The Alawites in Syrian Society: Loud Silence in a Declaration of Identity Reform

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Articles & Testimony

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The "Declaration" presumably issued by Alawite notables and broadly covered by international media is a historic statement, irrespective of its political implications. While it commands international engagement, both to highlight its positive aspects and to invite its authors to expand on the less positive, it particularly ought to be called to account on two instances of loud silence within the text — the first regarding "the other," the second about "the self."

Various world press outlets have strived to dispel the first silence in seeking signs of dissonance within the Declaration between the Syrian regime and the Alawite community — which constitutes the regime's main source of recruits for its military. One such sign found was the statement that "other Syrians are engaged in uprising, with the strength of rightful anger, …" This was, however, a tangential statement that appeared in the context of describing the Alawite state of affairs. The statement immediately follows with "… while the Alawis engage in identity reform, with the strength of the authority of collective conscience."

In fact, the Declaration addresses the condition of the Syrian State from both historical and theoretical perspectives, but displays no interest in calling the immediate past or present into question. With the exception of the aforementioned statement, the Declaration is apparently atemporal vis-à-vis the current Syrian context —which is presumably its raison d'être. The absence of reference to this grave and tragic context is in contradiction with the spirit of truth and reconciliation between the Alawite self and the Syrian oppositionist other that the text seems to embrace.

The issue is not one of fanning the flames of discord between the regime and its second stratum. Such discord is a certain fact, even if it remains unannounced. The values declared by the authors of the Declaration deny any possibility of alignment with the regime — which has committed atrocious crimes, nurtured dormant grievances, and invoked sectarian demons — even if all Sunni Syrians were radical extremists, which, as the Declaration itself asserts, is not the case.

However, a declaration of principles that is agnostic to facts on the ground may be accused of cynicism and is best served by a real accounting of victims and their oppressors. The regime, its President, members, and institutions have committed crimes against individual citizens, the national commonwealth, and humanity. Demands for justice

are a necessary point of departure in approaching the Syrian plight from a values perspective, even if politics, embracing the art of the possible, are forced to compromise.

The regime was motivated neither by ideological conviction nor group solidarity in implicating communities, tribes, and urban strata in crimes necessitated by its drive to survive. It is nonetheless a fact that, through tactics of fear and enticement, it succeeded in drawing the complicity of a disproportionate number of Alawite Syrians. This enabled a depiction of the Syrian conflict as one pitting Sunnis against Alawites. It is a reductionist description to be sure, but one now widely spread in Sunni and Alawite circles, as well as elsewhere. Accordingly, foreign Sunni fighters flocked to the uprising once it metastasized into an armed conflict, depleting its original civil energy and diverting its trajectory. They provided the regime with the partial victory of extending the tragedy and thereby avoiding imminent collapse.

The "Declaration," however, stands as a denial of the sectarian nature of the Syrian killing fields. It neither addresses the depth of complicity to which the regime has driven Alawite Syrians, nor does it attend to the legitimate fears of Alawites for their safety from both foreign fighters and their fellow Syrians at the moment of reckoning -- the eventual fall of the regime. The Declaration's effective denial may be a deliberate position aimed at enhancing the prospects of a civil and social reconciliation. Nevertheless, it is in flagrant opposition to the lived experience of the past multiple years, and thus unsustainable. It may instead induce a phase of a dual discourse: a false public discourse declaring civil peace and a private factional one preparing for the next explosion.

The authors of the Declaration may deflect some of the preceding criticism by pointing to the document's intended audience: it is not aimed at all Syrians or any 'others' in the Syrian community, rather it is instead an invitation for discussion within the Alawite community itself. National reconciliation will require the full disclosure of fears and grievances, but that is a concern for a later phase. The current moment instead requires identity reform.

But the Declaration displays arbitrariness in framing identity. It is not concerned merely with Alawites as one community, but with Alawism as a faith system, positing it as one. As a result, there is no allowance within the definition it adopts for the multiple expressions, differences, and non-conformity to the reductionist framework as decreed. According to the Declaration, Alawism is the third path in Islam, in parallel to Sunnism—the embodiment of dogmatic scholasticism—and Shi'ism, the manifestation of rational scholasticism. (the English version of the Declaration uses different terminology herein is the more accurate translation from the Arabic source). Alawism is esoteric, gnostic, and unbound by scholasticism.

Unfortunately, this characterization is a juxtaposition of multiple simplistic assertions. None of the intellectual spaces of Sunnism, Shi'ism, or even Alawism is prone to such undue reductionism. It would certainly please some Salafi scholars to equate "Sunnism" with their own dogmatic scholasticism rather than with the multitude of expressions of faith and practice of the vast majority of the world's 1.5 billion plus Muslims. Irrespective of their convictions, however, these scholars are not the custodians of the Sunni religious experience, nor even of the lived Salafi experience — which wittingly or not is converging on the Sufi tradition through the practice of Tazkiyah (the purification of the soul). It is worth noting that the richest, widest, and most complex of Islam's gnostic and esoteric expressions are indeed within the Sunni-Sufi tradition. The Declaration is categorical in denouncing Ibn Taymiyah, the 14th century de-facto founder of Salafism, for his anti-Alawite edict, yet channels without question some of his successors' claim on the normative character of their approach to Sunni Islam. The authors ought to have known better: Syria was and still is a major showcase of the diversity of Sunni Muslim expressions, ranging from the scholastic (al-Uza'i) to the ecstatic (Ibn Arabi) and the skeptic (al-Ma'arri).

Scholasticism in Shi'ite Islam features tradition-based (Akhbari), rule-based (Usuli), opinion-based (Shaykhi), gnostic-based (Kashfi), and authority-based (Wilayat al-Faqih) approaches. Shiism also displays a wide range of tools and disciplines, with philosophy and gnosticism operating as integral parts of the corpus. And what is true for Sunni

Islam is also true for Shiism: scholasticism has no monopoly on expressions of faith. in short, the Declaration has done injustice to the wide complex of Muslim religious experience.

A more acute injustice is directed at the Alawite religious experience itself. The Declaration proclaims that it seeks identity reform while distancing itself from any attempt at religious reform. However, selective and composite religious characterizations of Alawism amount to a radical program of religious re-conception. It is evidently a legitimate pursuit for Alawite intellectuals, as attempted in the Declaration, to seek what they consider the quintessential core of their religious tradition, to rephrase in contemporary idiom, and to reassess the historical record on its basis — highlighting what conforms to it, and ignoring what does not. This, however, is a project of religious reform, not a mere presentation on already established religious tenets.

The reference to Alawite esoterism as "sirraniyah" is notable in this project. "Sirraniyah" is a neologism coined by the translators of the Western Orientalizing occultist tradition (including figures such as Aleister Crowley and Helena Blavatsky). In its native Middle Eastern form, esoterism (batiniyyah) is part and parcel of the Islamicate toolkit, to use Marshall Hodgson's term in reference to an extended scope beyond the Islamic. This is irrespective of attacks on esoterism by Ibn Taymiyah and al-Ghazali — the 12th century champion of an ecstatic-scholastic reconciliation which excludes philosophy and gnosticism. As part of the "toolkit", with considerable variation by individual practitioners, esoterism is the quest for the hidden, just as mysticism is the quest for the total truth (haqiqah), jurisprudence for divinely-ordained life (shari'ah), theology for the comprehension of divine unity (tawhid), and the transmission of tradition (hadith) is the quest for perfection in behavior (sunnah).

The choice of the occult-inspired neologism "sirraniyah" possibly reflects an assumed respectability for occultism that may have eroded in the West, and may be an attempt at linking Alawite esoterism with a wider context. The intellectual community in another regional community with esoteric teaching, the Lebanese Druze, attempted a similar experiment in the 1980s and 1990s. They identified affinities in the New Age religious movement, and thus engaged in synchronizing Druze traditions with, among others, the channeling of extraterrestrial encounters. But that experiment did not generate religious reform, elevate the faith system to global prominence, or fend creeping radicalism within the community.

What reductionism obscures regarding the Alawite religious experience is that while the antecedents of Alawism may have been steeped in esoterism (batiniyyah), Alawites today are not ipso facto esoteric adepts, as is implicitly mandated by the Declaration. While the religious elite shapes and sharpens methodologies and theologies, the lay followers, even if conceding in principle to the primacy of the elite's views, engage mostly in transactional worship. Alawites, as others, maintain a packet of rituals, albeit one perhaps less taxing than in other iterations of Islam, with an elaborate system of belief governing the relationship between the worshiped and the worshiper. It has been the function of the religious elite to stem the inevitable evolution of this system.

A few years after seizing power in 1970, Syrian strongman Hafez al-Assad, himself an Alawite, oversaw the reorganization of the Alawite community under the Shi'ite umbrella. It was a radical motion, but not without historical basis. The Alawite community had entered the 20th century with scant scholasticism and a wide range of folk beliefs — often shared with non-Alawite neighbors. Its educational and administrative empowerment was accompanied by considerable dislocation of its folk clergy's character and role. As a mostly rural community, in the 1930s it had been swayed by Salman al-Murshid, a charismatic leader who claimed divine revelation, then incarnation, fracturing the community and exposing the potential for religious rifts. In seeking formal structures, the emerging new Alawite clerical institution opted to fit Alawism into the Shi'ite template on the basis of affinity, in order to gain Islamic legitimacy, and to insure their distinctive communal identity in a mostly-Sunni society. By the late 1960s, 80 Alawite clerics from both Syria and Lebanon signed a declaration of faith, stipulating Shi'i beliefs and practices as normative, and stating that "the appellations Shii and Alawite indicate the same signified, one category

of which is Twelver Ja‘fari Imamism.”

The Declaration of Identity Reform maintains another loud silence on this established history of Alawite theology. It simply ignores the period, implying that the whole episode of Shi'ite identification was insincere. Yet the Declaration claims to usher in a phase of truth and openness “away from dissimulation”. If Alawite Shi'ism was insincere, the Declaration ought to have explained its circumstances. What may be closer to the truth is that the drive towards Shi'ism was not insincere but had limited traction, notably among modernized segments of the population. These segments opted to translate the relative vacuum of rituals left by the retreat of folk practices into a de facto areligious civic life, albeit one still imbued with Alawite identity or community awareness.

In its dual silence on the religious others of Syria and its own group’s religious pluralism, along with its undeclared religious project, the Declaration does not appear to a non-Alawite as a call for identity reform in the Syrian context, but instead as a polemical act within the community, part of a debate between two discrete propositions. The first proposition places Alawism under Shi'ite tutelage, benefiting from official support and an increasing Iranian presence while calling upon the claim to “resistance” to justify its grip on power. The other seeks to alleviate the burdens created by such Shi'ite tutelage, including the community's vassal status towards Iran, to the depletion of the community through open warfare. It hopes to do so through the elevation of Alawism to peer status with Sunnism and Shi'ism, and a recourse to secularism to stem the effects of minority marginalization.

A similar debate is simultaneously being conducted on social media, albeit more vehemently. Some claim Alawism as a full and separate Syrian religion that espouses secularism, while others place Alawism within Shi‘ism, embracing Shi'ite martyrology and associated ritualism.

Thus, prior to assessing the status of Alawites in Syrian society as called for by the Declaration, what may be needed is an Alawite internal assessment of community identity. Syria’s Alawites, as well as the country’s Sunnis, Christians, Druze, Isma‘ilis, Imamis, and others, are not prone to monolithic characterizations. However, all together, with all their diversity and differences, would be better united in a framework that elevates the Syrian individual as the basic value in political and social pursuit. As to religious meaning, and the concept of the divine in the different orientations, this could be a subject matter upon which the Syrians would continue the age-long tradition of agreeing to disagree.

The Declaration, all comments notwithstanding, is a positive step forward.

Hassan Mneimneh is the Contributing Editor at Fikra Forum. This item was originally published on ***the Fikra website (http://fikraforum.org/?p=9121&lang=en#.VwxV1fkrLIU)*** *.* ❖

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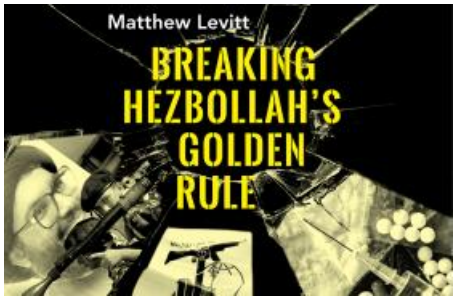

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