

# ALEVIS AND THE TURKISH STATE

*The Alevi Opening, an attempt of the Justice and Development Party (AKP) to “solve” the Alevi “problem” through a series of workshops between the State officials and the Alevi community was completed in 2010. The two prominent Alevi Federations, however, are not satisfied with the “Opening” and do not see the “problem” as solved. In this article, the authors provide a short description of the Alevi issue, pointing out the futility of explaining Aleviness, and map the main Alevi organizations’ stances on how the State should end oppression against Alevis.*

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**T**he fast pace of Turkish politics makes it difficult for its followers to contemplate on a specific issue. Amidst the discussions on whether and how different religious groups' rights would be included in the new constitution, assuming that a new constitution can be adopted, one specific group's rights have been widely discussed. The Alevis, making up around 15 percent of Turkey's population, believe in a syncretic heterodox branch of Islam, and have been historically discriminated by the Sunni majority.<sup>1</sup> The "Alevi Opening," an attempt of the Justice and Development Party (AKP) to "solve" the Alevi issue through a series of workshops was completed in 2010. In December 2011, the Turkish Prime Minister apologized for the killings, in the late 1930s, in Dersim (today Tunceli), an Alevi populated region: this was the first official recognition and apology for the events. Yet, the Alevi groups are not satisfied. Neither the opening nor the apology are sincere attempts at reconciliation, they say. Why do the Alevis need reconciliation though? What is the Alevi "issue" and does it need to be "solved" as a problem?

Besides looking critically at the descriptions used for Aleviness (Alevilik), this article attempts to answer these questions, and explain the interaction between the Alevis and the Turkish state. In addition to referencing literature on the topic, the analysis is informed by interviews conducted with two main Alevi groups' representatives, the Federation of Alevi Foundations (Alevi Vakıfları Federasyonu – AVF) and the Alevi Bektashi Federation (Alevi Bektaşî Federasyonu – ABF).<sup>2</sup> Arguing that the effort to define Alevis is in itself derogatory, this article presents an account of how Alevis situate themselves politically, and how they think the State should situate itself vis-a-vis the Alevis.

### ***Discrimination and the Political Situation***

The Research Report on Religion, Conservatism and Otherization in 12 cities sheds light on the social and economic discrimination of Alevis in Turkey.<sup>3</sup> Despite the fact that almost all Alevis define Alevism within Islam, with a particular devotion to the fourth Caliph and the son-in-law of Mohammed, Ali, a great majority of the

<sup>1</sup> For Aleviness as a syncretistic heterodox form of Islam and other definitions, see works of Martin van Bruinessen, Karin Vorhoff, Umut Azak, and Elise Massicard. Martin van Bruinessen, "Kurds, Turks, and the Alevi revival," [http://uu.academia.edu/MartinvanBruinessen/Papers/723275/Kurds\\_Turks\\_and\\_the\\_Alevi\\_revival\\_in\\_Turkey](http://uu.academia.edu/MartinvanBruinessen/Papers/723275/Kurds_Turks_and_the_Alevi_revival_in_Turkey); Karin Vorhoff, "Let's Reclaim our History and Culture: Imagining Alevi Community in Contemporary Turkey", *Die Welt des Islams*, (Leiden: Brill, 1998); Umut Azak, *Islam and Secularism in Turkey*, (NY: I.B. Tauris, 2010); Elise Massicard, *Türkiye'den Avrupa'ya Alevi Hareketinin Siyasallaşması*, (İstanbul: İletişim, 2007).

<sup>2</sup> The third major umbrella organization is the Federation of Alevi Associations (Alevi Dernekleri Federasyonu – ADFE), yet they were not interviewed.

<sup>3</sup> Binnaz Toprak et al., *Being Different in Turkey: Religion, Conservatism and Otherization*, Research Report on Neighborhood Pressure, (İstanbul: Boğaziçi University Press, 2009). The report is the result of 401 in-depth interviews conducted in Erzurum, Kayseri, Konya, Malatya, Sivas, Batman, Trabzon, Denizli, Aydın, Eskişehir, Adapazarı and Balıkesir, as well as two districts in İstanbul, Sultanbeyli and Avclar. The research group was led by Prof. Binnaz Toprak, a reknown political scientist from Boğaziçi University. Cities such as Erzurum, Kayseri, Malatya, and Sivas have large Alevi populations and social pressure and prejudice against Alevis are carefully documented in Chapter 3, p.41- 57.

Sunnis tend to have an interpretation of Alevism as if it is outside the faith and non-Muslim in practice. One of the reasons for this prejudice is the role of women in Alevi culture, worshipping side by side with men; another is the different traditions in fasting and praying. Not eating the food offered by Alevi (since they think they are not hygienic enough), accusing them of immoral behavior between men and women for their ritual involves both sexes, and not shopping at their stores are examples of social pressures exerted by Sunnis.<sup>4</sup> Statements such as “He is an Alevi but he is a good person; he is an Alevi but an honest guy” are signs of minimal prejudice.<sup>5</sup>

“The cemetery is the only place where discrimination ends,” says a man from an Alevi foundation in Eskişehir, although Eskişehir is one of the cities where least discrimination is reported.<sup>6</sup>

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These social pressures date old: Alevi were given different names with derogatory meanings (rejectionist, irreligious, unbeliever, and red head–Kızılbaş) since the Ottoman times,

because, the Ottoman state perceived Alevi as a threat, fearing that they could shift their loyalty to the Safavid Empire, whose main religion was Shi’ism.<sup>7</sup> The deeply-rooted prejudices stood time, and as the Sunni Islam remained the officially recognized belief in the Turkish state, contempt for Alevism continued.<sup>8</sup>

### **Dersim, Malatya, Maraş, Çorum, Sivas, Ümraniye, Gazi...**

The Sunni definition of the “good” Turk alienates the Alevi in daily life as well as in the political sphere. After the recent apology of the Prime Minister Erdoğan about Dersim, the other instances where Alevi were attacked and killed made their way into the mainstream media.

Among the events, we can count Maraş, Malatya, Çorum, Sivas, Ümraniye and Gazi. In 1978, amidst the tumultuous political environment of the pre-1980 period, over 100 Alevi were killed in 36 hours by right-wing groups in Maraş. Slogans such as “Maraş’s going to be the grave of Alevi!” were chanted in the streets, and State officials later argued that they did not get any information on the events until after the crimes were committed.<sup>9</sup>

<sup>4</sup> Ibid, 43, 44.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid, 41.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid, p.40.

<sup>7</sup> Azak, p.142.

<sup>8</sup> For a discussion of Kemalism’s appropriation of Alevism as “good Islam,” see Umut Azak.

<sup>9</sup> For a detailed journalistic account of the events see Ayça Örer and Abdullah Kılıç’s news piece on Maraş Katliamı (Maraş Massacre),

Similar events occurred in Malatya in 1978, as well as in Çorum during the summer of 1980, right before the military coup, killing more than 60 Alevi. In 1993, 22 people (mostly poets and singers) attending an Alevi festival were set on fire live in a hotel in Sivas, before the eyes of the Welfare Party (RP) politicians. In 1995, in İstanbul, upon a firing from a cab to coffee houses in Gazi district, where mostly Alevi live, clashes between the police and citizens ended up with 17 Alevi's deaths. The families took the Gazi case to the European Court of Human Rights and the court ruled that "the domestic authorities did not conduct prompt and adequate investigations into the killings."<sup>10</sup>

These events, coupled with the prejudices of the society and the social pressure

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exerted upon them, does not make Turkey an easy place to live for Alevi. The "invisible victims of Anatolia" suffer from daily degradation and even hate crimes. Especially in Anatolian cities such as Erzurum, Kayseri, Malatya, and Sivas, exclusion from economic life, unemployment and marginalization are daily practices.<sup>11</sup>

### **Explaining Aleviness**

There are many definitions and differing views on what constitutes Aleviness. Some refer to Aleviness as a separate and unique sect of Islam; some see it as a different belief system older than Islam. Then, there are discussions over whether it is a religion or a secular philosophy. There are also approaches to Aleviness as a political entity: Alevi being Republican, Kemalist and laicist, or Alevi being dissentients, democrats, egalitarians, leftists and socialists.<sup>12</sup>

In this article, we do not attempt to explain who Alevi are or what they believe in because, firstly, there is a rich literature by experts doing so. Secondly, defining Aleviness without knowing the essentials of Aleviness is not possible.. As Erdemir suggests, Aleviness is Aleviness, and all other beliefs should be content with this explanation. Without being an Alevi, one would not understand what the concepts

published in Radikal between 22-24 December 2011. Also see Orhan Tüleylioğlu's book, Kahramanmaraş Katliamı (Kahramanmaraş Massacre), Ankara: UM:AG Yayınları, 2009.

<sup>10</sup> European Court of Human Rights, "Şimşek and others vs. Turkey," 35072/ 97, 37194/97, <http://cmiskp.echr.coe.int/tkp197/search.asp?skin=hudoc-en>.

<sup>11</sup> Binnaz Toprak et al.,

<sup>12</sup> Sabır Güler, "Bir İnanç Sistemi Olarak Aleviliğin Siyasal Örgütlenmesi: Türkiye Büyük Birlik Partisi (TBP) Deneyimi, (Political Organization of Aleviness as a Belief System: Grand Turkish Unity Party (TBP) Experience " Ankara Üniversitesi Kamu Yönetimi ve Siyaset Bilimi Yayınlanmamış Yüksek Lisans Tezi, 2007.

that Alevis use to define themselves mean.<sup>13</sup>

Our interviewees from the Alevi federations argued the same. In the words of the representative from ABF: “99 percent of the Alevis do not know Alevilik. If you ask a regular Alevi on the street what Alevilik is, they would reply, we do not fast during Ramadan, we do not pray five times a week. Explaining your belief with what it is not is not the best way to explain (yet that is what the others would understand).”<sup>14</sup> The interviewee from the AVF adds, “Alevis could not learn Aleviness because of the pressure exerted upon them for 200 years. So, the Western orientalist scholars try to explain it. They look at the Sunnis, Wahabis, then, compare it with Alevis and conclude that this should be something else. Alevilik is not a list of rules. That way you can explain Sunni Islam but not Alevi Islam. Alevis reason why they do the things they do.”<sup>15</sup>

On the other hand, Aykan Erdemir, a Harvard trained anthropologist, argues that asking Alevis questions such as how many strands of Aleviness there are, what the essence of Aleviness is, or whether the Aleviness is a sect, is identical to asking Jews the types of Judaism and its essence. Putting the burden of proof onto the group that suffered from wrongdoings of others upon them is a vile policy, therefore, the Sunnis should not be asking the Alevis those questions.<sup>16</sup> However, reading through the end report of the Alevi Workshops, one cannot help but ask whether that was primarily what the state officials did during the meetings.

### ***Alevi Workshops***

Between June 2009 and January 2010, seven workshops were organized by the government in order to, in the Prime Minister’s words, “hear out the Alevi citizens and assess their problems.”<sup>17</sup> Minister of State of the previous government (July 2007-June 2011) Faruk Çelik, was personally involved in the process. Necdet Subaşı, a scholar of communications, acted as the coordinator in the process and was the author of the final report. His introduction to the report starts with these questions: “Who are the Alevis? What do they want? How and in which situation do they live? What are their interests and demands?”<sup>18</sup>

In addition to these questions that approaches the Alevis as if they are a different breed, his introduction reads as a savior’s address to his people. Given that the discussions among the different Alevi groups, who came all together for the first

<sup>13</sup> Aykan Erdemir, “Alevi ‘Önce hak’ diyor” (Alevis prioritize ‘rights’), interview by Devrim Sevimay, *Milliyet*, 3 December 2007.

<sup>14</sup> Interviews were conducted on 6 and 7 February 2012, with the representative from the AVF and ABF, respectively.

<sup>15</sup> Interviewee from AVF, 6 February 2012.

<sup>16</sup> Erdemir, p.6.

<sup>17</sup> Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, “Alevi Çalıştayları Nihai Raporu” (Intro. to the End Report), T.C. Başbakanlık (Republic of Turkey Prime Ministry), Ankara.

<sup>18</sup> Subaşı, 2010. Intro to the End Report, p.2.

time, were heated during the workshops, he writes, “Who did what to make Alevis equal and prestigious in the eyes of the State? Who inflicted the real harm onto Alevis? Who is going to pay the price for those harms? Every new born Alevi should face the given circumstances with a humane understanding...We have to agree that it is not possible to come to the desired conclusion through a planned social engineering.”<sup>19</sup>

Despite the demeaning tone of this introduction and the whole report, the Federations’ representatives who were present in the workshops do not report any resentment. The AVF representative states, “ the Minister, Faruk Çelik, himself

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said that his views has changed once he got to know the Alevis.” Respondent from ABF argues that he felt like the Alevi opening was geared towards the Sunni ulemas rather than the Alevis, and these workshops helped them to open up to the Alevis.

The discussions between the Alevi groups during the workshops and their lack of a “common” stance is highlighted in the report and in the interviews. The ABF representative admits, “To be honest, once there, we also behaved as if we were party delegates so the discussions took a form that would not be appropriate in an Alevi setting (which is known for its humility and peacefulness).” While expecting a “common” stance from a

variety of groups who have different political views and approaches is futile, a closer look at different Alevi groups can explain the reasons of heated debates between them.

The Federation of Alevi Foundations (AVF) is an umbrella organization of 12 foundations, though the “admiral ship” of the federation is the Republican Education and Culture Center (CEM Foundation). AVF defines Aleviness as an integral part of Islam, and defends that “Alevi Islam” is an important soft power that the Turkish state could make use of. In the words of its representative, “there are Alevis in a vast geographical area, from China to Albania, reaching as far as Yemen to the south. If Turkey had control over the Alevis in this area, it would be more beneficial

<sup>19</sup> Ibid, p.3.

for the Turkish state than, say, trying to ally with the Salafis.”

The other umbrella organization with 14 members, The Alevi Bektashi Federation (ABF), on the other hand, defines the power of Aleviness as being a cure to the global problems. The representative argues that Alevis’ peaceful and humble approach to mankind, loving and caring relationship with nature are the antidotes to hatreds that cause wars and to irresponsible consumption of nature.

The difference between the two federations’ views on the “Alevi effect” hints at their political positions as well. While the AVF has a more traditional view of the State, elevating it to a place where it can use Aleviness as a “combining element” for its purposes overseas, the ABF focuses on the values of Aleviness as internationally-permissible moral standards, and has a more, in the words of the AVF representative, “radical” view, which translates into being leftist.

The distinction between the two Federations’ approaches crystalizes when it comes to their views on Directorate General of Religious Affairs (Diyanet İşleri) under the Prime Minister’s Office, which, according to the law, executes the works concerning the Islamic religion’s beliefs, worships and ethics; enlightens the public about religion; and administers the places of worship.<sup>20</sup> While the AVF demands an office within the Directorate General of Religious Affairs that would provide Alevis with the State’s financial aid, the ABF demands the overall abolition of the Directorate General of Religious Affairs, arguing that it is against the secular principle since the state should be impartial to all beliefs.

The divergence between the views of different Alevi groups has been studied by linking it with modernization theories, identity politics, and even ethnicity theories. One common conclusion of most studies is that the Turkish political environment of the 1990s contributed to Alevi’s forming associations and voicing their concerns. Surely, people getting together in different associations had various socio-political status and demands. Most needs of the Alevis, on the other hand, are the same, and that stems from the exclusionary policies of the Turkish state towards the Alevis for a long time.

<sup>20</sup> Diyanet İşleri Başkanlığı Kuruluş ve Görevleri Hakkında Kanun (Law on the Foundation and the Functions of the Directorate General of Religious Affairs), *T.C. Resmi Gazete (Republic of Turkey Official Journal)*, No.12038 (2 July 1965), <http://www.resmigazete.gov.tr/main.aspx?home=http://www.resmigazete.gov.tr/arsiv/12038.pdf&main=http://www.resmigazete.gov.tr/arsiv/12038.pdf>

***Common Demands***

Despite their divergent political views and conception of Aleviness, different Alevi federations' demands from the State are essentially the same: to ensure that discrimination against Alevis come to an end, and that their worshipping places, "Cem" houses, are legally recognized. The frame within which they put their demands differs. The AVF frames the rights of Alevis within religious and minority rights while the ABF frames them within a more liberal citizenship perspective.

The AVF suggests the creation of an office within the DRGA which would provide funding as well as training opportunities to the religious "guides", situating Alevis as a religious group. The ABF, on the other hand, argues that non-discrimination is a citizenship issue, and the State, keeping equal distance to all belief groups and ethnicities, should recognize all groups and stand on the principle of democratic constitutional citizenship.

No matter how it is framed, it is clear that Alevis have suffered from the oppression of the State which contributed to their discrimination in social and economic life. According to the Alevi federations, while the "Alevi Opening" started as a step towards reconciliation, the process and the end report turned out to be just another futile effort of the State to create "their own" (meaning, loyal) Alevis.