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Alawite

Any member of a minority sect of Shi'ite Muslims living chiefly in Syria.

The roots of Alawism lie in the teachings of Muhammad ibn Nuayr an-Namir (fl. 850), a Basran contemporary of the 10th Shi'ite imam, and the sect was chiefly established by Usayn ibn Amdan al-Khail (d. 957 or 968) during the period of the Amdanid dynasty (905–1004), at which time the Alawites had great influence in Aleppo. With the fall of Shi'ite rule, however, the Alawites, with other Shi'ites, became the victims of persecution. They were ill-treated by waves of Crusaders, by Mamluks, and by Ottoman conquerors, in addition to fighting a number of internecine wars.

Considered by many Muslims to be heretics, the present-day Alawites obtained a legal decision about their status as Muslims from the Lebanese leader of the Ithnâ' Asharîyah (Twelver) sect of Shi'ite Islam. The Alawite sect has become politically dominant in Syria, particularly since 1971, when Afiz al-Assad, an Alawite, was elected president of the country. The sect is predominant in the Latakia region of Syria,
and it extends north to Antioch (Antakya), Turkey. Many Alawites also live around or in and amāh. They are second in number within Syria to the Sunnite sect, which makes up about three-fourths of the Muslim population of mostly Muslim Syria.

The name Alawī is more generally used to refer to all the groups affiliated with one of the Alīs; thus the Muslims usually refer to the Syrian Alawites as Nu ayrīyah, or Namīrīyah. Though well established in Syria since the 12th century, the Alawites were not able to fully adopt the name Alawī until 1920, the time of French occupation of the area.

The basic doctrine of Alawite faith is the deification of Alī. He is one member of a trinity corresponding roughly to the Christian Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Alawites interpret the Pillars of Islām (the five duties required of every Muslim) as symbols and thus do not practice the Islāmic duties. They celebrate an eclectic group of holidays, some Islāmic, some Christian, and many Alawite practices are secret. They consider themselves to be moderate Shīʿites, not much different from the Twelvers.

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