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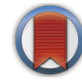

'Alawi Muslims in Argentina: religious and political identity in the diaspora

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Abstract This article examines contemporary aspects of the identity construction of the 'Alawi diaspora in Argentina. In the local context, the preservation of 'Alawi singularity has so far been a key element in the group's identity. The strategies for integration as legitimate Muslims in the wider Islam and the closeness to Shi'ism are relatively independent of how these processes took place in the homeland. I first describe the geography of the diaspora in Argentina, comprising the spaces and institutions where descendants settled all over the country. I analyze the factors that helped keep the nodes connected and I will demonstrate that these constitute a center/periphery logic for communities concerning the alleged degrees of preservation of the culture of origin they symbolize. I will try to show that 'Alawis integrated into the diversity of Islam in Argentina while preserving their sectarian borders and, at the same time, stressing an "Arab" identity. I argue that these strategies should be understood in the local arena of an intra-Islamic pluralism that constitutes Muslim presence in Argentina, where the dynamics of sectarianisms assume idiosyncratic characteristics. Finally, I will show institutional closeness to Shi'ism as a recent development, promoted by the common political stance of both groups on the conflict in Syria. We will see that this closeness does not imply the dissolution of doctrinal boundaries between Shi'is and 'Alawis and that it involves a redefinition of the diaspora in terms of increasingly claiming a Syrian national origin.

Keywords 'Alawis · Syria · Muslim · Diaspora · Imigration · Argentina

Introduction

The beliefs and probable sources of inspiration comprising the 'Alawi cosmology, often characterized as "syncretic", is a subject of debate among scholars. While some have

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emphasized the predominance of external influences such as Christian Gnosticism, pagan elements, Greek philosophy, Zoroastrianism and local superstitions, others have characterized the 'Alawi religion as a development inside the Shi'a, which emerged in Iraq in the nineteenth century (Friedman 2010: 68–70). 'Alawis are probably one of the last mystical sects of Shi'ism considered *Ghulat* (exaggerators) by their contemporary rivals because of their extreme veneration of Ali and his descendants (Friedman 2010: 5). In the past they used to be called Nusayris, a name apparently associated with the sect founder, Muhammad Ibn Nusayr, a disciple of 'Ali al-Hadi, the tenth Imam of the Twelver Shi'a and of the eleventh, Hasan al-Askari. The promulgator of the faith was al-Husayn Ibn Hamdan al-Khasibi, who first operated in Iraq and later moved to Aleppo.[1] The name 'Alawis was adopted in the 20th century to emphasize the attachment to 'Ali ibn Abi Talib, the first Shi'i Imam, and thereby reaffirm their belonging to Shi'ism. Today, group members consider the term Nusayris pejorative, but some researchers still use it.[2]

The history of 'Alawi presence in Syria should be examined in different political contexts: under the Ottoman Empire, under the French mandate and after independence.[3] In each of these periods, the attitude of Sunnis and Shi'is to the sect ranged from harsh persecution, based on the alleged heretic character of their beliefs, to legitimization, first as Muslims and, later, as part of Shi'i Islam.[4] The various *fatwas* issued against 'Alawis show this process; the first four condemning them as non-Muslims were declared before the twentieth century. Once the Ottoman Empire was over, already amidst the emergence of Arab nationalism, the Grand Mufti of Jerusalem Muhammad Amin al-Husayni issued in 1936 a *fatwa* declaring 'Alawis part of Islam. In the 1970s two other *fatwas* tried to legitimize their belonging to Shi'i Islam; the most important was the one issued in 1974 by Musa al-Sadr acknowledging them as a community within the Twelver Shi'a Muslims (Talhamy 2010).

In modern Syria, the changing situation of 'Alawis has tended, not without ambiguities, toward integration into the political and religious arena. After 1922, followers of the sect publicly rejected the name Nusayris and sought to assert their identity as 'Alawis; the religious implications of this transition were expressed by community insiders in a series of texts published between 1930 and 1931, with a positive impact among some Sunni sectors. According to Firro (2005), it was a transition from the *Nusayriya* to Islam via *Alawiya*, a process that, besides helping the sect integrate to Islam, may also have allowed it to adopt the nationalist ideology. During the mandate (1923–1946), French politics had encouraged separatism, even creating an 'Alawi state. Consequently, the elites later faced two options: either keeping separate, emphasizing their ethno-religious particularism, or joining the nationalist movement (Firro 2005: 18–19). In 1943, after independence and the

[1] For an analysis of Al-Khasibi's role in the development and expansion of the sect, see Friedman (2001).

[2] In their own religious books, Alawis usually call themselves *al-muwahhidun* —"the monotheists"—, *ahl at-tawhid* —"the people of monotheism"— or simply *al-mu minun* —"the believers" (Procházka 2016: 2).

[3] According to Stefan Winter, the older history of the 'Alawis is often treated in essentialist terms and reduced to a single overarching theme of religious deviance, marginality, and oppression. See recent analysis by Winter (2016).

[4] The religion's secret character, distinguishing between initiated and non-initiated members, favored the spread of fantasies and defamation about some of their beliefs and practices, as well as defensive responses by community intellectuals. The main components include: the belief in a triad made up of the parts of divinity (*ma'na*, *ism* and *bab*) and in metempsychosis, the non-prohibition of alcohol consumption, the rare attendance at mosques, the practice of *taqiyya* (religious dissimulation). The most thorough contemporary studies of these religious components are the books by Friedman (2010) and Bar-Asher and Kofsky (2002).

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permanent integration of the 'Alawi region to the Syrian state, Iraqi and Lebanese Twelver Shi'a authorities encouraged the construction of mosques in the 'Alawi mountains and sent young people to Najaf to be trained in religious sciences (Mervin 2006: 353). Until the 1960s the Syrian state apparatus lay economically and politically in the hands of Sunni elites. However, the 'Alawis started integrating through the army and the Ba'ath party, aided by a context of political rhetoric that silenced particularisms and denominational differences (Firro 2005: 30). After 1980, the impact of the Iranian revolution and the close political alliance between Syria and Iran strengthened the tendency toward "Shiitization". Again, 'Alawi students were sent to Qom to specialize in Twelver jurisprudence (Kramer 1987: 253). However, as Friedman 2010: 237) argues, while during the twentieth century Lebanese, Iraqi and Iranian Shi'a leaders strove to assimilate 'Alawis to Shi'ism, the return to the Ja'fari school has always depended on the degrees of preservation of former Nusayris identity of origin.

Today, the total number of 'Alawis worldwide is estimated at 4 million at most. In Syria there are around 2.5 million (approximately 12% of the population). They stayed long in the mountains on the northwest coast of Syria[5] and only after the second half of the twentieth century did some educated groups move to cities such as Damascus, Latakia, Homs and Aleppo. Around 1 million live in three Turkish provinces —Mersin, Hatay and Adana—, some 100,000 live in northern Lebanon, and the rest in Europe and Latin America (Procházka 2016: 1–2). Among the Latin American countries, Argentina has undoubtedly the largest community and number of institutions founded by 'Alawis, who migrated in the early twentieth century.[6]

This article examines contemporary aspects of the identity construction of the 'Alawi diaspora in Argentina. In the local context, the preservation of 'Alawi singularity has so far been a key element in the group's identity. The strategies for integration as legitimate Muslims in the wider Islam and the closeness to Shi'ism are relatively independent of how these processes took place in the homeland. I will first describe the geography of the diaspora in Argentina, comprising the spaces and institutions where descendants settled all over the country. For this purpose I will analyze the factors that helped keep the nodes connected and I will demonstrate that these constitute a center/periphery logic for communities concerning the alleged degrees of preservation of the culture of origin they symbolize. I will try to show that 'Alawis integrated into the diversity of Islam in Argentina while preserving their sectarian borders and, at the same time, stressing an "Arab" identity. This allowed them to be recognized in the wider sphere of Islamic Arab communities in the country. I will argue that these strategies should be understood in the local arena of an intra-Islamic pluralism that constitutes Muslim

[5] After a first period of dissemination of beliefs, there was a territorial retreat into "mountain refuge"; see Paoli (2013b). Rabinovich (1979), drawing from P. Rondot and A. Hourani the term "compact minorities", compares 'Alawis and Druzes based on their shared characteristics: among others, both inhabited mountainous areas where the largest portion of the community was concentrated and where that community constituted an absolute majority.

[6] Brazil and Argentina are the Southern Cone countries with the largest Arab immigration. 'Alawi presence in Argentina differs from the case of Brazil, where there are only two institutions with little activity: the 'Alawi Muslim Charitable Society, established in 1931 in Rio de Janeiro, operating effectively until 2000 and comprising 400 members today, and the Muslim Charitable Society of São Paulo, founded in 1965, with 700 members (Onram 2015: 68–71). For an analysis of Muslim communities in Brazil see Montenegro & Benlabbah (2013). For an overview of Muslim presence in Latin America, see Logroño Narbona et al. (2015).

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presence in Argentina, where the dynamics of sectarianisms assume idiosyncratic characteristics. Finally, I will show institutional closeness to Shi'ism as a recent development, promoted by the common political stance of both groups on the conflict in Syria.[7] We will see that this closeness does not imply the dissolution of doctrinal boundaries between Shi'is and 'Alawis and that it involves a redefinition of the diaspora in terms of increasingly claiming a Syrian national origin. In this article, I adopt an ethnographic approach based on fieldwork in various 'Alawi communities making up the diaspora. It included interviews with leaders and members as well as participant observation at parties, religious events, mobilizations and public protests concerning the conflict in Syria. I obtained information on immigrants' hometowns and stories from community members, either orally or through the access to albums or diaries recording group memory. Studies on 'Alawis in Syria date back to the work carried out by Orientalist scholars such as Dussaud (1900) or missionaries such as Lyde (1853), among others, between the middle of the 19th and the early 20th centuries. Later on, a limited corpus focused on the contemporary study of 'Alawis, with a growing literature over the last two decades examining the sect's role and relationship with political power in Syria. This article seeks to shed new light on the current circumstances of a community with a hundred years' presence in Argentina, whose identity trajectory remains unexplored until today.

From *Jabal al-'Alawiyin* to the diversity of Islam in Argentina

The 'Alawi diaspora began with the Arab immigration that thrived from 1890 to the first three decades of the twentieth century, becoming sporadic or individual in the subsequent years.[8] Clubs and other forms of association brought immigrants together based on the names of their homelands or under institutions that used broader names. The largest number were those that called themselves "Arab", followed by those that used the compound term "Syrian-Lebanese". Fewer entities were established, depending on the historical period, under the sole name of "Syrian" or "Lebanese".[9] These different names illustrated the agreements and disagreements around ethnic or national ascriptions that brought together or separated the various groups in the diaspora; they were also subject to the impact of the political processes taking place in the homelands.

Within a Christian majority of Arab immigrants practicing different religions (Orthodox, Melchites, Maronites, Catholics), Muslims were an active minority that founded their first religious institutions between the second and third decades of the

[7] Although 'Alawis may be considered Shi'is, the institutional and identity distinction between both groups in Argentina persists through, or is marked by, relations of proximity and distance. When I refer to Shi'is I then mean the Twelver Shi'ism that follows the Ja'fari School of Shari'a and that, in the case of Argentina, is connected with Iran as a reference center.

[8] For an overview of Arab immigration in Argentina, see Akmir (2011) and Montenegro (2009).

[9] The Homs Club (club Homs), the Yabrudense Association (Asociación Yabrudense) and Aleppo's Offspring (Los Hijos de Aleppo) are examples of entities based on regional origin. In a sample of 132 Arab immigration institutions in Argentina, with no religious reference, I counted 58 under the "Syrian-Lebanese" name; other 42 appealed to the Arab category, in a number that would exceed the former if we considered the Islamic entities also including "Arab" in their name; 19 entities identified themselves exclusively as "Syrian" and 13 as "Lebanese".

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twentieth century.[10] In this context, ‘Alawi Syrians remained autonomous in respect of other Muslims, by establishing their own institutions whose names included the distinctive term “Alawi” (Alauita). This did not stop many of them from visibly engaging in Arab entities where immigrants and descendants of different religions shared spaces.[11] The ‘Alawi institutional dynamics respond to the general patterns characterizing most of the first Islamic entities established in Argentina: some associations still exist today, after stagnation or inactivity periods; others disappeared after the first generation of descendants, and others reemerged after developing institutional strategies that helped them change, expand and become stronger.

Almost one hundred years later, Muslim presence in contemporary Argentina is marked by its internal diversity and by institutional reconfiguration and diversification processes over the last three decades. Sunnis, Shi‘is, ‘Alawis, Druze and various Sufi *tariqas* hold dynamic positions in the Argentine Islamic field (Montenegro 2007).[12] Some institutions continue restricting their membership to descendants of the Syrian and Lebanese immigrants who founded the oldest Islamic associations. Other groups accept or promote the conversion of Argentinians of non-Arab descent. In the case of Sunnis and Shi‘is, besides the entities created by immigrants, after 1980 institutions were founded by descendants or emerged as a result of the local outreach of transnational projects. Also, in the early 1990s the arrival of some branches of Sufism and their subsequent divisions provided one of the more dynamic ways for the conversion of Argentinians.[13] Over the last fifteen years, African —mostly Senegalese— immigrants have further contributed to the diversification of Islam by moving their confraternities to their new places of residence.[14] Transnational connections with centers providing religious education, doctrinal and ideological guidance and funding, such as Saudi Arabia, Iran and, lately, the local expansion of some movements from Turkey or India,[15] help the restructuring or strengthening of some institutions

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[10] Specific figures of Muslims in Argentina are difficult to obtain, as the national census does not include any question on religion affiliation. According to reports by the Islamic Office for Latin America, the number of Muslims in Argentina exceeds 700,000, some 160,000 of them living in Greater Buenos Aires alone. Other institutions, such as the Center for Islamic Studies, refer to 450,000 Muslims. The Islamic Center of Argentina prefers to estimate them at 500,000–700,000. There are no data available about the number of ‘Alawis; according to community’s own sources, during the first decades of the twentieth century they accounted for 40% of the Muslims who had arrived in Argentina.

[11] In some locations where the number of ‘Alawis was not sufficient for establishing an autonomous entity, immigrants used to share spaces at non-religious institutions. For instance, ‘Alawis in the Argentine littoral city of Santa Fe stated that, until the 1950s, they and their parents shared spaces with immigrants and Lebanese descendants at the Syrian-Lebanese Club (Club Sirio Libanés), founded in 1924. In the 1950s, given many disagreements they established a separate institution they called Syrian Social Center Arab House (Centro Social Sirio Casa Árabe), where ‘Alawi Syrians prevailed, but they never managed to create a religious institution.

[12] In Argentina there are 12 centers of the *tariqa* Naqshbandiyya Haqqaniya and 3 of the Yerrahiyya Order.

[13] For a typological analysis of conversion to Islam in Argentina, see Montenegro (2015b).

[14] The Senegalese immigrants that have arrived to Argentina in the last decades (around 10,000) mostly belong to the *tariqa* Muridiyya, founded in 1883 by Amadu Bamba Mbacke (1850–1927) in Senegal.

[15] Since the early 1990s, the revivalistic movement Tablighi Jamaat, established in 1927 in India by Muhammad Ilyas al-Kandhlawi, is visibly present in the country through missionaries who perform *da'wa* (invitation) among Muslims from different communities. They have a *musalla* in the city of Buenos Aires, a *madrasa* in the city of Quilmes and a mosque in the city of Mar del Plata. Like elsewhere in Latin America, the Turkish movement *Hizmet* (service) led by Fethullah Gülen arrived in Argentina in the late 1990s. It opened a Turkish language teaching center, in 2004 it established the Argentine-Turkish Friendship Association (Fundación de Amistad Argentino-Turca), later the Hercules school and the ALBA Center for Intercultural Dialog (Centro de Diálogo Intercultural ALBA) as spaces for spreading their interpretation of Islam.

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and the establishment of others. Within this intra-Islamic pluralism, ‘Alawi Muslims continue standing out because of their institutional autonomy, the maintenance and reinvention of their traditions of origin and endogenous cultural reproduction.

The first ‘Alawis arrived in the 1900s, but most came between 1920 and 1935 from the small villages on the northwest coast of Syria, the region known as *Jabal al-‘Alawiyin* (‘Alawi mountains) and its surroundings. Through descendants' own narratives and documents I noticed that immigrants came from places such as Sebei (17 km to the north of Safita, in the Tartus Governorate), Al-Findara and Sighata (located in the district of Masyaf, west of Hama), Al-Rabiaa (also to the west of Hama), Baniyas, Safita and the cities of Tartus and Latakia; others arrived from the Deir Mama village, inhabited by Christians and ‘Alawis. Migrations, therefore, took place in the context of the falling Ottoman Empire and during the first two decades of the French mandate. Economic, political and religious factors contributed to the decision to migrate. While in other times they had been relatively tolerated, toward the end of the Ottoman Empire ‘Alawis underwent increasing pressure to quit their traditional doctrines and reform their faith. In order to assimilate them, the Ottomans built mosques imposing the Sunni Hanafi rite; among ‘Alawis only few *shaykhs* embraced reformism (Firro 2005: 12–14). After the fall of the Ottoman Empire, the French encouraged ‘Alawi separatism to ensure they kept away from Sunni nationalists that called for Syria's independence and unity. Between 1922 and 1936, when most of the diaspora arrived in Argentina, there was a separate ‘Alawi state created by the French where ‘Alawis were still socially and economically inferior to Sunnis (Kramer 1987: 238).

Once in Argentina they settled all over the country and today there are still four spatial concentration areas, constituting on the whole a geography that connects the diaspora through family bonds and common beliefs, practices and origins. Three of these areas coincide with host places and with the creation of institutional spaces by immigrants just a few decades after arrival, or in subsequent years together with their first-generation descendants. A fourth space is *Shaykh* Ahmed's sanctuary, located in a town with no Arab immigration but where ‘Alawis assemble to visit the shrine of one of their spiritual leaders, whom they see as a saint that performs miracles.[16] In each of these scenarios, ‘Alawis integrate into the broader and more varied field of Arab or Islamic association.

In Northwest Argentina the province of Tucumán is relevant. In its capital city, San Miguel de Tucumán, ‘Alawi Syrians together with a few Sunni families established in 1929 the Pan-Islamic Cultural and Worship Association (Asociación Cultural y Culto Panislámica). Over time, and with the assimilation of Sunni families to the local culture and the loss of religious adherence, the institution in the end represented only ‘Alawi Muslims —many more in numbers from the beginning— and their descendants. This "Pan-Islamic" origin explains that it is the only ‘Alawi institution whose name does not specify the sectarian belonging. For financial purposes, several institutions have chosen to lease part of their premises for commercial activities, reserving other areas for worship.[17] For many

[16] *Shaykh* Ahmed Marhej, who died in 1943, was a prominent spiritual leader for the community, said to perform miracles and to have healing powers. His shrine became a sanctuary visited not only by ‘Alawis but also by other Muslims and some Christians.

[17] As I was able to see in my visits to the institution, the prayer room carpets bear the logotype and the acronym of the Islamic Center of the Argentine Republic, a Sunni entity that has set itself up as the "representative of Muslims in Argentina" and as the "Mother entity". CIRA assists with the infrastructure of some centers in the country, and its support is another token of the institutional acknowledgment of ‘Alawis as legitimate Muslims.

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decades, the institution founded by ʻAlawis was the only Muslim entity among a number of associations that brought together Arab immigrants, many living in the Northwest.[18] The city of Tucumán is characterized by a visible Arab presence: both the institutions created by immigrants and the Arab trade area are in the city's downtown, and this "concentration" helps reinforce the idea that Tucumán is a markedly Arab city. Throughout my fieldwork there, the institutional representatives of Arab associations agreed that around 35% or 40% of the city's population is composed of Arab descendants; ʻAlawi Muslims stated that 70 % of that percentage are Muslims. Regardless of the accuracy of these data, I would like to stress that in this area Muslims consider themselves a majority within the Arab community, inverting the proportion in the rest of the country. At the same time, in the region as a whole Arabs see themselves as having a strong historical presence. By the mid-1980s, the ʻAlawi association is no longer the only Muslim entity, given the creation of the *ash-Shahid* mosque and the *al-Ghadir* Institute for Islamic Culture and Sciences (Instituto de Cultura y Ciencias del Islam), both of them Shi'i-oriented. These institutions were established by Muslims of ʻAlawi origin who withdrew from their community through the integration into Shi'i Islam transnational networks. After the Islamic revolution in Iran, the links with Latin America have had Argentina as the first host space. In the mid-1980s, two young descendants of ʻAlawi Syrians from Tucumán were the first Argentinians to receive formal religious education in Qom and to create institutions openly identified with that branch of Islam and detached from ʻAlawis. In Tucumán, while sectarian differences foster engagement in extralocal relations, the imaginary of the existence of a "great Arab community" kept ʻAlawis integrated with Christian, Maronite and Orthodox Arabs in commercial or daily activities. Many ʻAlawis say they have often visited entities of the Syrian-Lebanese community as spaces frequented by "Arabs" of different religious traditions. Others highlight the "Arab character" of the city and the number of "compatriots" one can find there, claiming that religious differences have not estranged the community. In Tucumán ʻAlawi families have also scattered over towns within the province, such as Aguilares and Los Ralos. Thus, in the northwestern region, by emphasizing their Arab identity, ʻAlawis integrate into a wider, regionally visible, diaspora, recognized and valued as part of the local migration landscape.

The second concentration area is Buenos Aires, both the province and the country's capital city. Here ʻAlawis integrate into a space with strong intra-Islamic pluralism. In the Caballito neighborhood they founded in 1929 the Islamic ʻAlawi Charitable Union (Unión Alauita Islamita de Beneficencia), another one of the first Islam entities in Argentina. This institution follows a quite common trajectory among pioneering institutions. In 1933 it changed its name to Pan-Islamic ʻAlawi Charitable Association (Asociación Pan Alauita Islámica de Beneficencia); it was at its height between the 1940s and 1950s, to undergo periods of stagnation and financial difficulties later on. In the late 1990s there was a turnover including the sale of the former center and the plan for a new building, opened in 2011. The restructuring strategy consisted in changing from a charity into a not-for-profit organization, as part of a business plan aimed at operating the halls for meetings, parties

[18] In Tucumán there are several institutions founded by immigrants, such as the Syrian-Lebanese Society (Sociedad Sirio Libanesa), 1925, the Lebanese Mutual Aid Association (Asociación Libanesa de Socorros Mutuos), 1937, the Señor del Milagro church, San Marón church, 1924, the Templo Asunción de María Santísima orthodox church, 1914. Other entities were established by descendants, such as the Arab-Argentine Institute (Instituto Argentino Árabe), 1984, a non-denominational school that offers optional Arabic language and Arab culture classes.

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and corporate events. Thus, profitable activities became a source of funding for unprofitable ones, such as community cultural and religious events. In 1936, also in the city of Buenos Aires, the ʻAlawi Union Association (Asociación Unión Alauita) was created, and in 1943 other immigrants established in José Ingenieros, a southern town in the Tres de Febrero district, northwest of Greater Buenos Aires, the Islamic ʻAlawi Association of José Ingenieros (Asociación Islámica Alauita de José Ingenieros).[19] In Buenos Aires, ʻAlawis are integrated into the wider space of Islam and of the entities representing the Arab community. Within this context, the role of *shaykhs* has been key to the visibility and acknowledgment of ʻAlawi communities. Some have become well-known because of their participation in television programs to clarify events involving the Muslim community or simply spread religious principles. *Shaykh* Mohsen Ali, one of the best-known and most charismatic, has hosted since 1989 the *al-Quiblah* radio program and, every year during the Ramadan month since 1994, the "Ramadan Nights" (Noches de Ramadán) show; he has even participated in fiction films.[20] Other community leaders have stood out because of their engagement in the broader networks of the Arab community; one example is Américo Yunes (1932–2016), who hosted for 51 years (1957–2008) the radio program "Arab Homeland" (Patria Árabe), served in boards of ʻAlawi and non-ʻAlawi Islamic institutions, such as the Islamic Center of the Argentine Republic (CIRA), and participated in the establishment of the Federation of Argentine-Arab Entities (Federación de Entidades Argentino-Árabes, FEARAB). The integration and visibility of ʻAlawis in Buenos Aires helps extend this key role to the institutions within the country. The engagement of some *shaykhs* as Islam representatives in interfaith dialog promoted by the State or the Catholic Church helped make ʻAlawis visible to other religious communities.

The third concentration area is a single rural town in the northwest of the Buenos Aires province. Founded in 1926, La Angelita, also known as "Little Syria" (Pequeña Siria), stands out because nearly all its inhabitants are descendants of ʻAlawi immigrants. As we will see, this town represents the central node and symbolic core of the diaspora. While since arrival they have practiced their religion, only in 1962 did they formally establish an institution, the ʻAlawi Charitable Association of La Angelita (Asociación Alauita de Beneficencia de La Angelita), which helped gather the locals and people living in the surrounding towns, such as Rojas and Ascención.

Finally, *Shaykh* Ahmed's sanctuary, in the littoral rural zone of Argentina, is a diaspora node where ʻAlawis from all over the country converge to receive the *baraka* of the *shaykh.* These spaces do not exhaust ʻAlawi presence today, for there are families scattered over various regions of the country such as Neuquén, Mar del Plata, Balcarce, Santa Fe, Rosario, among others. Historically there were also other institutions, no longer existing now.

Within the diversity of Islam expressions in Argentina, ʻAlawis have always been publicly and institutionally recognized as legitimate Muslims. The accusation of heresy or the objection to some components in their beliefs or practices may be informal or private, but there is no institutionalized discrimination. In Argentina this is because ʻAlawi institutions integrate into one of the most hegemonic identity traditions of local

[19] For example, in the city of Mar del Plata, ʻAlawi families participated in the creation of the Arab Union Charitable Association (Asociación Unión Árabe de Beneficencia), 1935, and later of the Darus Salam Islamic Center (Centro Islámico Darus Salam), 2006, today closer to Shi'ism.

[20] *Habi, the Stranger* is a fiction film released in 2013, in which a young woman from the interior travels to Buenos Aires and, by adopting a false identity as an Arab descendant, integrates into an Islamic community. *Shaykh* Mohsen Ali participates in the film performing the religious services for the community.

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Islam, that which juxtaposes Islamic and Arab identity. By not considering conversion and by advocating an origin-based belonging, 'Alawis fully represent the Islamic Arab axiomatic identity. In this sense, they share the identity emphasis of other immigration institutions, such as the Sunni CIRA. As one of the oldest Islam entities in the country, and the most traditional one, this institution acts as an intermediary between the State and the different communities (Montenegro 2015a: 90–96). Thus, 'Alawi entities are involved in the context of acknowledgment and legitimacy enjoyed by the old Muslim institutions of Arab immigration.

In private, some 'Alawis may refer to Sunnis as "historical enemies", but I have always found this in references to the group's memory as a victim of many persecutions in Syria or regarding specific international scenarios rather than in connection with the local context. Therefore, the reassertion of 'Alawis' Arab identity is what allows them to integrate into the Islamic Arab dimension, which in different contexts overcomes sectarianism while preserving it under a larger "Arabness" umbrella comprising a mosaic of religions.

The 'Alawi geography: Centers and peripheries of authenticity

The sense of authenticity is part of the identity imagination of communities "in a diaspora situation" when it comes to conceptualizing their traditions and belongings as connected with an unchanging essential core (Hall 1999: 4). During my fieldwork, while touring around 'Alawi communities, institutions and spaces, I clearly noticed that Little Syria is the symbolic core of the diaspora. The town is appreciated by the different communities as an authentic 'Alawi enclave, reproducing in the host society many of the characteristics attributed to the homeland villages. It is the most significant core because of what it represents in terms of the group's diasporic imagination: a community of immigrants and their descendants where the relative isolation nurtures the idea that the religious and cultural traditions of origin have been preserved there. Little Syria is located in the heart of the Argentine pampas, a region prosperously engaged in agriculture and cattle-breeding[21]; most of their inhabitants, already called "Muslim gauchos" by the press,[22] coexist with a few families of Italian descent. According to the locals, in 1908, while the land belonged to a cattle ranch called Campo Alvear, the first two Syrian immigrants arrived and leased 5 ha for agriculture. In 1911, upon the opening of the first railroad station, out of service today, a settled area gradually emerged. In 1926, after the cattle ranch land was auctioned off, the urban design took place. Thus, the first immigrants arrived to the rural zone before it became a settled area, others came in 1912 and the majority between 1926 and 1930.[23] The

[21] La Angelita is located in the district of General Arenales, one of the 135 districts in the Buenos Aires province. Data from the National Institute of Statistics and Census (Instituto Nacional de Estadísticas y Censos) of Argentina show that the population decreased in La Angelita from 311 inhabitants in 1991 to 265 according to the last national census in 2010.

[22] An article published by one of the largest circulation newspapers in Argentina, entitled: "Un pueblo bonaerense con mayoría de gente de origen árabe. Los Gauchos Musulmanes", *Clarín*, September 23, 2001, page 38.

[23] All the data about Little Syria were collected during my fieldwork in the town and thanks to the documents provided by Marta, who kindly allowed me to review the notebook where she herself and her ancestors preserve "the memory" of their town.

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homelands are the small villages mentioned above. Immigrants started working as hucksters and makers, but they also turned to rural work and bought land for sowing, an activity that continues today.

Within the entire ‘Alawi geography, Little Syria and its inhabitants enjoy the prestige of authenticity and are seen as maintaining ancestral culture in its pure form. At other diaspora nodes I found many references to this idea: “they are truly mountain people”, “they have managed to preserve the customs and the language”, “they keep traditions just as life is in Syria”, “my father was a pure ‘Alawi, like those in Little Syria”. In Argentina it is unusual that second-, third- and fourth-generation descendants of Syrian and Lebanese immigrants speak or understand Arabic; hence, the town is also appreciated because of its effort to pass on the language to the younger generations.

The characteristics and the representations constructed by the diaspora about this town help spread this image of a homeland “replica”. The small town preserves a rural appearance with low, plain houses, and at first sight any visitor can recognize the locals’ marks of origin. Inside the houses there are typically pictures in Arabic with *surahs* of the *Qur’an* and references to Syria, as well as flags or photographs of regions or family members. In the public space the square in honor of *Shaykh* Saleh al-Ali stands out, with a bust carved by an artist from a neighboring town, and a plaque commemorating him as a “leader and soul of the armed resistance against the French occupation of his Syrian mother country”. Next to the access road there is a row of olive trees, also as a tribute to the homeland. The major institution in the town articulates within a single space expressions of the inhabitants’ cultural and religious identity: the Arab Society of La Angelita (Sociedad Árabe de La Angelita) and the ‘Alawi Charitable Association of La Angelita (Asociación Alauita de Beneficencia de La Angelita) are one and the same entity. For social activities, the institution has a large meeting hall, spaces for educational and religious activities, a room for Arabic lessons, the *Shaykh* Saleh al-Ali school, a prayer room and spaces for burial rites.

Although not all ‘Alawis may personally know the town, they are acquainted with its existence and in some cases they idealize its authenticity. In this context, the other spaces of ‘Alawi concentration appear as peripheral to the degree of authenticity attributed to Little Syria. The foundation dates of the first ‘Alawi institutions suggest a simultaneous settlement of immigrants in the various concentration areas. However, the imagination about the centrality of this place nurtures among some descendants the foundational myth that Little Syria was the epicenter of immigration, from where immigrants scattered to other places.

Many practices strengthen the diaspora lateral networks and imply the mobility of individuals and families toward this node of authenticity. The town and its Association are a reference for families from other locations that usually send their children to stay during the summer in Little Syria to learn Arabic and socialize in a space representing the culture of origin. Since it is seen as a “replica” of a Syrian ‘Alawi village, spending a season in the town amounts for many families to sending children and young people to the land of their ancestors. The Arabic language teacher, a descendant of one of the first inhabitants, told me about the responsibility and, at the same time, the pride it meant for them that families living in Patagonia, at the southern end of the country, should send their children to the town to learn

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Arabic in context and to participate in families' daily lives. As regards her experience with language teaching and learning, she said that, just after a few months' stay in the village, many children came back home with good knowledge of the language, and others feeling closer to religious customs.

After 1997, Little Syria was also the epicenter of the "inter-'Alawi youth camps", a relatively regular activity bringing together adolescents and youths from various nodes of the diaspora, in order to strengthen ties and engage in religious activities with the visit by *shaykhs* from different cities. In addition, at the end of each year there is a festival commemorating the town anniversary, attended by descendants from elsewhere in the country. The event itself is a ritual celebrating the 'Alawi national origin and, at the same time, the rooting of the various generations in Argentina. The day of the annual celebration, Syrian and Argentine flags flank the door of the hall decorated for the occasion; some 600–700 people come from many places. At the party there are symbols condensing references to the homeland society and the host society, showing the dual belonging of the diaspora (Tambiah 2000: 169), among which music and food are the most relevant. The menu is prepared by men and women from the town and consists of two parts. The first includes various Syrian appetizers and the second one is made up of a series of traditionally grilled cuts of Argentine meat. A famous 'Alawi Syrian singer —who alternates his place of residence between Syria and Argentina, the son of a well-known *shaykh* who returned to Syria— is engaged every year to perform with one of the most traditional Arab music orchestras in Argentina. Dancing follows a similar logic to food: *dabke* sessions and dancing to the music of the Arab orchestra are followed by Argentine *cumbia*, also danced by those present.[24] In the latest editions of the event, the escalation of the conflict in Syria triggered speeches and commemorations exalting the national origin of the diaspora, but likening Syria to the 'Alawi community. Participants planned specific actions to raise money for the 'Alawis in Syria, understanding this as helping the country as a whole. In the context of 'Alawi presence in Argentina, Little Syria operates as a geosymbolic space imbued with emotions and meanings, representing the expression of the group's common values and familiar experiences embodied in that specific place (Bonnemaison 2005: 46–47). Little Syria attracts diaspora members, making interaction possible.

Another factor that has historically helped link scattered, distant communities has been the movement of *shaykhs*. These play a key role in the 'Alawi religion; their position is mostly hereditary and passed on by training other *shaykhs*. As an initiatory religion, one of their tasks is to initiate young community members. A long list of *shaykhs* have historically moved around the spaces inhabited by 'Alawi families in Argentina. They are remembered, known and commemorated by community members; some, such as *Shaykh* Ahmed, are worshiped as saints and their shrines have become a pilgrimage site.[25]

The 'Alawi geography in Argentina is made up of the interrelation of these nodes or communities. These remain connected by family bonds among migrant families and their descendants, by the historical movement of *shaykhs* around the different areas, by 'Alawis' visits to *Shaykh* Ahmed's sanctuary and by a contemporary reinvention of the relationship of the diaspora with Syria, marked by the current conflict.

[24] A typical "tropical" rhythm danced by popular sectors in Argentina and other Latin American countries.

[25] In my ethnographic work at the sanctuary I confirmed the importance that the diaspora assigns to *shaykhs*, not only to those guiding communities in Argentina but also to 'Alawi *shaykhs* in Syria, whose portraits are placed at the saint's shrine.

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The content of these interrelations refers to religious and national dimensions that help reconstruct the contemporary identity configuration of Argentine ‘Alawis.

“*Allah, Suriya, Bashar w bass!*”: distance and closeness between ‘Alawis and Shi’is

“Allah, Syria, Bashar and that’s it!” was the chant sung in Arabic at the end of several demonstrations in support of the Syrian government by Shi’i and ‘Alawi groups in Argentina. Since 2011 there have been well attended demonstrations and events in various Argentine cities with ‘Alawi presence. Mobilizations have been called under different premises: for the peace in Syria, against imperialist interference, for explaining the truth behind the conflict, in support of the Syrian people or as part of the celebration of the country’s independence. ‘Alawis from Little Syria also celebrated in 2014 Bashar al-Asad’s “reelection” as president with a rally at the small *Shaykh* Saleh al-Ali square, ending with the chant in favor of the Syrian president.

That between ‘Alawis and Shi’is is not a one-way relationship: until some years ago, both groups used to keep their borders under a “friendly coexistence” also involving other expressions of Islam. More recently, a process of institutional closeness and ideological confluence started between both groups, without implying a doctrinal compromise, a fusion or a loss of autonomy of ‘Alawi communities. This closeness involves two contemporary processes: the common stance on the conflict in Syria and the creation of new institutional spaces in competition with Sunni entities that, over the last years, had monopolized the dialog with the Argentine state (Montenegro 2014).

In general, the institutions representing Syrian-Lebanese communities in Argentina have adopted a similar, but not identical, view in terms of arguments and public expression of their positions in favor of the Syrian government.[26] Mobilizations in the public space have displayed symbols directly referring to Bashar as a national leader and to the larger geopolitical role ascribed to him by the diaspora. Syrian flags, portraits of Hafez and Bashar al-Asad on posters and T-shirts, Hezbollah flags carried by Shi’i community members and recordings of the Syrian national anthem were part of the atmosphere. At most of these events, leaders and *shaykhs* of those Muslim communities gave speeches. Since 2011, in community spaces of the diaspora, such as the festival that ‘Alawis from Little Syria hold every year, the situation in Syria has been the subject of speeches and demonstrations of support, including the decision to send the money raised at the party to help ‘Alawi families. At the 2015 party, the folk dance group made up of girls and adolescents burst on the stage wearing the war military uniform. The performance, including a large Syrian flag fluttering to stand for the army’s strength and courage in defending its

[26] In general, the institutions representing Syrian-Lebanese communities in Argentina adopt a similar, but not identical, view in terms of arguments and public expression of their positions. We cannot refer here to those nuances; for example, entities such as the Federation of Argentine-Arab Entities (FEARAB) have agreed with Shi’i’ and ‘Alawi’ discourse, for since 2001 its presidents and main officers have been members of the Shi’i community. Other community institutions issue public statements, for example, upon the celebration of Syria’s independence, praising the people’s courage in resisting the conflict but without mentioning actors or open supporters as Shi’i and ‘Alawi groups do.

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people, was ardently welcomed. Previously, one of the young *shaykhs* had recalled the difficult situation of the country, calling for a prompt solution and the end of foreign harassment. At another event, ‘Alawis recited poems showing their “love for the Syrian mother country” and told their experiences while visiting the country over the last decades. They stressed the progress, peace and safety that, in their view, had characterized Syrian society before the conflict.[27]

The ideological closeness between ‘Alawis and Shi’is deepened over the last years because of this common stance, and at most of these events both groups participated together. Without neglecting that there are nuances and individual positions or even abstention by many people, we can find a consensus. The support for Bashar al-Asad is based on a series of assumptions that may be expressed according to specific sce narios or put forward by different actors, *shaykhs*, descendants and practicing or non-practicing Muslims. The first assumption is that it is a conflict orchestrated by foreign powers, basically by centers of power that have historically antagonized Syria and that have entered into various opportunistic alliances (France, Britain, the United States, Saudi Arabia, Qatar and Turkey). The notions of imperialism and neocolonialism are part of this discourse. In addition, some Shi’i leaders have publicly argued that the “scheme” has also the final purpose of weakening and aiming at Iran, since it seeks to break the Tehran-Damascus-Lebanese Resistance axis and organize a new Middle East segmented into religious strongholds.

The second argument refers to the characterization of the actors fighting in the armed struggle within Syrian territory, based on the national army/terrorism dichotomy. The countries otherwise playing a role as allies to the Syrian government are deemed as forces united to fight terrorism, such as Russia, China or Iran. In this context, the terrorist category is generically applied as an adjective to different actors: foreign terrorist jihadists; Al-Nusra Front terrorist group, the Syrian branch of al-Qaeda; *takfiris*[28] terrorist groups; anti-Islamic Daesh terrorist group, Wahhabi terrorism or simply terrorist foreign forces. On this point I have found nuances in positions: some claim that such was the configuration of groups operating from the beginning of the conflict, whereas others say that the conflict arose with legitimate claims to Bashar al-Asad’s administration for necessary reforms, but that later the struggle was externally appropriated and claimants were replaced by mercenaries of terrorism. In one public mobilization, a Shi’i *shaykh* stated that Iran’s support for the Syrian army shows the country’s new role as one of the leaders in the fight against global terrorism, and that the United States acknowledged this fact and had to come closer to the previously demonized Iranian government. In the local arena, to Shi’is this means a chance to reverse the discourse that has prevailed over decades in some mass media and in the investigation into the case of the 1994 attack on the Argentine Israeli Mutual Association (Asociación Mutual Israelita Argentina, AMIA),[29] where mass media and sectors of the Judiciary insisted that Iran was the “terrorist power” behind the attacks. For our

[27] Though not a widespread practice, some community members have traveled to visit relatives in Syria and ‘Alawi saints’ shrines, both before and after the conflict began, always in areas with ‘Alawi presence.

[28] The term *takfir* refers to the practice of declaring other Muslims *kuffar* (unbelievers). In the context of the speeches analyzed, it is used to refer to intolerant groups that exert violence on others by claiming to be the only true believers.

[29] An attack resulting in 85 deaths, not clarified yet; one of the prosecutors accused a group of Iranian citizens of planning the attack and requested their extradition. The investigation followed a complex process full of irregularities and disputes, still pending resolution.

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informant, it is now internationally and locally proven that Iran is precisely a "power fighting global terrorism rather than a terrorist power".

The third argument involves what the diaspora imagines about contemporary Syria. This narrative has as its time line the pre-conflict Syria, idealized as a country where creeds could coexist peacefully and even minorities were protected, there was gender equality, freedom and a progress path that had started with Hafez al-Asad's administration. This aspect is most often highlighted based on the experience of Argentine descendants who have traveled several times to their ancestors' country. In these discourses, religious differences or sectarianism do not account for or are involved in the conflict; they are rather seen as external explanations that seek to make the problem understood in religious terms. Even when Wahhabi groups in Syria are referred to as "terrorists", they are considered from the perspective of their political actions, devoid of religious values or adherences. As a Shi'i *shaykh* explained at an event jointly organized with 'Alawis, in response to one participant's question about why Wahhabis would be interested in interfering in Syria: "It is not a religious interest, in religious expansion; Wahhabism has long ceased to be a religious doctrine or trend, to become just a political instrument of imperialism". Another of the arguments for rejecting any religious component of the conflict is that there are also Christians who support Bashar al-Asad. An 'Alawi from the northwest of Argentina explained this in his speech at one event, referring to the percentage of Christians, Sunnis and 'Alawis in Syria: "if the Sunni majority had been against the government, it would have been easy to overthrow it". In this imagined homeland narrative, Syria is assigned a clear role in the Middle East. The diaspora sees the country as the only nation maintaining a frontal opposition to Israel and as a guardian of the Lebanese and Palestinian resistance and, hence, of the great Arab causes. One of the events I attended ended with a presentation of slides showing the Palestinian people's situation as a warning of what is also sought for Syria. Finally, the legitimacy of Bashar al-Asad's government is allegedly based on the continued path of modernization and progress started by his father and on his staying in power through legitimate elections. In the context of the elections in Little Syria, a more recent immigrant exalted in his speech that in 2014 Bashar won the elections with 88.7% of the votes and that, unlike other elections permitting just a vote for or against continuation, other candidates had been allowed to run.

Finally, there is an almost unanimous view on the future imagined for Syria: it will overcome the crisis and defeat foreign interference. We could illustrate this idea with the metaphor used by a descendant of 'Alawis: "a lion (Asad) can never be defeated by hyenas". Asad's continuation in power is seen as the only guarantee of future peace.

Based on this common view, both Shi'is and 'Alawis often mention the passivity of other actors of the Arab community or the public neutrality toward the conflict as time goes by. The institutional closeness between Shi'is and 'Alawis, previously limited to occasional interactions, was partly encouraged by this new common viewpoint.

This ideological closeness was in turn accompanied by an institutional closeness. Shi'i institutions in Argentina had long sought to create an umbrella entity that allowed them to have their own representation to compete against the claim by the Islamic Center of the Argentine Republic to represent "all Muslims in Argentina". Thus, in 2013 some Shi'i leaders engaged in discussions and meetings for this purpose and decided to include 'Alawi entities. As a result, 16 institutions grouped under the name of Federation of Islamic Entities of the Argentine Republic (Federación de Entidades

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Islámicas de la República Argentina, FEIRA) for the purpose of uniting and promoting the development of existing Shi'i and 'Alawi Islam institutions.[30]

This closeness does not imply any doctrinal compromise. Both beliefs and practices create borders between the two groups; there is also an important difference between a project accepting the conversion of Argentinians, as in the case of Shi'ism, even including converts among its main leaders, and another one assuming a belonging by birth, as in the case of 'Alawis. So far, 'Alawi institutions have remained detached from Shi'i institutions and have kept the "'Alawi" name, their own *shaykhs*, community of believers and institutional spaces. Some *shaykhs* have visited Iran with their Shi'i peers and move around a common space. One of them considered this relationship as based on a "pact" not to be broken. This interaction approach involves a relationship between groups that consider themselves different from each other, each one with its own institutions and community of origin.

Conclusion

The 'Alawi diaspora draws a triadic geography of belonging (Vertovec 1999) made up of the relationships established with their places of residence, the homeland myths and the imagination of the diasporic communities. With almost a hundred years' presence in Argentina, 'Alawis have managed to keep a delicate balance between the preservation of their singularity and integration. Their institutions integrated into the constitutive diversity of Muslim presence in Argentina, where 'Alawis, Sunnis, Druze and Shi'is were part of a minority within a predominantly Christian Arab migration. Identity strategies to maintain that balance are consistent with the local context: the 'Alawi diaspora appealed to an Islamic identity that is inseparable from its "Arab" origin. Hence it has become a part of one of the mainstream narratives, which the most traditional institutions of Islam in Argentina have reactualized until today. The different generations have managed to preserve their communities, with *shaykhs* born in Argentina but acknowledged by their migrant ancestors. These leaders' movement has kept the communities scattered over the national territory interconnected. From the beginning of the conflict in Syria, 'Alawis started claiming a specifically "Syrian" origin, coming ideologically and institutionally closer to Shi'is in their common support for the Syrian regime and to other similarly aligned Arab community organizations. 'Alawis have never expressed this side-taking in sectarian terms; discourses in favor of the Syrian government have not referred to the 'Alawi origin of the al-Asad clan, but rather appealed to the idea of a religiously plural Syrian nation, to be protected against foreign interference.[31] Thus, 'Alawis have built their position on the conflict in Syria as another chapter in the struggle between "imperialisms" and "national autonomy"; in this language they made their stance communicable by allying themselves with other Arab community groups that see the Syrian issue as a specific chapter of the larger "Arab cause".

[30] FEIRA comprises 16 Islamic Shi'i and 'Alawi entities.

[31] Concerning the al-Asad clan and the 'Alawi minority to which the family belongs, various studies show a complex relationship between them, which does not imply automatic support but different kinds of clientelistic relations not always beneficial to 'Alawis. On this topic, see Farouk-Alli (2014) and Balanche (2006). For an analysis of the 'Alawi' dilemma regarding the conflict, both in terms of support/opposition and their destiny as a community, see Paoli (2013a).

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