# Arab Alevis (2) (Alawite / Nusayrism)

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**Summary**
Nusayri-Alawite (Arab Alevism) is a unique belief system based on esoteric and batini (inner) interpretations within the Shiite tradition of Islam. Shaped by the teachings of Muhammad ibn Nusayr in the 9th century, this tradition is rooted in the trinity of "Ma'na-Ism-Bab" (Essence-Name-Gate), where Ali represents divine essence, Muhammad the manifest form, and Salman al-Farisi the mediator. The most distinctive feature distinguishing Nusayris from other Islamic groups is their belief in reincarnation (tanasukh) - the conviction that the soul is immortal and transmigrates through different bodies. Historically subjected to persecution and marginalization, Nusayris adopted taqiyya (religious dissimulation) to protect their faith. Esoteric knowledge is exclusively transmitted to male adolescents through special initiation rituals. The community divides into two main sects: Kilaziyya (who venerate the moon) and Haydariyya (who reject moon worship), with Kilaziyya predominating in Syria and Haydariyya in Turkey. In Nusayri society, religious and social life revolves around two institutions: Shaykhhood (religious leadership) and "unclehood" (initiatory mentorship). While shaykhs represent religious authority, "religious uncles" guide young males through initiation. Geographically, they mainly concentrate in Syria's Latakia region and Turkey's Hatay, Adana, and Mersin provinces. Despite identity debates, Nusayrism differs theologically and ritually from Anatolian Alevism, particularly in its attribution of divine qualities to Ali, reincarnation beliefs, and secret worship practices. Having evolved from a sect into a comprehensive way of life through historical struggles, Nusayrism holds a distinctive position among Islam's heterodox interpretations.

**Keywords:** Alawite, Esoteric Interpretatiton, Kilaziyye-haydariyye, Meanin-name-gate, Nusayrism, Sheikhood, Taqiyya, Unclehood

## Definition and Origins

Nusayrism, also known as Arab Alawism, is a unique belief system within the Islamic world that is based on esoteric (hidden) and bāṭinī (the idea that the verses of the Qur’an have deeper, inner meanings beyond their apparent ones) interpretations of Shiism. The community takes its name from Abū Shuʿayb Muḥammad ibn Nuṣayr al-Bakrī al-

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Numaīrī, who lived in the ninth century. Due to their rituals and teachings that distinguish them from other communities, Nusayris have been subjected to pressures and exclusion throughout history and they have been regarded among the heterodox interpretations of Islam. While members of the group were known as Nusayris until the 1920s, after religious rulings (fatwas) issued by Iranian clerics in the 1920s, their name was changed to Alawi (Prochazka-Eisl & Prochazka 2010). In Turkey, Nusayris identify themselves either as Arab-Alevi or simply as Alevi. However, due to this naming, they should not be confused with Anatolian Alevis. These two Alevi traditions do not intersect historically and, at the same time, have different rituals and social institutions.

The core texts and systematic teachings of Nusayrism were compiled and systematized particularly after the death of Muhammad ibn Nusayr by Abu Abdullah al-Husayn ibn Hamdan al-Khasibi (al-Khasibi) and Abu Said Maymun ibn Qasim al-Tabarani (al-Tabarani) (Bella 2012). Due to their heterodox interpretation of Islam, the Nusayris (Alawites) faced either oppression or exclusion by the rulers of their regions. As a result, Nusayri belief doctrines/texts were typically shared only with initiated individuals, and the teachings were preserved through oral tradition. However, *the foundational texts* reached a broader audience in 2006 with the publication in Lebanon of Silsilat al-Turath al-Alawi: Rasa'il al-Hikma al-Alawiyya (The Chain of Alawi Heritage: Epistles of Alawi Wisdom), a multi-volume collection edited by Abu Musa al-Hariri (Erdoğdu 2022).

## The Tripartite Theological Structure: Maʿnā – Ism – Bāb

The Nusayri faith possesses a tripartite theological structure, commonly formulated as follows: Meaning-Name-Gate (Maʿnā-Ism-Bāb). Maʿnā (Meaning) refers to the divine essence and represents God. In Nusayri doctrine, this essence manifested in ʿAlī ibn Abī Tālib. Ism (Name) is the visible form of God's word, identified as the Prophet

Muhammad. Bāb (Gate) denotes the mediator between the Creator and humanity, embodied in Salmān al-Fārisī within the Nusayri triad. As evident, this belief system is fundamentally grounded in the idea that God can only be comprehended through intermediaries. A critical point must be emphasized here: ʿAlī is not God Himself but the vessel through which God's essence is manifested

**The Doctrine of Tanāsukh**

In addition to this tripartite theological structure, what sets Nusayrism apart from many other groups within the Islamic tradition is its belief in tanāsukh-the transmigration of souls. Nusayris hold that the human soul is immortal and that after death, it passes into another body. In the regions of Hatay and Adana, stories are still told of individuals reborn in another's body, and some even share with their relatives their own experiences of having been reborn in a new form after death (Friedman 2010).

**Taqiyya**

Nusayris view taqiyya (dissimulation) as a religious obligation. The disclosure of their secrets results in expulsion from the community. These secrets are revealed only to initiated men, who are bound by numerous oaths never to divulge them. Historically, Nusayri taqiyya emerged as a response to persecution, marginalization, and social exclusion. At the same time, the belief that theological secrets should be entrusted only to the worthy has also contributed to the widespread practice of taqiyya. Consequently, Nusayrism's core texts have limited circulation, and not all members of the community possess the same level of religious knowledge.

**Two Sects, Two Interpretations**

Nusayrism has split into two main sects due to interpretative differences: the Kilāziyya and the Haydariyya. Although these two sects share core beliefs, they diverge in certain symbolic interpretations and social practices. These

differences have led to occasional internal conflicts, both major and minor. The primary doctrinal divergence concerns the sanctity of the moon: the Kilāziyya sect venerates the moon, while the Haydariyya rejects this belief. Additionally, there are variations in hand gestures during prayer. In Syria, the majority of Nusayris belong to the Kilāziyya sect, whereas in Turkey, the Haydariyya holds greater influence (Shannak 2022).

**Sheikhdom and Unclehood**

Two prominent social institutions stand out in Nusayrism: "Hocalık/Şıhlık" (Sheikhdom) and "Amcalık" (Unclehood). These institutions are primarily responsible for transmitting religious knowledge to new generations and maintaining social order. Both are male-dominated and operate within a strict hierarchical structure. Sheikhs are regarded as the highest religious authorities, possessing advanced esoteric knowledge. Their role is hereditary, passing from father to son. Beyond their mastery of religious texts, sheikhs also serve as mediators in communal disputes, leaders of rituals, and spiritual advisors. However, it is important to note that while sheikhs act as spiritual guides for specific regions, Nusayrism lacks formal centralized religious leadership. Followers may consult multiple sheikhs simultaneously and even invite different sheikhs to lead prayer gatherings at different times. Sheikhs play a pivotal role in the initiation process, transmitting the Nusayri "secret" (sır) through rituals-first to the "uncle" (amca), who then passes it on to the male initiate (talib/telmìz). For a Nusayri boy to become a full member of the community, he must learn specific prayers, symbols, and doctrinal teachings. This initiation takes place in the uncle's home, where the esoteric knowledge is gradually revealed.

**The institution of** *Amcalık* **(Unclehood) plays a central role in initiating adolescent boys into Nusayrism.** Around the ages of 14-15, each boy is assigned a *"dinden amca"* (religious uncle), who guides his spiritual development and serves as a role model in social life. This

uncle and his family effectively become a second family for the initiate (*telmiz*-the male child learning prayer). The boy must show the same respect and care to his religious uncle and his wife as he does to his own parents. Since the children of the *dinden amca* are considered religious siblings, marriage between the initiate and the uncle's daughter is strictly forbidden-believed to bring a curse upon them if violated.

**Historical and Geographical Presence**

Although Nusayrism first emerged in the Basra-Kufa region, its followers historically sustained their presence in the mountainous and coastal areas of the Levant. To protect themselves from external persecution, they often settled in isolated, hard-to-reach regions. Centuries of homogeneous living allowed them to preserve their collective memory and religious traditions. Today, the largest concentration of Nusayris is in Syria's Latakia region. In Turkey, they are known as Arab Alevis and are concentrated in three main provinces: Hatay (particularly in Samandağ, Antakya, Arsuz, Altınözü, and Defne districts) Adana (in neighborhoods and villages such as Akkapı, Yamaçlı, Karataş, and Haydaroğlu) Mersin (in Kazanlı, Karaduvar, and coastal neighborhoods of Akdeniz district) While they are clustered in these three regions, the Nusayris of Hatay hold a central position both demographically and in terms of preserving traditional rituals.

**Identity Debates and Theological Distinctions**

While some Nusayri individuals view themselves as a branch of Alevism, others emphasize the uniqueness of their sect and prefer the term Arab Alevism. This triggers identity debates within the community, leading to differing definitions of belonging across generations. However, regardless of how they self-identify, Nusayrism (Arab Alevism) should not be confused with Anatolian Alevism. Although love for Ali holds a central role in both belief systems, there are significant theological, ritual, and

sociocultural differences between them. Nusayri doctrines-such as the belief in divine manifestation in Ali, the prayer performed (not 'prayed' but 'performed') by initiated men at specific times, the belief in reincarnation (tenasüh), the institutions of sheikhs and unclehood (amcalık), the status of women, and their unique religious holidays-distinguish it from Anatolian Alevism, which is characterized by cem ceremonies, semah rituals, musahiplik (religious brotherhood), and the dede-mürşit-pir hierarchy."

In short, Nusayrism, as a distinct tradition, occupies a unique place within Islam's esoteric and heterodox interpretations. Centuries of resistance to assimilation have shaped it not just as a sect but as a way of life and a model of communal solidarity. Secrecy (taqiyya), born out of persecution, became a core tenet of their faith. Thus, Nusayrism should neither be classified strictly within classical Shiʿism nor treated as an extension of Anatolian Alevism. Instead, it must be understood as an independent doctrine shaped by local syncretism within the broader Islamic tradition

**Conclusion**

Nusayrism (Arab Alawism) stands out as a distinct and self-contained tradition within the heterodox and esoteric interpretations of Islam. Rooted in the teachings of Muhammad ibn Nusayr and formalized through the theological trinity of *Maʿnā-Ism-Bāb*, it constructs a metaphysical cosmology that situates divine essence in ʿAlī, manifested through Muhammad, and mediated by Salmān al-Fārisī. The doctrine of *tanāsukh* (transmigration of souls) further differentiates it from mainstream Islamic sects, emphasizing a cyclical understanding of the soul's journey. Nusayrism's strict practice of *taqiyya* has historically served both as a survival strategy and as a mechanism for preserving its esoteric knowledge across generations.

This tradition is upheld and transmitted through a complex, male-dominated institutional framework involving the

complementary roles of *sheikhdom* and *unclehood*, which together structure religious authority and social initiation. Internally, Nusayrism contains interpretive diversity, most notably between the Kilāziyya and Haydariyya sects, while externally, it is often misunderstood or conflated with Anatolian Alevism, despite substantial differences in theology, ritual, and cosmology.

Geographically concentrated in Syria and southern Turkey, Nusayri communities have maintained a strong collective identity shaped by historical marginalization and regional isolation. While debates over identity-whether as part of Alevism or as an autonomous tradition-persist, Nusayrism has evolved into a comprehensive way of life rather than remaining merely a theological system. Its commitment to secrecy, oral transmission, and communal cohesion exemplifies a resilient religious model forged through centuries of adaptation and resistance.

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