BOOK REVIEWS

A History of the 'Alawis: From Medieval Aleppo to the Turkish Republic, by Stefan Winter. Princeton University Press, 2016. Hb. \$ 85.00, ISBN-13: 9780691167787.

Reviewed by Lutz Berger, Universität Kiel, berger@islam.uni-kiel.de

Most research on the 'Alawis treats either the history of 'Alawi religion or the role played by the group (or a number of its members) in Syrian politics after the period of the French mandate. Astonishingly little has been done to further our knowledge of the social and political history of the 'Alawi community before that period. Stefan Winter finally fills this gap. He bases his study not only on the religious literature of the 'Alawis, chronicles and travel accounts, and besides that, makes good use of Ottoman and Turkish Republican as well as French archives.

Until recently, researchers rather often had a tendency to accept at face value the myths of origin of any group and thereby to project later situations back into the past. Avoiding this trap, Winter brings forth good arguments to show that, in the beginning, 'Alawi ideas and those of the *ghulāt* in general did not form a self-contained whole that developed in separation from the rest of Shi'ism. The ideas that later on were associated solely with the 'Alawis were still acceptable within the mainstream of Shi'i thought in Buyid Iraq. In Winter's view therefore, the formation of the 'Alawi community in the mountain ranges of western Syria is not so much a consequence of a flight of persecuted sectarians but rather the result of internal change within the society of the coastal highland brought about by the missionary work of Shi'is of 'Alawite conviction.

Because of present day conflicts between the Sunni and Shi'i communities in Syria and because of the relevance of Ibn Taymiyya's work in modern Islam, there is a tendency to read the history of the 'Alawis in Ayyubid and Mamluk as a history of persecution and conflict. As Winter shows, Ibn Taymiyya's fatwa condemning the group had little relevance for the relation of 'Alawis and the government in medieval time. What punitive measures of the Mamluk government there were, stemmed not so much from religious motives but was rather rather by the refusal of mountaineers to pay the taxes the government felt entitled to. The existence of the community as such was in no way anathema to the authorities.

This tolerant policy continued after the Ottoman conquest of the region in the early sixteenth century. Thanks to the richness of Ottoman archives we can

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follow the efforts of the government to tap the riches of the 'Alawi Mountains in some detail. At no time did the Ottoman rulers try to annihilate the 'Alawis, in contrast to what later legend might imply. Wherever they used military might against them, they did so in order to suppress brigandage and not for religious reasons.

The eighteenth century saw the rise of an 'Alawi local gentry, whose riches depended on cash crops like tobacco and, not least, on their function as tax-farmers for the central government. The social development of the 'Alawi community at the time was therefore completely in line with what was happening elsewhere in the Empire during this "age of notables."

The social differentiation within the community and the migration of some of the poorer members to the neighboring plains in search for a livelihood forms the backdrop for the conflicts between the 'Alawis and local and central authorities of the Ottoman state in the late eighteenth and nineteenth century. Strife was caused by the increasing harshness with which regional officials like Ahmed Cezzar treated their constituents, later on by the centralizing policies of Muhammad 'Ali's government in Syria and, finally, at the end of the century, by the efforts of 'Abdülhamid II. to bring the 'Alawis in line religiously. It was only in the nineteenth century that conflicts in the mountains were mostly seen in terms of heresy and only in the reign of 'Abdülhamid II. that the central government made a deliberate effort to convert the 'Alawis to Sunni Islam.

At the end of World War I the majority of the 'Alawis threw their lot in with the Kemalist resistance to allied occupation of the region. This, and the willingness of many of them to accept the integration of the region of Antakya into Turkey, did not spare them the assimilating measures of the Turkish republican government. They were seen as descendants of the allegedly Turkish Hittites and were expected to give up their Arab language, as were other minorities at the time.

Stefan Winter's *History of the 'Alawis* provides the reader with a most welcome, readable overview on a central and up to now undeservedly neglected subject. He skillfully taps a very broad range of sources and literature in all relevant Oriental and Western languages and convincingly brings current trends in the research on the formation of social groups to bear on his topic. Winter's book is sure to be the standard work on the social and political history of the 'Alawis for some time to come.