The Nuṣayris before the Tanzimat
in the eyes of Ottoman provincial administrators,
1804-1834

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Introduction: knowledge of Nuṣayrism

After touring western Syria in 1896, the Egyptian scholar Muhammad ʿAbd al-Jawād al-Qayīṭāī summed up his account of the region’s cultural diversity with “Praise be to God on High that He has preserved our Egypt from the multiplicity of these faiths and sects and these madhāhib and cults, whose adherents commingle in the lands of Syria with the Muslim element, to the point of bringing turmoil upon it and sowing corruption and disorder.”

Al-Qayīṭāī’s attitude would hardly be noteworthy except for the fact that he did travel extensively in the southern Lebanon and around Latakia, but was still content simply to rely on his Beirut interlocutors for his confused and derogatory characterization of the ʿImāmī, ʿIsāʿī, and Nuṣayrī2 Shi‘ite groupings found in Syria. Indeed, this combination of nescience, disinterest, and disgust seems to have been universal among the ruling and learned classes of the nineteenth-century Near East. Even as towering a reformist statesman and intellectual as Ahmet Cevdet Pasha would not hide his uninformed dis-

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1 For their help during my research, I am indebted to Stephan Procházka, the Bağbakanlık archive staff, and Ülkü Altınbaş.  
2 Muhammad ʿAbd al-Jawād al-Qayīṭāī, Nafakāt al-bashām fī riblat al-Shām, Cairo 1319H/1901, 37.  
3 While the names “ʿAlawī” or “Alawi” are now to be preferred to the pejorative “Nuṣayrī”, I follow the convention of a number of contemporary Syrian writers in retaining the latter term when discussing the community in a pre-twentieth-century historical context. For further discussion, see also Muhammad Al-madʿ All, al-ʿAlawiyyn fī l-tārīkh, Ḥaqūq wa-ʿabdīl, Beirut 1997, 259-261.
to a "scientific" Turkish literature on Nusayri society, which seeks to prove its anthropologically, sociogeographically and historically Turkish character. The Nusayris before the Tanzimat

Much of the work of reform entailed, in Selim Deringil’s words, the “fine tuning” of the population, the Nusayris included. “Fine tuning involved the meticulous innocation, indoctrination, enticing, frightening, flattering, forbidding, permitting, punishing or rewarding—all in precise doses... Not necessarily humane or anodine, it can involve brute force and bloodshed, but only as a last resort.” But did this nauseate control and the Foucauldian knowledge of its subject that it presupposes originate only in 1839? In this chapter, we propose to return to the first third of the nineteenth century—before Protestant missionaries set out to win the souls of the local highland population—and examine how the Nusayris were presented to the Sublime Porte in provincial diplomatic despatches on the very eve of the Tanzimat.

The dozen or so disparate documents at our disposal cover a generation (1803-1834) marked by Syria’s tentative return to a more distinctly Ottoman form of rule, between the end in 1804 of the nearly independent reign of Cezaar Ahmed Pasha and the Egyptian invasion in 1831. They are classified for the most part in the Hätt-i Hümayün collection of the Başbakanlık archives in Istanbul, with some exceptions being noted. Further diplomatic correspondences dealing with the Nusayris may doubtless be found, and many more must be presumed lost. The selection presented here can make no claim to being complete, nor even to providing a significant complement to the nineteenth-century narrative sources as far as the presentation of historical events is concerned. In particular, it must be pointed out that this sample concerns only reports sent to, and not orders issued from, Istanbul. Only when the complete body of pertinent Ottoman chancery documents, foreign (especially French) consular reports, travel itineraries, and 'Alevi narrative and prosopographical sources (many still in manuscript form) have been assembled, will it be possible to begin a history of the Nusayris in the modern period.


10 Selim Deringil, Well-Protected Domains, 10.

11 American Protestants first distributed Bibles among the Nusayris in 1830 and 1831, and though they talked repeatedly of opening a mission house in the province of Latakia to further their work, these plans were only realized long after the Egyptian occupation. See The Missionary Herald Reports from Ottoman Syria 1819-1879, ed. Kamal Salibi and Yusuf K. Khoury, Amman 1995, II, 292, 316, 318, 438, III, passim.

12 The Mühimme Defterleri 235-237 and 240-241 were also searched for references to the Nusayris, with no result.

Contemporary ʿAlawi writers especially in Turkey have remarked on the continuing lack of sociohistorical (rather than heresiographical) studies on the Nuṣayrī creed.¹³ While the present contribution can provide little more than a contextualized inventory of pre-Tanzimat archival sources citing the Nuṣayrīs,¹⁴ it is hoped that a thematic presentation of some of their forms and contents may at least demonstrate the range of cognitive positions and executive responses that the central and provincial Ottoman administrations could adopt toward the heterodox sects of northwest Syria.

The Nuṣayrīs as political scapegoats

Ottoman government in the Syrian provinces remained indirect in the early decades of the nineteenth century, with the Sublime Porte generally retaining strong, semi-autonomous pashas over several years, such as Sîleymân and ʿAbdallâh in Sidon, Muṣṭafâ Barbir in Tripoli, or the last of the ʿAzm household in Damascus. This mode of rule is reflected in the registers of extraordinary mandates issued by Istanbul (müühmet defterleri), where the previously detailed directives on provincial administration have given way in this period to the communication of vague general policy guidelines. Essentially local concerns such as relations between the various Syrian confessional communities had little place in the diplomatic correspondence with the imperial capital. The business of provincial politics consisted in Ottoman notables competing amongst themselves, often violently, for top posts such as the governorship of Damascus.

Sometimes Nuṣayrī or other clans became embroiled in such battles and their involvement was reported with polemic intent to Istanbul. An example of this is a note sent to the grand vezir by Cezzar Ahmed Pasha, short enough to quote in full, in which he depicts a recent supposed “police action” against Druze, Shiʿites, and Nuṣayrīs as a defense of imperial honor and interest:

[Vezi's note to the sultan, added at top of page:] Note from Your servant Cezzar Paşa. The command is Your majesty’s, He who orders.

My exalted brother,

The Abdullah Paşa situation was inquired about. A while ago, he brought together the Druze, Kızılihâ, and Nuṣayrî factions, attacked the fortress of Tripoli and besieged its people. The townspeople came [to me] and sought refuge, saying “Honour belongs to the pasâr. Save our honour from these different sects.” A number of soldiers were dispatched and, with God’s help, they [the insurgents] were repelled from Tripoli.

9 Cemazi‘l-ahir 1218 [September 26, 1803].¹⁵

In fact the local narrative histories add some nuance to what Cezzar (i.e. “the butcher”) euphemistically terms the “ʿAbdallâh situation”. ʿAbdallâh Pasha al-ʿAzm had been (re)appointed governor of Damascus in 1214/1799 precisely to contain the insatiable territorial ambitions of Cezzar Ahmed Pasha, governor of Sidon. In 1803, Cezzar was even declared maghdîb al-dawla or “object of the State’s wrath,” giving ʿAbdallâh occasion to attack Tripoli, whose intendant (müttēsetelli/mutasallim), Mustafâ Ağa Barbir, had just gone to Acre (Cezzar’s capital) to place himself and the province of Tripoli under the latter’s suzerainty.¹⁶

Cezzar, never famous for his pro-minority stance, had every interest in branding his long-standing rival ʿAbdallâh Pasha al-ʿAzm as a friend of execrable Shiʿite sects. Just to cover all bases, he at the same time also denounced ʿAbdallâh to the Sublime Porte as a supporter of the Wahhābīs, the puritanical Bedouin Sunni sect that had seized control of the Hejaz.²⁷ Either way, his propaganda proved effective. Far from being heroically “repulsed from Tripoli,” ʿAbdallâh had to abandon the siege midway when he was dismissed as governor of Damascus – replaced by Cezzar.

Cezzar’s note is the only source to mention in passing the participation of Nuṣayrîs in the 1803 siege of Tripoli. A document referring to a similar battle between Syrian governors in 1822 reports Nuṣayrî involvement more explicitly. In that year, another ʿAbdallâh Pasha, this one the energetic new Ottoman governor of Sidon, made a bid to extend his power by attacking Darwish Muḥammad Pasha of Damascus. His forces were led by Amir Bashîr al-Shiḥâbî, the powerful Christian tax farmer of the Lebanon mountains, and included the Druze warlord Bashîr Junbulî, while other Druze such as the ʿImám clan sided with Darwish Pasha. According to the records used by Dick Douwes in his recent book, a Hama court even condemned ʿAbdallâh to death for allying with the heterodox sects.¹⁸ The crushing defeat of the Damascene army near the suburb of al-Massa on May 27, 1822 so alarmed the Sublime Porte that the governor of Aleppo was dispatched to intervene on Darwish Pasha’s behalf.¹⁹

¹⁵ HH 3784.
¹⁷ Al-Shiḥâbî, Lâbnān, 465.
¹⁹ Mîkhâl al-Mishâq, Mashhâd al-aʿyân bi-aḥadîth Sûriyyû wa-Lâbnân, ed. Muḥîhir Khanî ʿAbîd and Andîrûs Hânnâ Şâhâbîshîrî, Cairo 1908, 80-85; Taşmûn al-ʿAskârî, Akhâbâr al-aʿyân fî Jabal Lâbnân,
Darwish, meanwhile, had more innovative ideas for repulsing ‘Abdallâh’s forces, as he outlines in a report to Istanbul dated 29 June 1822. Pointing out that “the Druze, Nûsayrî and Kizilbash factions have united with ‘Abdallâh Pasha, and since subduing them through warfare is futile,” Darwish proposes to “spare neither money nor presents” and pay off his enemy’s allies. For “already when Amir Bashir came to Damascus with ‘Abdallâh Pasha’s army and thirty or forty thousand Druze from the Druze Mountain were attacking noble Damascus from all four sides, Shaykh ‘Ali Imam had in that time been gained for our side and the people of the said mountain were [split into] two groups.” Now even Amir Bashir and Shaykh Bashir appeared to be ready to compromise, though “because such ruse and artifice has been observable on their part until now, it was impossible to be disposed or trusting toward them.” Nevertheless, Darwish promises his sovereign “not to falter in any way, in undertaking to gain and conciliate little by little both the aforesaid faction as well as the Kizilbash and Nûsayrî factions.”

Darwish discreetly overstated the importance of “conciliating little by little” the Shiites (“Kizilbash” in Ottoman parlance), for the Shiite Hârfîsh amirs of the Biqî’ had been firmly on his side in the first place.20 His letter is unique in its impassioned appraisal of their and the Nûsayrî’s potential as allies. Moreover, it bears notice that the document carries at its head an autograph comment by Sultan Mahmûd to his vezir taking account of its content. He cautions against trusting Bashir but supports Darwish Pasha’s efforts in conciliating the opposing factions, a rare example of unspoken but official indulgence toward the Nûsayrîs.

This indulgence is all the more noteworthy in light of how the Nûsayrîs (and Druze) are portrayed in another message received in Istanbul only shortly thereafter. The undated document, which links them to the Greek nationalist revolt begun in March 1821, is the transcript of an oral report made by an envoy of Mehmed ʿAli Pasha, governor of Egypt. The Sublime Porte was earnestly seeking the intervention of Egypt’s puissant navy against the Greek insurgents; Mehmed ʿAli’s asking price (beyond the governorship of Morea and Crete already promised to him) was a hand in settling the affairs of Syria, including a royal pardon for that same rebel governor of Sidon, ʿAbdallâh. This was absolutely necessary, according to the Egyptian envoy, because “all investigations” had revealed that:

In order to achieve the evil and contemptuous deeds which the sinister Greek nation convivingly forces upon the people of Islam, and—through the advocacy of its corrupt thought—to make comply with their principle of collusion and unity the Druze and Nûsayrî sects, who have no share in the ornament of Islam and who are perhaps worse than enemy infidels, the abominable nation has not failed to correspond and communicate with the accused sects, in the aim of bringing about in the end the requisite friendship and unity between them.22

The grand vezir reiterated the Egyptian allegation of the Nûsayrîs’ complicity with the Greeks in a long memorandum to the sultan in which he discusses the relative merits of executing or reappointing the governor of Sidon.23 The same charge is also repeated, though without any further elaboration, in Ahmed Cevdet’s History.24 The stabilization of Syria was doubtless of concern, and Ottoman authorities had been vexed by the Druze and Nûsayrî mountaineers’ contacts with foreign seapowers—especially their doubly illegal grain-for-muskets trade—since the sixteenth century. Yet it is hardly believable that the Druze and Nûsayrî would lend any effective support to the Greek insurrection, certainly not enough to warrant the Syrian policy advocated by Muhammed ʿAli. Again we see the specter of Nûsayrî fractiousness invoked with a view to political persuasion, and again it proved to be not ineffective. Muhammed ʿAli got his way (as usual) and ‘Abdallâh Pasha was amnestied in the spring of 1823.

The Nûsayrîs as loyal citizens

The Sublime Porte was ever wary of its own subjects’ loyalty but does not seem to have been excessively concerned by the Nûsayrî through the remainder of the Greek rebellion. In July 1828, two months after Russia had declared war on the Ottoman Empire and sent its Mediterranean fleet to support the Greeks, orders were sent to Aleppo to verify the state of preparedness of the harbors Suwaydiyya and Kasab in the sanjak of Antioch. The fact that “the people of most of the villages around the said harbors are Nûsayrîs” is only brought to the Porte’s attention by the governor of Aleppo in his reply three weeks later; in view of which he asks leave to lead a company of additional men in order to ensure that information “on both their [the Nûsayrîs] and the harbors’ disposition” would be gathered.25

In fact, the Nûsayrî populace of the coastslands north from Suwaydiyya (today Samandaği) and the Cilician plain (the Çukurova) is almost never acknowledged in this period, either in Ottoman administrative documentation or in the Arabic chronicles. Nûsayrî emigration into the Çukurova in the province of Adana seems only to have started in the early nineteenth century, the product both of religious discrimination in

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20 HH 2067a.
21 HH 2067i.
22 Ahmed Cevdet Paşa, Tarih-i Cevdet, 2nd imprint, İstanbul 1891/92, XII, 74.
23 HH 17679.
Syria and greater economic opportunity in the north. However, both the regional capital of Antioch and towns such as Bayās (today Yakaçık) and Suwaydiyya, at whose famous shrine tens of thousands of 'Alawi still converge every July 13-14, had been Nusayri population centers for much longer. As townsmen and settled agrarianists, these Nusayris did not attract official attention as a "nūṣūr" or separate faction, like their mountain-dwelling cousins further south, who were wont to supplement their more meager pastoral subsistence with banditry. In the Antioch district, a critical communications link between the Ottoman Empire's central lands and its North Syrian breadbasket, brigandage specifically involving Turkomans and Kurds from the highland interior had been a serious problem throughout the eighteenth century. In the first decades of the nineteenth century, the Kâşiklioğulları attacked caravans from their base in the Amanas mountains (Gavurdak) so frequently that wealthier travelers as a matter of course took boats from the Nusayri-inhabited coast to reach Tarsus in Anatolia in safety.

However, even true Nusayri "factions" from the mountains further south (the "Ansârie" range) could, under certain circumstances, appear as the most loyal of Ottoman subjects. Such circumstances were given by the Egyptian occupation of Syria between 1831 and 1841. After brutally transforming Egypt into a model of industrial and military reforms along modern European lines, Muhammad 'Ali turned his sights on Syria. His son Ibrahim Pasha, having driven the Ottoman armies all the way up to Kithaya (February 1833), introduced similar statist measures during his eight-year administration of Syria, including the building of public schools and libraries, the systematic exploitation of strategic lumber, cotton, and other primary resources, and universal military conscription. The shock of sudden integration into Egypt's economy and jurisdiction was felt especially in the port cities and coastal highlands of Syria, and disaffection and con- scription were fiercely resisted by the tribal/feudal clans of the mountains in particular. A massive revolt by the Druze, which neglected the Shî'ah and the Hawrân in 1838 (and which benefited from clandestine British arms shipments) contributed to destabilizing Egyptian rule in Syria.

The first secessionist revolt against the Egyptians was, however, that of the Nusayris. In October 1834, as various Arabic chronicles report, a Nusayri commander raided an Egyptian army column near Latakia, then proceeded to attack government buildings and warehouses in the city itself. The Egyptians immediately sent a vast force into the mountains (led by the sons of Amir Bashir al-Shihâbi, Muhammad 'Ali's ally in Syria), which torch hundreds of Nusayrî villages in the following days. Despite scoring several tactical victories against the Egyptian troops, the Nusayris were soon forced to submit and disarm in order to save their crops and homes.

A remarkable letter, sent to the Porte a few weeks later, paints an entirely more optimistic picture of the Nusayri revolt. The document is unsigned and could conceivably have been written by one of the Ottoman spies sent into Egyptian-held territory in order to insinuate and observe just such sectarian uprisings. On the other hand, its exaggeration of the Nusayris' success — the claim that they destroyed the strategically important bridge at Jisr al-Shughur is unsubstantiated in the narrative sources — suggests that the author was essentially advocating local interests. He notes that "all the people of Aleppo and Antep" are tired of the occupation and long for a vizirial military campaign to liberate them. The time is ripe, for "one Druze district (sent) and all the Nusayris have united. The Egyptian side is being defeated because the Nusayris are very numerous, and they are powerful... They declare openly that they will rise up collectively when you set out."30

The entire Nusayri confessional community did not, of course, adopt a single, clearcut attitude toward Egyptian and Ottoman sovereignties; in particular, Nusayris of the coastal regions welcomed the Egyptian state's social and technical innovations and especially its premise of religious equality.31 The more traditional feudal solidarity groups of the highlands, on the other hand, saw their autonomy threatened through these very measures, which thus translated into a paradoxical fidelity toward the weaker suzerainty of the pre-Tanzimat empire. By the time this document was composed (December 5, 1834) the Nusayri bands were already no longer in a position to aid an imperial campaign which, though fervently anticipated by parts of the Syrian population, in fact never materialized. Syria was restored to the empire thanks to British intervention in 1840, and the continuing discrimination against the Nusayri highlanders suggests that the Ottoman government never recognized its debt of loyalty.

27 Ali Bey (Domingo Badiya y Labich), Travels of Ali Bey in Morocco, Tripoli, Cypros, Egypt, Arabia, Syria and Turkey between the Years 1803 and 1807, London 1816, II, 302; on the Kâşiklioğulları, see Andrew Gould, Lords or Bandits? The Derbeys of Cîtceâ, LIMES 7 (1976), 485-506.
30 Hl 2233a-4c.
The Nuṣayris as a social problem

Aside from the cases where Nuṣayri groups resisted the Egyptian occupiers or participated in battles as far away as al-Mazza, relations between the Nuṣayris and the Ottoman authorities were remarkably routine. The tax-collectorship (muhassil) of Latakia was divided into sixteen rural tax districts (semâ), of which nine were recognized locally as belonging to the Nuṣayris. A Nuṣayrī notable (muqaddem) would be responsible for collecting the annual fiscal tax (mîrî) from his district and submitting it to the tax collector of Latakia. This tax collector, an Ottoman-appointed official, was generally an intendant (mütesellîm) governing Latakia on behalf of the governor of Tripoli. Since the eighteenth century, the governors of Tripoli and Sidon provinces were frequently subordinate to one another and/or to the governor of Damascus, for instance when a regional dynasty such as the ‘Azims held down all three posts. When the Nuṣayris fell into arrears in their payment of the mîrî tax (whether because the amount demanded was impressively high or because their own muqaddems thought they could get away without paying it), they would thus be subject to military reprisals by any combination of imperial, super-regional Syrian, Tripolitan, or Latakian forces. The native retainers armies of the local mütesellîms had the most regular contact with – and greatest religious hatred for – the Nuṣayris sect. The devastations wrought on the Nuṣayrī fields and villages ensured, in turn, that their payment of the mîrî would again be in arrears in the following years.

More far-sighted Ottoman administrators recognized this vicious circle and sometimes tried to remedy it. Our first document above dealt with the Nuṣayris in 'Abdallâh Pasha al-'Azm's unsuccessful 1803 attempt to invest Tripoli. Five years later, another 'Azm governor of Damascus, Kunj Yusuf Pasha, again attempted to dislodge its recalcitrant mütesellîm, Muṣṭafâ Agha Barbîr. This time, however, the attack on Tripoli was preceded by a massive punitive expedition against the Nuṣayris of the region. Kunj Yusuf had come to power at a difficult time, with Syria increasingly destabilized by the fundamentalist Wahhabî tide, and he has been much reviled in Lebanese historiography for his concessions to Sunni orthodox feeling. Yet the summer 1808 campaign had very much to do with reestablishing order and very little to do with imposing religious conformity, insomuch as Nuṣayris of the paramount Rasûl family had just killed the Iṣmâ‘îlî Shi‘ite amir of Masyāf along with 300 of his followers and had taken over his castle. Kunj Yusuf then coerced the defeated Nuṣayris to feign conversion to Sunni Islam in order to ransom their captives, but as the Egyptian historian al-Jabarti notes, he "accepted their words at face value, pardoned them and left them in their homeland."

Moreover, in a long and not easily intelligible letter to the Sublime Porte dated February 9, 1809, Kunj Yusuf blames that "good-for-nothing" Muṣṭafâ Barbîr for the insubordination of the Nuṣayris which he had just been forced to quell:

He gave cause and occasion to the mutually protective Nuṣayrî gangs to rise up collectively, with his instigation, and raise the banner of fomenting nefarious rebellion, and they plundered and seized the villages and castle of Masyāf, the lands of Hama, and the kazas of Latakia. Of the lands and castles which they took into their clutches, seven well-known royal castles were [then] regained and rid and removed from their hands, in war and violence and with drawn sword.

It is not necessary to accept these words at face value, for Kunj Yusuf’s personal hostility toward Muṣṭafâ Barbîr was well known and he was at pains to justify his siege of Tripoli to the Sublime Porte, all the more so because it was failing again. The French consul at Tripoli even suggested that Yusuf’s reconquest of Masyāf might have been "fixed" with the Nuṣayris beforehand, so as to put pressure on Barbîr and his supporters in Tripoli. But in a repeat of history, Barbîr once more appealed to the strong ruler of Sidon – now Sûleymân Pasha – to intercede for him, and returned to rule Tripoli when Sûleymân was promoted governor of Damascus – replacing Kunj Yusuf – in 1810.

Yet the above report, even if not entirely objective, does reflect an important truth: From the 1803 siege of Tripoli to the 1834 anti-Egyptian campaign, almost all major Nuṣayrī insurrections pivoted on Muṣṭafâ Barbîr personally. A lower-class Sunni native of Latakia and one-time Janissary agha, Muṣṭafâ first seized power in Tripoli in 1800. He ruled it with an iron fist (albeit with interruptions) until 1833, in every way a worthy heir of his first patron and idol, Čezzar Ahmed Pasha.

It is ironic that he should have sought the patronage of Sûleymân Pasha "the Just," who made the conciliation of the estranged Shi‘ite sects a cornerstone of his recovery policy for post-Cezzar Sûleymân. Indeed, Sûleymân does not seem much to have liked Barbîr and once flatly refused to help him put down an Iṣmâ‘îlî revolt at Qadmîs, saying, to paraphrase his personal biographer’s quotation in Syrian dialect, "I don’t want risk my neck for the sake of Barbîr and his bravedo."

Nevertheless, Sûleymân needed


32 Al-Khărî, Muṣṭafâ Barbîr, 103-109; al-Shihâbî, Luǧnân, 534-535.


34 "Masyāf" [sic], EF.


36 Topkapı Sarayi Archives, Istanbul: E. 2465.

37 Topkapi Sarayi Archives, Istanbul: E. 2465.

38 Guisot to Champsaur, June 19, 1808, in Documents diplomatiques et consulaires relatifs à l'histoire du Liban, ed. Adel Ismail, Beirut 1975, IV, 150.


dependable allies such as Barbir, and on occasion had to rely on him to keep fractious Nusayri bands in check.  

Barbir’s main nemesis was Saqr al-Mahfuz, the lord of Saffah castle. Long the most independent and powerful Nusayri shaykhs of the region, Mahfuz’s ancestors are cited as troublemakers in Ottoman chancery documents as far back as the late sixteenth century. During Cezzar’s reign of terror, Saqr occasionally hid Shihabsi amirs fleeing his persecution. Not to be outdone by Cezzar, Barbir pursued Saqr mercilessly when the mīrī was not paid to his satisfaction, such as in 1806-1807, as well as the Nusayris of Marqab and Qardaha in 1226-1811-1812.  

Süleyman Pasha makes specific reference to this last campaign in a report on Barbir’s bloody, five-month assault on the Nusayris in 1816. The expedition had been ordered by Istanbul after the French colonel Vincent Beutin, a “great friend” of the adventurers and freelance political agent Lady Hester Stanhope, was murdered during an inspection tour of the castles in the coastal mountains. There can be no question of the violence Süleyman himself intended toward the Nusayris, as evidenced by the distasteful practice of taking the heads of fallen Nusayris as trophies, for which he now sought (and received) the praise of both the grand vezir and Sultan Mahmūd.  

Nevertheless, the letter, one of the longest extant Ottoman documents dealing exclusively with Nusayris, in addition to providing numerous new details on the campaign, also suggests in its tone that Süleyman genuinely hoped to reform and integrate rather than persecute the Nusayri community. He recalls that after the tax-collectors of Latakia was placed under his jurisdiction (1225/1810), “some of the aforesaid brigands agreed to forebear their thievery and pay the mīrī on time, and committed themselves to become evlâya [Ottoman subjects].” Within a year, however, renewed trouble had required him to send “a massive army... to twist some ears and teach a lesson, so that they would no longer oppress and injure Musulmān and wayfarers.” Now, four years later, the inhabitants of several tax fiefs in the southern district had supposedly stocked

41 In a lengthy report on the 1818 Qadinus uprising, Süleyman states that the Nusayris were now in fact helping the Ima’mīs. See HH 24282.  
42 Münnezmi Defteri 102.61.275.  
43 Shidyq, Akhbar, 346, 372. In the latter case (in early 1800, but note that Shidyq’s dates are frequently inaccurate) his assistance was requested by ‘Abdallāh Pasha al-‘Azm, the Damascus governor accused by Cezzar of allying with the Nusayris in HH 3784i.  
45 Al-Shihabī, Lubān, 630; al-‘Alawī, Mustafā Barbir, 150-156.  
46 HH 24372.  
47 HH 24295.  
48 Al’Awra, Tārīkh wilayat Sulaqūn, 268-269.  
49 HH 24395.
Just to finish the story, Muṣṭafā Barbir turned traitor against the Ottoman cause when İbrahim Pasha invaded Syria in 1831, and continued to govern Tripoli under Egyptian sovereignty. On April 1, 1832 Șâqṣ’s son Dâhir al-Maḥfûz and his men flanked an Ottoman army in a desperate joint effort to dislodge Barbir from Tripoli. The attempt failed and Dâhir, the last autonomous Nusayrî ruler of Sâfîta, died of his injuries. Muṣṭafâ Ağa Barbir, surely one of the more unsavory figures of modern Syrian history, was dismissed and died peacefully at home in April 1835.

Nusayris as state functionaries

Even before the Tanzimat, we do also find individual Nusayris serving as Ottoman bureaucrats and sometimes attaining high office. One may cite the family of Muṣṭafâ Efendi al-Ṭarṣūsî, a Nusayri scholar whose father had come to Syria from Egypt and worked as a government tobacco agent. Muṣṭafà Efendi died in al-Bila near Taṭrūs in 1824/25, after his sons had moved to Istanbul where they served in the government bureaucracy. His grandson Yâṣîn ibn ʿAlî Efendi (d. 1883/84), according to a recent Alawi biographer, worked in foreign affairs at the highest level.29

Kâra Meḥmûd Pasha enjoyed a brilliant Ottoman military career and was doubtless the most prominent Nusayrî of the nineteenth century. Originally recruited into the imperial army, this native of Antioch served as chief of the palace doorkeeps, master-general of the imperial artillery, and agha of the sipahi division before being dispatched to Rumelia as a government inspector.30 His success was a source of considerable pride back home. Muḥammad ʿAmin Ghâlib al-Tawi credits him with carrying out the bombing of the Janissary barracks in 1826 (but in fact he was no longer master-general of the artillery at this point) and with inspiring numerous Nusayris to migrate to Bursa and Istanbul to seek their fortune also.31

It was in the naval forces that Kâra Meḥmûd rendered the most eminent service. In June 1821 he was appointed sancak governor of Biga and warden of the Bosporus in the rank of full vezir, the first and only Nusayrî ever to achieve that distinction. He was soon promoted commander of the Mediterranean forces with the task of directing marine landing operations, and in the summer of 1822, grand admiral (kapudan-i derya) of the Ottoman navy. After he failed to defend the Morean port of Nauplion against the Greek rebels,32 Sultan Maḥmûd, judging him nevertheless as “illustrious and capable from among my great vezirs, and experienced, hard-working and decorated from among my splendid ministers, in every way deserving of favour and worthy of beneficence,” made him governor of the rich province of Azkara and Çankar.33 In the Scîl-i Osmanî, Kâra Meḥmûd, is described indifferently as a Nusayrî and as being “foresighted.” He seems to have owed his career in some measure to an advantageous marriage to the daughter of his former grand vizier Hallîl Ḥamîd Pasha (1782-1785). This pedigree most likely also helped their son, Maḥmûd Bey (d. 1841), land a post as deputy secretary at the Sublime Porte.34 And patronage politics may well have been in play when Kâra Meḥmûd Pasha was suddenly dismissed in November 1823 and “banished” to the island of Limnos. In any event his crime cannot have been too serious, for he was soon thereafter made warden (muḥâfîz) of Limnos, a post which he held until his death in 1828/29. Kâra Meḥmûd lies buried in Istanbul’s elite Eyüp cemetery.

Last, one may recall another Meḥmûd Pasha, a native of Latakia, whose career as an Ottoman ended on a decidedly more tragic note. Trained in the 27th division of the Janissary corps, Meḥmûd worked his way up to kethûda and was finally promoted to agha of the Janissaries in the fall of 1811. He was retired not long thereafter and went back to Syria on a pension, but resumed active duty with the rank of beylerbeyi some years later and was finally appointed governor of Tripoli in 1823/24. Almost immediately, however, he was accused of tyranny and denounced as a Nusayri by the Sunni populace, and consequently killed in Latakia along with several members of his family. An enraged grand vezir sent orders to raze the quarter where the murder had taken place.35

Conclusion

The murder of the Nusayri governor Meḥmûd Pasha in Latakia brings us back full circle to al-Qaṣṣî and the traditionalists’ aversion to western Syria’s “multiplicity of these faiths and sects and these medhâkhs and cults.” Clearly, the local Sunni Arab disdain for the Nusayris—grounded in religious texts, bred on patrimonial rivalries, and given free rein by petty tyrants such as Muṣṭafâ Barbir—did not inform and could be violently at odds with the agenda of Ottoman provincial government.

From the point of view of classical religious ideology, the Nusayri sect has of course always been regarded as an Islamic heresy, which, combined with the impoverished Syrian mountaineers’ propensity for social banditry, exposed the entire Nusayri com-

30 Al-Sinâhâ, Lâhûn, 840-3. Shaykh Darwish al-Maḥfûz, nephew of Dâhir, was nevertheless confirmed as tax farmer of Sâfîta in his stead shortly thereafter.
31 Al-Khâfî, Muṣṭafâ Barbir, 268-269.
33 Sûreyya, Scîlî-i Osmanî, 1058-1059.
34 Al-Tawi, Târîkh al-‘Alawîyîn, 443.
35 See Tarih-i Cevdet, XI, 184, vol. 12, 18, 43, 60, 64.
37 Sûreyya, Scîlî-i Osmanî, 909.
munity to official campaigns of persecution throughout the Mamluk and Ottoman eras. Only in the Tanzimat and especially Hamidian periods did the Sublime Porte begin to perceive the Nuṣayris not just as a faction to be chastised but also as citizens to be educated and as wayward believers to be reconfigured.

From what little evidence we have been able to present, it would nevertheless appear that Ottoman administrators with actual experience in Syria displayed greater flexibility toward the Nuṣayris than either local prejudice or official discourse might suggest. Even before the Tanzimat, provincial despatches portray the Nuṣayrī taʾṣīla as rebels and conspirators, but also as allies and subjects. This pragmatism is paralleled in the larger bureaucratic apparatus, where individuals could be promoted to the highest rank without regard to their sectarian derivation.

This is not to minimize the significance of 1839, nor to exaggerate the enfranchisement of non-orthodox Muslim sects following the introduction of more liberal personal statute laws, which affected mainly the Christian subjects of the empire. Still, nineteenth-century reform was not merely a series of reactions to Western imperialist pressure but was itself a lengthy, homegrown “process of identity and ideology.” The Ottoman social thought that resulted in the Tanzimat was the culmination of a long administrative and bureaucratic experience in socially heterogeneous provinces such as Sidon and Tripoli. The efforts spent by professionals such as Süleyman, Darwish Muhammad, or Kunj Yusuf to control and integrate, to punish and promote the Nuṣayris on a modest, regional level ultimately flowed into this wider Ottoman process.