse group, even though they constitute one branch of Islam. In addition to cultural, linguistic and ethnic differences, there is also diversity in levels of adherence, schools of thought and forms of emphasis on practice – either towards spiritualism, such as Sufism, or through a focus on the essentials of Islam, such as Wahabism and Salafism, amongst others.

A note on diversity in the Middle East



People often assume that the Middle East is comprised solely of Arabs, and that the three Abrahamic faiths are the only religions to be found in the region. But in fact, there are many more ethnicities and religions in the Middle East: some of these include Turkics, Kurds, Armenians, Azeris, Assyrians, Turkmens, Persians and different Bedouin communities whose origins reside in African and Asiatic countries. Similarly, Zoroastrian, Bahá'í and Yazidis are some of the religions to be found in the Middle East today, in addition to Judaism, Christianity and Islam (in their many branches and traditions).

The Middle East's diversity comes from the many religions and traditions that existed prior to the arrival of the three monotheistic religions. Some of these religions have continued, such as Zoroastrianism, while others, such as paganism – in the Middle East at least – have disappeared. These previous traditions, however, have continued to have an impact on the cultures and practices of Middle Easterners even since the development of the three monotheistic faiths.

Equally, as these three monotheistic faiths developed, they influenced and affected one another. This is particularly the case with the development of smaller faith communities that synergised Judaic, Christian and Islamic beliefs.

The final source of diversity comes from the different invading and imperial forces that occupied the Middle East; the Romans, Mongols and the Crusaders all had a significant effect on the cultures and practices of Middle Easterners, not only because of their invasion and its consequences but also because many of those forces settled there and eventually became part of the cultural fabric. Different powers in the Middle East also took hold of the region and forcibly occupied territories and changed local cultures and traditions.

Diversity in the origins and development of Islam

Islam sees itself as the continuation of the message that was originally given to the Jews, continued on to the Christians and was finally received by the Muslims. This is why Muslims consider the Abrahamic faiths to be 'people of the book'. Islam's heritage, then, is a significant one, with complex forms of diversity inherent in how 'the message' was understood both by Jews and Christians, before the message continued to Islam.

Upon the establishment of Islam and during its first two centuries, Muslims developed an empire and Islam spread largely through the conquest of territory. The gradual absorption of diverse cultures,

religions and traditions produced an explosion of ideas and scholarship within Islam. This diversity contributed significantly to the emergence and further development of a range of disciplines such as law, theology, literature and philosophy. It also produced significant differences among Muslims themselves in their understanding of Islam. At the time, while some Muslims sought to change and further develop Islamic thought and practice, other Muslims spent considerable effort trying to regulate and systematise Islam in an effort to protect it from fragmentation. This effort was only partially successful, with significant diversity remaining in the form of branches, traditions and schools of thought. Additionally, at the personal level, there is further divergence in the types of adherence and interpretive practices of individuals that is not directly linked to schools of thought but rather reflective of personal and spiritual approaches to Islam.

Islamic branches: Origins of diversity

Muslim diversity is almost as old as Islam itself.

Muslim diversity is almost as old as Islam itself. The major source of intra-faith diversity in Islam is that between the Sunnis and Shias. Sunnis form about 80% of the global Muslim population and Shias (or Shiites) most of the remaining 20%. It is our view that these are conservative figures, and that the Shia communities constitute a greater proportion of the Muslim community than is currently recognised, however there is no data on which any estimate can be tested.

Historically, the Sunnis are often referred to as mainstream Muslims and the Shias are often seen as evolving from the mainstream.

However, it would be more correct to say that both groups formed due to a difference in belief as to who was the rightful successor to the Prophet Muhammad (whose name will be followed by the initials PBUH, standing for 'Peace Be Upon Him', a common blessing given to him by Muslims).

The Sunni community believes that the Prophet (PBUH) did not leave instruction as to who should succeed him after his death, and that upon the Prophet's (PBUH) death key members of his inner circle were elected by the Muslim community to act as leaders/Caliphs in a manner that was ordinary and appropriate. The Shias (see The Shias below for more detail) believe that Muhammad's (PBUH) cousin Ali, should have become Caliph as this was the wish of the Prophet (PBUH), and that Imam Ali, known as a philosopher-warrior, was best suited to take up the leadership role. Upon the Prophet's (PBUH) death, however, Abu Bakr (a respected elder), Umar (a mediator) and Uthman (a member of a prominent clan), were elected to the leadership. Imam Ali became the last of the four Caliphs and the last member of the Prophet's inner circle to lead the Muslim community.

Further changes and growth

Over time, more sub-groups have developed within these two overarching branches, and the original split between Muslims has widened to encompass social, political and theological differences. However, the main underlying beliefs and principles of Islam remain the same in both the Sunni and Shia streams.

The diversity that exists in Islam today extends not only to theological differences but also to cultural ones.

It is important to note that some minority Islamic communities have faced substantial persecution from mainstream Islam in Muslim countries. As a result, some groups do not always identify themselves with mainstream Muslims or Islam. Similarly, some mainstream Muslims do not accept some of these groups as Muslim. In Pakistan, for example, the government has declared that the Ahmedis – who believe that their founder, Mirza Ghulam Ahmed, was a prophet after the death of Muhammad (PBUH) – are non-Muslims, despite the fact that the Ahmedis themselves identify as Muslims.

The story of Muslim diversity is an intensely complex one which has sometimes led to conflict and violence. On the one hand, there is the desire and push to homogenise Islam and bring consistency and consensus among all Muslims. On the other hand, there are real differences in how Islam is interpreted and practised. This dilemma appears endemic to most religions and can be seen in Christianity for instance, following the split between Catholics and Protestants.

It is difficult to do justice to the breadth of differences within Islam and the individual practices of different branches. The diversity that exists in Islam today extends not only to theological differences but also to cultural ones. For example, the two communities featured in this guide – the Alevis (a sect within Islam) of Turkey and the Alawites of Lebanon and Syria – until recently, were considered to be the same group. However, recent studies suggest that they are actually very different – both historically and theologically.

The majority of Muslims in Australia are Sunni. But there are also significant populations belonging to the Shia, Alawi, Alevi, Ismaili, Druze, Bohra and Ahmedi communities.

The Shias

The death of the Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) created a profound emptiness and perhaps sense of bewilderment among the Muslim community at the time. The Prophet (PBUH) was a very engaged and accessible leader who was always available to community members for questions and consultation. He is also reported to have been intensely generous, kind and having possessed a wonderful sense of humour. He moved among the community and participated in community events, even assisting in chores and community duties which people believed were beneath a leader. His loss meant not only the discontinuation of revelation, but also of a figure whose presence held an entire community together and one around whom the entire community revolved. The reverence for the Prophet (PBUH) stemmed not only from the fact that he was a Prophet (PBUH) of God, but also from who he was as a person. His character was considered to be a crucial reason for the respect Muslims held for him. Hence, the question of his successor was more than about who had the skill to lead; it was also about the character of the leader.

The Shias are often considered as differing from the Sunni because their choice of Imam Ali as the first Caliph was based on Imam Ali being the Prophet Muhammad's (PBUH) first cousin and closest living male relative, as well as being his son-in-law (married to his daughter, Fatima) – and therefore the head of the Ahl-e-Bayt, or People of the House (of the Prophet (PBUH)). This, however, greatly oversimplifies the understanding that the Shias have of Imam Ali, who was already known as a philosopher and a teacher, and like the Prophet (PBUH), was considered an intensely pious and humble man. Imam Ali's right therefore to succeed the Prophet (PBUH) was also based on Imam Ali having personal attributes that were considered integral to the religion's leadership post Muhammad's (PBUH) death.

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As previously mentioned, Imam Ali was also believed to be the rightful successor to the Prophet (PBUH) after his death because he had been designated by the Prophet (PBUH) himself – a right that was denied to him. According to Shia accounts, the Prophet (PBUH) had anointed Imam Ali as his successor on a number of occasions, but especially after his last pilgrimage when he was on his death bed.

After the Prophet (PBUH) died in 632 CE, however, tribal leaders and the Prophet's (PBUH) companions met and elected his close friend, Abu Bakr, as Caliph while Imam Ali and the Prophet's (PBUH) closest family were making funeral arrangements. Although this was disputed, Imam Ali and his family did not protest against the decision at the time. It was only after the turmoil, and ultimately the murder of the third Caliph, Uthman, that Imam Ali was invited to become the fourth Caliph. He did so with great reservation because of the unrest that had continued to exist in the Muslim community and which had remained unresolved by Uthman's death. Hence,

disunity and conflict continued into Imam Ali's Caliphate, and eventually Imam Ali was assassinated during prayer.

After Imam Ali's death, the Caliphate was claimed by both Imam Ali's son, Hassan, and the Governor of Syria, Muawiyah. In order to unite the Muslim community and maintain peace, Hassan ceded the Caliphate to Muawiyah, and removed himself entirely from the question of leadership. However after the death of Muahwiya and the poisoning of Hassan, Hassan's younger brother, Hussain – with support from the Muslim community – refused to recognise Muahwiya's son, Yazid (who was a highly contested leader nominated by his father) as the rightful successor. Hussain saw the leadership of Muahwiya and Yazid as characterised by injustice and the corruption of core Muslim ideals. On his way to claim the Caliphate, Hussain and about 72 members of his family and companions were massacred in Karbala as they made their way to battle on the 10th of Muharram (the first month of the Islamic calendar) in 680 CE. This event sent shockwaves throughout the Muslim world at the time. But what is seen by Sunni communities today as a terrible and tragic part of Muslim history, is seen by the Shia as a sacred day of mourning and loss of the true trajectory of Islam.

It is important to note … that most Sunni communities today do not necessarily believe that Imam Ali should not have been the first Caliph, nor that Imam Ali did not have a major and important contribution to make and that the loss of his sons was not a significant blow to Islam.

The annual memorial for Hussain, his family, his children and companions is called Ashura (tenth day of Muharram) and is a day of profound mourning for Shia Muslims and other minority Muslims. While the martyrdom of the Prophet's (PBUH) family is generally mourned by all Muslims, it is a seminal event in Shia history and for them symbolises resistance to injustice and tyranny. The tragedy at Karbala reinforced a developing consciousness among Shia and other minority Muslims that the loss of the Caliphate to Imam Ali, and ultimately the loss of Imam Ali himself and his sons, was a loss of the realisation of the true Islam which was concerned with sacredness, learning, scholarship and spiritualism. This loss, along with the focus on Imam Ali's teachings, are crucial to the Shia identity today.

In today's world, Shias form the majority in Azerbaijan, Iran, Iraq and Bahrain. Significant Shia minorities exist also in Lebanon, Afghanistan, Pakistan, India and Saudi Arabia.

It is important to note here, that most Sunni communities today do not necessarily believe that Imam Ali should not have been the first Caliph, nor that Imam Ali did not have a major and important contribution to make and that the loss of his sons was not a significant blow to Islam. Most Sunnis today accept that all four Caliphs had important contributions to make, and that despite the tragedy surrounding the death of Imam Ali's sons, it constitutes a history that cannot be altered.

Shia – The Twelvers

The history outlined above, however, has led to the development of parallel forms of leadership among Muslims: formal leadership which might be described in today's language as institutional leadership manifest in the Caliphate, and the informal religiously-based leadership personified at the time by individual leaders. This form of leadership begins in what is today referred to as the Twelvers. The 'Twelvers' primarily refers to leaders in the Shia tradition, but is mentioned by other traditions as well. This is based on their devotion to Imam Ali and derived from their belief in divinely ordained leaders – known as the Twelve Imams (refer to Appendix 1).

The Twelvers believe that the descendants of Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) – through Imam Alī, his son-in-law, his sons, and then Hussain's descendants – are the best source of knowledge about the Qur'an and Islam, and therefore the most trusted carriers and protectors of the Prophet's (PBUH) traditions. The vast majority of Shias recognise the religious authority of these Twelve Imams (as do many of the groups which have evolved from Shiism), who were considered to be the spiritual and political successors to Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) (refer to Appendix 1 for a list of the 12 Imams). The vast majority of the Shia community are Twelvers, but often the Shia are referred to as Twelvers by default, which is not correct.

The Alawites

Alawite (also known as Alawi or Alouite) and Alevi both mean 'devoted to Ali' or 'followers of Ali'. Their roots are therefore considered to be in Shiism (see above), defined essentially by the traditions and reverence for Imam Ali and the belief that he was the rightful successor to the Prophet (PBUH) and should have been the first Islamic Caliph.

Like the Shia, Imam Ali's death for many minority traditions – particularly the Alawites – was the loss of a more spiritual and internalised approach to Islam. Imam Ali was renowned for his gentleness, concern that Muslims develop themselves spiritually and for his scholarship.

The Alawites, like the Shia, formalise a system of leadership that effectively sees the succession of the Prophet (PBUH) in both spiritual and theological terms; they both believe that Islamic scholarship effectively moved to Imam Ali and his sons, then passed onto other imams over the progression of time, in short, the 'Twelvers'.

The Alawites are … often confused with the Alevis, despite significant and important differences.

It is important to note that scholarship on the Alawites is scarce and grossly misrepresents Alawite beliefs and practices. Some of this can be attributed to the Alawite community's secretiveness due to a history of persecution. The Alawites are also often confused with the Alevis, despite significant and important differences. Additionally, Alawites have a complexity of thought and belief, which aims to achieve a highly historicised balance between the spiritual and the material (Islamic law).

Who are they?

The Alawites are an Arabic-speaking, ethno-religious Muslim tradition, centred in north-west Syria and its surrounding plains. Historically, they were a largely rural community. However, since the 1970s they have had significant populations in urban areas. Smaller populations also exist today in Lebanon, southern Turkey and Iraq. It is generally believed that Alawites constitute 12 – 13% of the Syrian population.

Most scholarship on Islam and the Alawites cite Ibn Nusayr (pupil of the 11th Imam) as the founder of the Alawites during the 8th and 9th centuries. Alawites themselves, however, strongly reject this. The Alawites believe that their branch of Islam was founded at the time of the Prophet (PBUH), by the Prophet's (PBUH) declaration that Imam Ali would be the rightful heir to his leadership.

It is estimated that today Victoria is home to about 13,000 Alawis, and New South Wales to approximately 30,000.

The first wave of Alawite migration to Australia was in the 1960s when they resettled for economic reasons. Later, in the 1970s, Alawis began migrating to Australia as refugees due to a series of civil wars in the Middle East. It is estimated that today Victoria is home to about 13,000 Alawis, and New South Wales to approximately 30,000.

History of persecution and conflict

Centuries of persecution of the Alawites by the Sunni majority in Syria is the foundation for the secretive and guarded nature of the Alawites.

This is why, even in this day and age, so little is actually known about the Alawites to outsiders and why so many myths about Alawite beliefs and practices continue to be widely circulated today.

The sectarian tensions in Syria today are the result of a longstanding combination of socio-economic and political issues

The Alawites first fled to Syria from Iraq in the 10th century, in response to ongoing religious vilification. In the 11th century, they were forced out into the mountains of north-western Syria, which has remained their heartland right up to today. Throughout the centuries, several important Sunni fatwas (or Islamic clerical judgements) have declared that the Alawites are not Muslim. Three of these were issued in the 14th century by Ibn Taymiyya, a renowned, ultra-fundamentalist Sunni scholar, considered to be the leading forerunner of Wahhabism which is the state religion in Saudi Arabia. Ibn Taymiyyah declared Alawites 'greater infidels than Christians, Jews or idolaters' and called for a holy war against them. This was followed by a period of major repression by the Mamluks (CE 1250–1517) who ruled the region. Geographically isolated, Alawites maintained their religious identity in the face of continuous attacks and invasions.

After centuries of marginalisation, between 1832 and 1973 the Alawites began to make gradual progress towards integration into the wider Syrian society. However, this remained a rocky road, with sectarian hostility erupting periodically and continued discrimination during the Ottoman Empire which appeared particularly preoccupied with homogenising Muslim thought and practice. This period included more fatwas against them that justified their repression, destruction of their property, perpetration of violence against them, forced conversion, as well as being forced to build mosques and the like. The Alawites have been accused of heresy, heterodoxy, rebellion, betrayal and immorality. The systemic abuse against them continued with fervour until the end of the Ottoman dynasty, and even to varying degrees up to the present day.

However, the fragmentation of Sunni Ottoman authority opened up opportunities for Alawite involvement in politics and society on a larger scale. Their fortunes began to change when Syria was under French colonial rule in the early 20th century. By promoting separate identities and creating autonomous zones in Syria along ethnic and religious lines, the French aimed to maximise their control – using Muslim and Christian minorities as their main allies against Arab nationalism among the Sunni elite. During this time, many local leaders supported the creation of a separate Alawite nation, which was founded in 1922 yet only lasted for a short time. In return,

Alawites helped maintain French rule in the region through military service, especially by marginalised and exploited Alawite peasants. However, France's colonial behaviour and Syrian aspirations for independence gradually mobilised Alawites alongside their Syrian counterparts, and Alawites became central to the anti-colonial movement which eventually saw the French leave in 1946. As a result, Alawites made up most of the military's non-commissioned officer corps, forming the backbone of the political apparatus which would emerge in the coming years.

By the 1960s, growing Alawite involvement in Syrian society began to trigger sectarian prejudice among the Sunni community, thus reviving Alawite fears of Sunni intolerance and persecution. The rioting by Sunnis in response to the secular character of the new Syrian constitution in 1973 further entrenched the Alawites' fears for their safety and their belief that their Sunni counterparts would never accept them as equal Muslims. However, under the Baath Arab Socialist Party, the push towards a secular pan-Arab nationalism saw minorities, including the Alawites, begin to thrive in Syria. The sectarian tensions in Syria today are the result of a longstanding combination of socio-economic and political issues. When the pro-democracy protests – which started in Tunisia – arrived in Syria in 2010, they appeared to be a nationalist movement, above any sectarian or ethnic division. However, soon the national unity fell apart, and age-old sectarian rivalries were encouraged and fuelled by different political forces.

Beliefs and practices

Like all other Muslims, the Alawites rely on the Qur'an, the Sunnah, the consensus of scholars, and analogical deduction or human reasoning/intelligence in the formulation and practice of Islam

Alawites believe in the five pillars of Islam:

1. Shahada – Unity of God or Indivisibility of God (tawheed) and that the Prophet is his Messenger; 2. Salat – Prayer; 3. Zakat – Almsgiving; 4. Sawm – Fasting for the holy month of Ramadan (always for 30 days); 5. Hajj or Pilgrimage to Mecca.

However, like the Shias, they place these fundamentals in a more complex system of '5 and 5 pillars' (see Appendix 2).

Alawites maintain the belief in Prophethood (from Adam to Muhammad, the latter being the final messenger of God), the four Holy Books (the Qur'an being the final holy book, and the source of truth), the Angels, and the Day of Judgement.

Like all other Muslims, the Alawites rely on the Qur'an, the Sunnah, the consensus of scholars, and analogical deduction or human reasoning/intelligence in the formulation and practice of Islam. In addition to the four established Sunni jurisprudence schools (of Maliki, Hanbali, Hanafi and Shafi'i), the Alawites also rely on and give precedence to the Jafari (6th Imam of the Shia's 12 Imams) school of Islamic jurisprudence.

Above all else, the Alawites consider themselves as followers of a religion of peace and respect all other faiths.

Apart from commemorating certain Islamic events and festivals (see Appendix 3), Alawites also celebrate the birth of Jesus as part of honouring Jesus as a Prophet of God – although not at the same time as Christians and not in the same way; generally the date falls at the same time as the Orthodox Christian celebrations and commemoration is done through prayer only.

Why have Alawites faced persecution and accusations of heresy?

This is a complex question that is not adequately addressed by the *actual* beliefs and practices of Alawites. There are three already cited dynamics that apply to the Alawites: firstly, the tension and push within Islam itself for consistency and standardisation have left Muslim minority groups vulnerable to intolerance; secondly, because they are considered a sub-group of the Shia community, they have been particularly vulnerable to Shia and Sunni tensions; and lastly, political conflicts over land and power have been framed as theological or sectarian conflicts.

There are two other factors that may also be of relevance:

Syncretism

The Alawites are often accused of heresy because they are considered syncretic; this is certainly a common assertion about them in current scholarship. To be syncretic is to meld together different beliefs, practices and ideals from different sources – in this case, different religions. Syncretism is generally considered unacceptable by mainstream Muslims and as leading to blasphemous beliefs and heretical practices. This has often led to their misidentification as being Phoenician, Christian or Zoroastrianism-inspired. However, the Alawites are not syncretic in the way that one usually understands it.

Like all Muslims, Alawites believe in Islam's insistence that it is not a new religion or new message but part of a longstanding narrative from God to humanity through many Prophets – starting with Judaism, moving through Christianity and then completing with Islam. The Alawites then pursue religious truths in other religions to add to their own Islamic understanding, teachings and practices. The Alawites, however, only integrate 'Islamically consistent truths' and only because the 'holy Qur'an has compelled them to do so'. An example of this is where Alawites sometime celebrate or commemorate both Islamic and non-Islamic events and festivals (see Appendix 3). Alawites, for instance, celebrate the birth of Jesus

as part of honouring Jesus as a Prophet of God, not the son of God – although not at the same time as Christians and not in the same way; generally the date falls at the same time as the Orthodox Christian celebrations and is done through prayer only.

Alawites and spiritualism

A focus on spiritualism is not unusual among Muslims. As previously stated, spiritual or mystical Islam, Sufism, has a strong hold in mainstream Sunni Islam and can be dated back to the time of the Prophet (PBUH). Nonetheless, it is the focus on the esoteric and internalisation of the faith that appears to have attracted the intolerance of fellow Muslims.

The Alawites have a complex spiritual system of beliefs that extends beyond Islam. It includes recognition of spiritual/veiled truths in other religions, where these truths are consistent with Islamic spiritual meaning. This complexity of thought, combined with a very long history of persecution, has meant that Alawites are very guarded about some of their teachings. As demonstrated under the 'Myths' section below, Alawites' spiritual beliefs are easily perverted and misrepresented as heretical.

The Alawites believe that the manifest meaning of the Qur'an and its laws is a veil that covers truer, deeper meanings. The Alawites strongly believe that the Qur'an instructs Muslims very clearly to hold a **balance** between the spiritual and material worlds, between material (manifest) and spiritual (hidden/veiled) meaning and worship.

This strong commitment to the state of the *spirit and hidden* (or as yet *'unrealised'* or *'unrevealed'*) meaning within the Qur'an and other sacred books (such as the Bible) is uncommon among the Muslim mainstream, but it is not uncommon in Islam. In fact, Sufism and the various Sufi traditions that exist across the Middle East have precisely this approach to Islam. Like Alawites, Sufis have also faced substantial persecution for heresy.

Alawites also assert that the Qur'an uses analogies and works on symbolic meaning. They believe that an understanding of the Qur'an's esoteric meaning is essential to being a true Muslim.

As a protective mechanism, religious leaders generally provide education on Islam to all young Alawite youth (including girls). This includes a thorough education in Islam, plus information on Alawism, some of which is included in this guide. Although often accused of providing secret information to only initiated men, it is more correct to say that Alawite imams have students whom they assist to develop their spiritual and esoteric capacities. This practice, again while unusual among mainstream Muslims, is very common and continues to this day among Sufi Muslims and other religions, including spiritual/mystical strands of Christianity and Buddhism.

Myths

Myth: Alawites worship Imam Ali, the fourth Caliph, because he is a manifestation of the Divine.

Fact: The Alawites have been much maligned for their alleged deification of Imam Ali. This is a myth. An Alawite might respond to this claim by expressing one of their teachings: 'Ali deserves obedience, but worship belongs only to God'.

Myth: The Alawite version of the basic Muslim declaration is: 'I testify that there is no God but Ali', indicating that they see Imam Ali as being the divine incarnation of God. He then created Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) from his own light, who created Suleiman.'

Fact: Like all Muslims, Alawites consider the notion of the trinity, that is, the divisibility of God as a form of 'shirk' (i.e. placing partners to God's power) and blasphemy. Alawites, like all Muslims, believe deeply in the unity of God. While Imam Ali is held in high esteem and added to human learning and knowledge following the death of the Prophet (PBUH), Alawites do not believe he created or is indeed greater than Prophet Muhammed (PBUH). Suleiman is said to have been favoured by the Prophet (PBUH) and was brought into this family. Suleiman is therefore, like all those close to the Prophet (PBUH), held in high esteem by the Alawites.

Myth: Alawites consider women inferior and exclude them from sacred observances and initiation. They are considered by Alawites to have been created by the devil or to have no soul.

Fact: References to the inferior spiritual status of women are myth. Like all Muslims, Alawites observe all Qur'anic prescriptions on women; therefore women are held as spiritual equals to men.

Myth: Wine is allowed, and is a part of religious rituals, much like Mass in Christianity.

Fact: Wine is strictly forbidden and clearly proscribed by Islam.

The Alevis

In recent years, there has been an explosion of information on Alevi identity in both the electronic media and in scholarly writing, with a range of differing views and interpretations as to what Alevis actually believe and practice.

Who are they?

The Alevis are a Turkish-, Kurdish-, Zazaki- and Albanian-speaking ethno-religious group based in Turkey, Albania, Azerbaijan, Cyprus, Macedonia, Bulgaria, Iraq and Iran.

Traditionally, they were a significant population in the central and east Anatolian provinces of Turkey, but they are now spread around the world. Seen by some more as a movement than as a tradition, the Alevis were 'mystical dissenters' in Central Asia, Mesopotamia, Persia, Anatolia and ancient Egypt who helped to shape Anatolia in Turkey in the 13th century.

Some Alevis also refer to their tradition as the Alevi-Bektashi tradition, because of the similarities between their origins and beliefs and those of the Bektashi Order (Sufi Islam tradition). Others, however, claim that these are distinct groups.

In recent years, there has been an explosion of information on Alevi identity in both the electronic media and in scholarly writing, with a range of differing views and interpretations as to what Alevis actually believe and practice. The Alevis appear undisturbed by the diversity within their tradition.

History of persecution

'The Alevis' emphasis on mysticism and symbolism, and their rejection of a literal interpretation of the Qur'an, have resulted in a perception among many mainstream Muslims-both Shias and Sunnies-that Alevis do not meet the fundamental criteria for being Muslim. This has led to centuries of persecution as well as accusations of immoral activities and being 'un-Islamic'. There have been a number of reports of discrimination and violence against Alevi communities in Turkey. This violence has also recently begun to spill over into diaspora communities.

At times, various Turkish governments have been accused of turning a blind eye to these racially motivated attacks against Alevis and discouraging Alevi cultural integration into Turkish society. For example, while Christians and Jews are officially recognised as minority groups, the Alevis are not. Minorities in Turkey can request exemption from religious education, namely Sunni religious education, but Alevis cannot as their existence as a tradition remains unacknowledged. Turkey's Alevis therefore argue that they are forced to participate in and pay taxes for the provision of religious education where only Sunni Islam is taught in religious classes.

While the current government is said to be taking positive steps towards the acknowledgement of the Alevis, discrimination continues to be a significant challenge. Many Alevis believe they

The sect has at best been ignored, and at worst been accused of immoral activities and of being 'un-Islamic', and therefore, actively vilified

cannot identify publicly as Alevis because of fear of intolerance. Fear of discrimination has also resulted in many Alevis alienating themselves from mainstream Islam and identifying as non-Muslims.'

Beliefs and practices

Alevis believe in the basic pillars and fundamentals of the faith of Islam. However, they attach a more spiritual and symbolic meaning to each of them. Below are some of the key beliefs and practices of the Alevis:

Alevis believe in the basic pillars and fundamentals of the faith of Islam.

Prayer – Seeing themselves as spiritual Muslims – like the Sufis – the Alevis congregate for a worship and prayer ceremony called the 'cem' (pronounced 'jem') in a meeting-house. The ceremony combines singing, music, poetry and dance (Semah). Today, with Alevis migrating to different countries, such rituals may not be strictly adhered to, but there remains a set design and plan for the 'cem', incorporating its most essential features.

Almsgiving – There is no set amount for almsgiving. However, the Alevis generally donate generously to help the disadvantaged, provide food to worshippers, and support religious/cultural education, as well as contribute to scholarships for students.

Fasting – Alevis fast in the first 12 days of Muharram (the first month of the Islamic Calendar, marking the murder of Prophet Muhammad's (PBUH) grandson, Hussain). In addition to giving up food and liquids till sunset (not strictly adhered to by all Alevis), the days of fasting are also meant to be a time for sacrificing other comforts and pleasures, as an appropriate symbol of mourning. Alevis may also fast from February 13th to 15th (Hizr Feast).

Hajj – While not an Alevi practice or requirement, some Alevis may make religious trips to tombs of revered saints for self-cleansing and blessing.

Holy Books – Alevis believe in all four Holy Books, and that the Qur'an is the last revelation, completing the message that had been passed along for centuries through the other books and religions. The Alevi interpretation of the Qur'an is largely mystical rather than literal, containing what they consider to be deeper spiritual truths. Alevi elder, Hadji Bektas Veli, says that 'the biggest book to read is the Human Being.' The Qur'an is generally read in Turkish for better understanding.

Religious literature – In addition, the Alevis also possess an extensive religious literature consisting of the recorded sayings of Imam Ali, the collection of doctrines and practices of the 12 Imams, as well as the events, accounts of the lives, teachings and writings (mystical poems and ballads) of Alevi elders and poets.

Prophets – Alevis believe in the continuity of Prophethood, and hold Prophets Muhammad (PBUH), David, Moses and Jesus in high regard. Muhammad (PBUH) is believed to be the final Prophet.

Heaven and Hell – Alevis believe in the Cycle of Existence, in which every human being passes through 32 stages until reaching Complete Human Being stage to unite and melt within God. Alevis perceive death as the 'changing of the phase' during the Cycle of Existence. The concept of heaven and hell is interpreted symbolically, according to Alevi belief. Accordingly, a person is perceived to be in hell if s/he is consumed by arrogance, hatred or animosity and, oppositely, in heaven when s/he is in a state of love, peacefulness or act of sharing.

Rules and Rituals – Adherence to rituals and rules is considered much less important by the Alevis, with emphasis rather on human relationships, compassion and connection with God.

'Four Doors' – Alevis believe in 'four doors' (i.e., religious law, spiritual path, spiritual knowledge/skill, and spiritual truth), with 10 levels in each. A person is thought to begin his/her spiritual journey as a novice through the first door, and is then led by a spiritual guide through the rest of the doors until she/he acquires oneness with the ultimate truth through the fourth door. This is interpreted as the achievement of completeness and perfection, including control over selfish desires, equal treatment of people, and serving others' interests.

Ali's image – Imam Ali's picture is prominent in many homes, community centres and publications. Some wear sword-pendants to represent Ali's sword and their devotion to him.

Community gatherings – Today, with the migration of Alevis, many community centres exist around the world, functioning as a place for worship services, Semah courses, religious and history lessons, foreign language and handicraft learning, job training for women, medical services, scholarship programs, funeral services, and the like.

Festivals – Alevis today commemorate a number of different Islamic events and festivals. They include religious fasting, sheep sacrifice and celebrating the coming of Spring. (See Appendix 4).

Why have Alevis faced persecution and accusations of heresy?

Many of the factors identified which placed Alawites at risk of persecution, apply also to the Alevis. There are however four additional factors of relevance:

The Alevi's, unlike the Alawites, are a truly syncretic tradition, although Islam is central to their system of belief. They nonetheless have practices which are outside traditional Muslim beliefs and practices

- The Alevi's, unlike the Alawites, are a truly syncretic tradition, although Islam is central to their system of belief. They nonetheless have practices which are outside traditional Muslim beliefs and practices
- Alevi spiritualism sees God as Unity – God is seen by many as a Spiritual Being, defined in varying ways such as symbolising the universe, humanity, undefined force or power, truth, love, knowledge and creation. Furthermore, that which is created by God is a reflection of God and therefore all beings are connected and a reflection of God. While this is unusual among Muslims today, this is a powerful theme among mystic/Sufi Muslims
- Alevi spiritualism has practices that fall outside traditional Muslim forms of worship. Traditionally, prayer and worship ceremonies, for example, have generally been conducted by a male elder who sits at one end, with the worshippers – both men and unveiled women together – sitting at the other. The elder plays the lute, and is accompanied by singing, prayer and recitations, at times requiring traditional praying positions, such as bowing and kneeling. Prayer is typically carried out in Turkish, although parts of the Qur'an are sometimes recited in Arabic. The subjects of the worship and prayer meeting revolve around love for and connection with God, love for people, the teachings of Prophet Muhammad (PBUH), Imam Ali, Haji Bektash, and acts of service. The service ends with ballads about Imam Ali and his family's murder, followed by a meal.
- Historically, Alevis have been prominent advocates for secularism and democracy, gender equality and religious freedom. These beliefs are considered central to Alevism.

Myths

Myth: Alevis believe that Imam Ali is a perfect human, with supernatural strengths and wisdom.

Fact: Various Alevi poets define the place of Imam Ali in the 'Alevi Path' as follows: the image of God appeared within Ali. That's why Imam Ali is accepted as the most enlightened and virtuous person.

Myth: Imam Ali is a deity in a trinity with God and Muhammad.

Fact: Imam Ali is not a deity, although he is an inseparable part of the God-Muhammed (PBUH)-Imam Ali trinity in Alevism. Imam Ali and Muhammed (PBUH) are considered to be path brothers who have been accepted as the beginning of 'The Gathering of Forties Myth' in Alevi Path.

Appendices

Appendix 1

Alawite belief in the '5 and 5 pillars' of Islam:

The first five tenets, called the 'fundamentals', relate to the attributes and actions of God:

- **Monotheism/Tawheed** – that there is one God, He is singular and further that there is a oneness or indivisibility of God
- **Justice** – that He is justice or the Creator and the Definer of justice
- **Prophethood** – that He is Creator and Selector of Prophets
- **Imammah** – that He is the Selector of the lineage of the Twelve Imams, starting from the Imam Ali, the cousin and son-in-law of the Prophet Mohammad (PBUH)
- **Resurrection** – that He calls and judges humanity upon resurrection on Judgement Day

The second set of 5 tenets relates to the requirement of human beings in the service of God:

- Salat or prayer
- Zakat or Almsgiving
- Sawm or Fasting
- Hajj or Pilgrimage
- Jihad: this refers principally to the 'Greater Jihad' of pursuing godliness and piousness.

Appendix 2

Alawite events and festivals

- Alawites commemorate the following Islamic events:
  - Eid-ul-Fitr – festival marking the end of Ramadan
  - Eid ul Adha – festival marking the completion of the Pilgrimage to Mecca
- Like the Shia, Alawites commemorate:
  - Ashura – remembering the martyrdom of Hussain (commemorated by Shias in particular). This is done not by demonstrations of regret, but rather by discussions about sacrifice.
  - Eid ul Ghadir – commemorating Imam Ali's nomination as the Prophet Muhammad's (PBUH) successor.
- Because of a history of profound persecution, Alawites have not typically maintained their own public or formal places for worship. This has gradually changed however, with a greater number of Alawite communities – both in Syria and as diaspora communities in the West – gaining a sense of confidence to declare themselves publicly. Alawite community centres usually have a mosque attached where Friday prayers and other community ceremonial requirements are carried out. Alawites may attend general Sunni mosques, depending on the mosque's openness towards Muslim minorities and Shias. Today, some Alawites believe that Alawites stopped attending mainstream Sunni mosques because historically they had been immediately identified and killed as heretics.
- As with mainstream Shias, Alawites believe that each of the 12 imams had a gate serving as a pathway to him, and that the 12th Imam disappeared leaving no gate. For Shias, this means that there are 12 imams and 12 gates. The general Shia belief is that the 12th Imam will return on resurrection and judgement day. In contrast, the Alawites believe that there are only 11 gates, with the last two imams presiding over one gateway/path, and with the 12th Imam already a purely spiritual entity who will return on judgement day.
- In addition to the Hajj, and although not an unusual practice among mainstream Muslims (except for Orthodox Muslims), Alawites visit shrines that have been built in special memory of their leaders (sheikhs).
- Alawites' religious literature includes the Qur'an and collected sermons of Imam Ali (compiled as 'The Peak of Eloquence').

- It is often suggested that the Alawites also have a highly guarded volume of their own writings ('The Book of Collections', or Kitab al Majmu), which has been kept strictly secret and never published, and which is only available through initiation and ascent through the community's leadership hierarchy. It has recently emerged that The Book of Collections/Kitab al Majmu was a fraudulent book aimed at disparaging the Alawites and presenting them as heretics.

Appendix 3

Alevi events and festivals

- Fasting in Muharram (which is a time of mourning for Muslims, especially the Shia and other sects devoted to Imam Ali) and the Hizr Fast in February, are both symbols of saving people from distress.
- At the end of the first 10 days of Muharram (known as Ashura), a special dish is prepared with grain, fruits and nuts to celebrate. Among other events associated with the celebration is the salvation of Hussain's son, Zeynal Abidin, from the massacre at Kerbala.
- Sheep sacrifice is part of the worship ceremony. Once a year, Alevis gather together to offer the sacrifice and ask for blessing. Some major centres in Istanbul sacrifice sheep and distribute meat each day to anyone who wishes to participate in the worship.
- On the 21st of March, Alevis celebrate Newroz – the start of Spring and a day of newness. Some also believe that the date is Imam Ali's birthday.

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