Alawi Massacres in Syria: The Historical Roots of the HTS Regime's Genocidal Intent

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Summary
This entry documents the recent massacres targeting the Alevi community in Syria and draws attention to the continuity between these practices of violence and their historical backgrounds. In this context, it examines, within a historical framework, how fatwas issued by Sunni orthodoxy have functioned as theological warrants legitimizing the religious annihilation of Alevis in Syria. It also assesses evidence concerning the contemporary massacres carried out by the HTS regime and its supporters. When massacre rhetoric is considered together with the genocide-inciting appeals contained in fatwa texts from the past to the present, it becomes evident that the massacres perpetrated by the Salafi-Takfiri HTS regime against Alevis in Syria constitute a contemporary manifestation of the anti-Alevi exterminatory intent embedded in the Sunni fatwa tradition.

Keywords: Alevi History, Genocide, Human Rights, Sünni

Fatwas as Theological Justifications for Genocide

The beliefs, cultural structures, and political positions of Alevi communities in Syria and Turkey have been examined in detail in various contexts. This entry, however, focuses on how Sunni religious authorities and the rulers they served portrayed Alevis in Syria as the greatest enemies of Islam. This sectarian discourse of hatred was codified and institutionalized through fatwas and official decrees

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beginning in the early fourteenth century (Talhamy 2010).

The first three fatwas were issued by the Hanbali Shaykh al-Islam Taqi al-Din Ibn Taymiyya. In order to mobilize support for the Mamluk rulers, Ibn Taymiyya published his first fatwa in 1305-immediately prior to the Mamluk military campaign against the Mongol invaders. In this fatwa, as well as in two further fatwas issued up to 1317, Ibn Taymiyya declared that Alevis were the greatest enemies of Islam, that food they had touched should not be consumed, and that killing their fighters, enslaving their children, and confiscating their property were legitimate acts (Talhamy 2010). These fatwas led to the first large-scale massacres, forcing surviving Alevis to flee to the mountainous region of northern Syria known as the Alevi Mountains.

According to Talhamy (2010), Ibn Taymiyya's fatwas were based on false theological and historical accusations against the Alevis. Despite these distortions, both the Hanafi and Hanbali schools of Sunni orthodoxy continued to endorse Ibn Taymiyya's fatwas until recent times, thereby encouraging contemporary massacres against Alevis.

The convergence between the two Sunni schools is also evident in three fatwas issued by Hanafi scholars during Ottoman rule. The first of these was issued in 1516 by Shaykh Nuh al-Hanafi (Al-Tawil 1979) and was used by the Ottoman Sultan Yavuz Selim in 1517 as justification for the massacre of more than 40,000 Alevis (Al-Tawil 1979). This massacre took place only three years after Yavuz Selim had ordered the killing of more than 40,000 Alevis in Central and Eastern Anatolia on the basis of two fatwas issued by the Sunni mufti Hamza Efendi and the Shaykh al-Islam Ibn Kemal. [1]

The second fatwa against Alevis in Syria during Ottoman rule was issued in 1808 by the Hanafi mufti of Latakia, ʻUbayd Allah b. ʻAbd al-Ghani. This fatwa coincided with correspondence between Sunni religious authorities in Syria and Ottoman provincial officials. The correspondence

mentions two shaykhs (Hasan Dabbur from Latakia and his superior in Damascus, Shaykh Shakir) as well as the representative of the governor of Damascus, Hajj Hasan Awaq. In both the fatwa and the correspondence, Alevis were described as pigs and dogs, and their killing was declared obligatory (Friedman 2005).

The third fatwa under Ottoman rule was issued in Latakia in the 1820s by Shaykh Muhammad Nasr al-Din al-Mughrabi (the exact year is unknown). This fatwa likewise defined Alevis as infidels and legitimized deadly attacks against them in the Latakia region (Friedman 2005).

These fatwas were followed by a sermon delivered by Muhammad Amin b. ʻUmar, known as Ibn ʻAbidin, who at the time was the highest Hanafi authority in Syria (Friedman 2005). Ibn ʻAbidin declared that the killing of Alevis was permissible, that those who died while fighting Alevis would be regarded as martyrs, and that-using the terminology preferred by Sunni orthodoxy-the property of the Nusayris could be confiscated and their women and children enslaved (Friedman 2005).

Fatwas have continued into the twenty-first century to justify sectarian violence against Syrian Alevis. For example, in 2013, Yusuf al-Qaradawi, then president of the International Union of Muslim Scholars, called on “every militarily trained Sunni Muslim to fight the Shiʻa and Alevis in Syria.” Al-Qaradawi also reiterated earlier fatwas and stated that Alevis were “more irreligious than Jews.”

The fatwas and religious decrees summarized above are defined here as theological warrants for genocide. This definition is consistent with Kuper’s (1990) analysis of the use of religious hatred as a warrant for genocide in other contexts. The cases examined by Kuper include the Armenian Genocide, the Holocaust, the destruction of settlements during the partition of India, the massacres of Hindus in East Pakistan (Bangladesh), the genocidal threat against Bahá’ís in Iran, and the situation in southern Sudan.

Genocidal Attacks by the HTS Regime against Alevis

The genocide carried out by the HTS regime against Alevis in Syria constitutes a continuation of the Salafi-Takfiri ideology that has historically inspired the fatwas and demonizing discourses summarized above. The link between past and present is clearly visible in the slogans chanted by HTS forces and allied armed groups in towns and cities with Alevi and Christian populations, such as: “Alevis to the grave, Christians to Beirut!” Similar continuities are evident in sermons delivered in mosques, calls for jihad against Alevis, and the humiliation and extrajudicial execution of unarmed Alevi civilians, who have been denigrated as “pigs.” This alignment between historical and contemporary patterns is also apparent in the abduction and enslavement of Alevi women. These violations have been documented by numerous human rights organizations and monitoring bodies, including the United Nations, Amnesty International, Human Rights Watch, the Syrian Network for Human Rights, and the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights.

Violations committed by the HTS regime-both directly and indirectly through allied terrorist groups-include extrajudicial killings, deliberate destruction of property, abductions, mass detentions, and widespread identity-based targeting. These crimes were perpetrated with genocidal intent against Alevis and Druze in March 2025 and July 2025, respectively.

According to a report by the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights dated 8 November 2025, 8,654 civilians were killed by HTS security forces and allied armed groups following HTS’s seizure of power on 8 December 2024. This figure includes 2,069 Alevis and 1,224 Druze who were killed within a few days during March and July. [2]

These figures represent conservative estimates. According to the Human Rights and Humanitarian Aid Monitoring Committee (IHIYTK), the verified number of Alevi victims stands at 2,246. The committee further reports that the Alevi

region is on the brink of an unprecedented humanitarian catastrophe due to poverty rates exceeding 97 percent of the population. In addition to these conditions, more than 10,000 Alevis have been unlawfully detained or forcibly disappeared; Alevis have been dismissed en masse from public-sector employment, including health and education; their private property has been confiscated; and widespread terror has been generated through hate speech and sectarian incitement disseminated via mosque sermons and HTS-controlled media propaganda.

The IHIYTK has examined operational documents and reported that orders for the massacres of Alevis originated from the regime itself, which declared a general mobilization to "suppress the conspiracy" and ordered deployments to the coastal region. The committee further determined that the orders for the massacres were issued by the following officers affiliated with the HTS regime: [3]

Ali Nureddin al-Nasan, Chief of the Syrian Military (from the leadership of HTS and al-Nusra)
Murhaf Abu Kasra, Syrian Minister of Defense (from HTS's military and security leadership)
Anas Hassan Khattab, Director General of Intelligence (from HTS's security leadership)

The orders reportedly began with the phrase "in accordance with the instructions of the President" and were transmitted to the following units:

HTS's military and security apparatus (all Syrian and foreign armed groups operating under the HTS umbrella)
Five Syrian armed groups not yet formally integrated into HTS, including the al-Amshad Division, al-Hamzat Division, Ahrar al-Sharqiya Movement, al-Muntasir Billah Division, Muhammad al-Fatih Division, and Sultan Murad Division
Other foreign (migrant) armed groups not yet integrated into HTS

According to a statement by Amnesty International dated 3

April 2025, the killings that took place on 8 and 9 March 2025 in the coastal city of Banyas were deliberate and specifically targeted the Alevi minority. HTS authorities reportedly forced families whose relatives had been killed to bury their loved ones in mass graves without religious rites or public ceremonies. Commenting on the findings, Amnesty International Secretary General Agnès Callamard stated that "government-affiliated militias deliberately targeted civilians belonging to the Alevi minority" and that "the authorities failed to intervene to stop the killings." [4]

Human Rights Watch has likewise reported that, despite the shocking scale of the death toll, Syrian authorities have implemented no measures of accountability. On the contrary, the regime has sought to conceal perpetrators and suppress the truth. One of the most striking examples of such cover-up efforts is the practice of the fact-finding committee established to investigate the atrocities and violations committed in the coastal region. The committee's investigative findings were described as "entirely contrary to the facts, developments on the ground, and eyewitness testimonies." [5]

Conclusion

The available evidence indicates that sectarian violence against Alevis in Syria has a long historical background. The ideological foundation of this violence lies in the Takfiri tradition of thought that has demonized Alevis through fatwas. Grounded in Takfiri-Salafi jihadism, the HTS regime has reproduced and expanded this historical legacy in the contemporary context by portraying Alevis as "remnants of the Assad regime." Sunni autocracies and authoritarian regimes in the Middle East, as well as Western "democracies" bearing a legacy of colonialism in the region, bear responsibility at different levels for the ongoing genocidal process targeting Alevis. This responsibility has manifested both directly, through support for the HTS regime despite the well-documented backgrounds of its leaders and armed elements, and indirectly, through the

failure to take effective action against HTS-led massacres of Alevis.In this context, the continued existence of Alevism in Syria as a religion, culture, and identity has brought to the fore the historical and social phenomenon of community-based self-protection capacity among Alevi communities. Alevis in Syria possess historical experiences in this regard, including the establishment of an independent Alevi state in the 1920s. Moreover, practices of solidarity between Alevi communities worldwide and anti-colonial movements, human rights advocates, and progressive civil society organizations constitute an important dimension of this process.

Endnotes

[1] The use of fatwas to facilitate genocide against Alevis in Anatolia falls outside the scope of this article. However, it should be noted that Ottoman rulers likewise relied on fatwas and condemnations issued by Sunni religious institutions prior to massacring Alevis in Anatolia. On this issue, see Doğan and Çelik (2014); Karakaya-Stump (2015).

[2] Syrian Observatory for Human Rights. "Including 8,654 civilians: 11,226 people killed in Syria since the fall of the al-Assad regime." https://www.syriahr.com/en/373033/

[3] Human Rights and Humanitarian Follow-up Committee (Syria). Genocide on the Syrian Coast: Preliminary Report (English). https://fhmsihr.org/eng/preliminary-report/

[4] Amnesty International. "Syria: Coastal massacres of Alawite civilians must be investigated as war crimes." https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2025/04/syria-coastal-massacres-of-alawite-civilians-must-be-investigated-as-war-crimes/

[5] Human Rights Watch. "Syria: March atrocities demand senior-level accountability." https://www.hrw.org/news/2025/09/23/syria-march-atrocities-demand-senior-level-accountability.

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