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Responses to Information Requests

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26 April 2013

TUR104391.E

Turkey: The difference between the beliefs and practices of Alevis and those of Alawis (Nusayris); treatment of both groups by authorities (2012-April 2013)

Research Directorate, Immigration and Refugee Board of Canada, Ottawa

1. Overview

Sources indicate that Alevis and Alawis are two distinct groups of people that have different interpretations of Islam (Professor of Sociology 15 Apr. 2013; DW 22 Mar. 2012; CIP 17 Aug. 2012). Both groups are of Shia origin and their names mean "devoted to Ali," who was the son-in-law and cousin of the Prophet Muhammad (ibid.; Professor of Turkish Studies 21 Apr. 2013). As many as 20 million Alevis live in Turkey, about half-million of whom are Arabic-speaking and live along the border with Syria (Massicard Dec. 2012; CIP 17 Aug. 2012). Around two million Alawis live in Syria (Massicard Dec. 2012; CIP 17 Aug. 2012). According to Elise Massicard, professor at the French Institute for Anatolian Studies (Institut français d'études anatoliennes, IFEA) in Istanbul, Turkey, the Alevis that live along the Syrian border are near the Alawis in Syria and have ties with them (Massicard Dec. 2012).

In correspondence with the Research Directorate, a professor of sociology at the Middle East Technical University (METU) in Ankara, Turkey, indicated that Alevism, as a particular belief system, is not recognized by the Turkish government (15 Apr. 2013). In correspondence with the Research Directorate, an emeritus professor at the Department of Religious Studies and Theology at the University of Utrecht indicated that "[n] either Islamists nor the [Turkish] government make a clear distinction between Alevis and Alawis (20 Apr. 2013). Corroborating information could not be found by the Research Directorate among the sources consulted within the time constraints of this Response.

2. Difference in Beliefs and Practices

Sources indicate that neither Alevis nor Alawis pray in mosques (DW 22 Mar. 2012; CIP 17 Aug. 2012), neither do they support clerics as mainstream Shias do (ibid.). Instead of mosques, Alevis pray in a *cemevi* (DW 22 Mar. 2012; CIP 17 Aug. 2012) or "meeting-house," and Alawis do not have places of worship except for shrines to their leaders or sheikhs (ibid.).

Sources indicate that, despite their common background, Alevis and Alawis have religious and cultural differences (DW 22 Mar. 2012; CIP 17 Aug. 2012; Emeritus Professor 20 Apr. 2013). A professor of Turkish Studies at the University of Cyprus provided the following table listing the differences between Alevis and Alawis (21 Apr. 2013):

	Alevis	Alawis
Different names	Kızılbaş; Bektâşi	Nusairi; Alaoui, Arap Alevi (turk. Arabian Alevis)
Time of origin/first mentioned	13th century AD	10th/11th century
Traditional settlement area	Anatolia (Asia Minor, spill over to Balkans, Irak, Syria)	Syrial Coastal Mountain Range (Alawi Mountains, al-Djabal al-Ansari/Alawi)

	Alevis	Alawis
Main figures in their mystical/religious history	Ali ibn abi Talib; the Shi'ite Imams Hasan and Huseyn, and all following Imams; Haci Bektaş; Pir Sultan Abdal	Ali ibn abi Talib; Salman al-Farisi (no historical data); Abu Shu'ayb Muhammad ibn Nusayr (d. ca 863 AD)
Main characteristics of their belief	Veneration of Ali in different degrees; Islamic mysticism as taught by wandering dervishes; the human being is the "living quran" and a sacred being; man and women are equally initiated.	Ali is the manifestation of God; complete secrecy; women not initiated; belief in migration of souls; Islamic mysticism with a strong influence of medieval Platonism and Gnostic.
Main practices	Cem ("come together") including <i>semah</i> (ritual dance), singing of hymns, solving of problems inside the community; commemoration of the death of Huseyn in Karbala. 12-Imam -Fasting during the Islamic month <i>Muharram</i> .	Commemoration of "Day of the Pond" <i>'id al-ghadir</i>) when Prophet Muhammad assigned the imamat to Ali; initiation of male community members; visit of shrines; <i>mawlid</i> (prayer for the soul of the dead); commemoration of Karbala but instead of Huseyn, Hanzala was killed.
Social structure	Endogamy prevailing; several institutions of religious kinship; lay families and families of sacred lineage; much importance is given to matrimony and solidarity inside the community; categorical rejection of death penalty and polygamy.	Differentiation between men and women, sheikh and lay families
Language/s	Turkish prevailing, also Kurdish.	Arabic prevailing, in the more recent settlement areas in Turkey, Turkish instead of Arabic.
Economic situation	Poor rural living conditions in remote areas of the Ottoman Empire/ Turkey; economic rise of families migrating to Europe in 20th century	Poor rural-mountainous living conditions; in 19th and 20th c. spreading to lowlands in Turkey (Hatay, Cukurova) and Syria (Homs, Hama); emergence of wealthy and influential families.

In an article by its executive director, the Center for Islamic Pluralism (CIP), a think tank that concerns itself with the role of Muslims in the United States and "challenges the dominance of American Muslim life by militant Islamist groups" (CIP n.d.), identifies further differences:

	Alevis	Alawis
Religious literature	"[E]xtensive and widely-read religious literature composed of spiritual songs, poems and epic verses." "Their recitations are drawn from the outstanding and beloved Turkish poet, Yunus Emre; the Kurdish Sufi, Safi Al-Din; the Persian-Turkish Sufi, Hajji Bektash, and the Turkish poet, Pir Sultan Abdal, among others."	"[A]pparently limited to Koran and the collected sermons of Imam Ali." "Teachings are transmitted incrementally through the lifetimes of selected disciples, but denied to most acolytes, and kept rigorously secret."
Practices	"[P]reserves pre-Islamic elements of Turkish shamanism and Kurdish angel-worship."	Also "preserves pre-Islamic elements of Turkish shamanism and Kurdish angel-worship [but] may reflect Phoenician paganism and pre-Islamic Persian religions."
Role of women	"[S]upporters of gender equality, and women participate in leading the 'cem'."	"[E]xclude [women] from sacred observances."
Political support	"[D]efend electoral democracy."	Support of the Assad regime in Syria.

(ibid. 17 Aug. 2012)

The Emeritus Professor at the University of Utrecht provided the following information regarding the differences between the two groups:

Both communities ... (originally) believe in reincarnation, but it is only among the Alawis that this belief is still actively held (and there are many cases of a deceased person "re-appearing" in a newborn child). Contemporary Alevis do not mention this belief.

Both communities have ritual gatherings; but among the Alevi, it is married couples who jointly take part in the gathering (Cem); among the Alawis, only men are present.

Sacred songs in Turkish (called *nefes* or *deyis*) accompanied on the *baglama* (long-neck lute) are an important element of Alevi ritual; these songs constitute the main body of religious lore and knowledge accessible to the average Alevi. The Alawis do not have a corresponding practice.

In many Alevi communities, there is also a sacred dance (*semah*) that used to [be] performed in the ritual meetings. Some scholars have claimed the *semah* represents the movement of the spirit between successive incarnations. Alawis do not have *semah*. However, in modern urban environments, both the Alevi cem and the *semah* have revived as a sort of folklore performance. Alawis have taken part in these cem (which are not strictly limited to initiated couples, as in the past in the village environment), and I was told of young Alawis inventing their own regional form of *semah* in order to compete with Alevi *semah* teams in *semah* competitions that occasionally take place. (20 Apr. 2013)

3. Treatment by Authorities

Sources indicate that Alevi have been "persecuted" for centuries (DW 22 Mar. 2012; Professor of Sociology 17 Apr. 2013) because of their "particular understanding of Islam" (ibid.). Officially, there is no discrimination against Alevi, but in practice, it still occurs (Massicard 19 Apr. 2013; Emeritus Professor 20 Apr. 2013). Sources indicate that a *cemevi* is not officially recognized by the government as a place of worship (EU 10 Oct. 2012, 25; Massicard 19 Apr. 2013; DW 22 Mar. 2012;) but is considered a "cultural centre" (ibid.; Massicard 19 Apr. 2013). Sources also indicate that Alevi have been barred from holding commemorative ceremonies, and their property has been marked (EU 10 Oct. 2012; Professor of Sociology 17 Apr. 2013) with an "x" (ibid.). In further correspondence, the Professor of Turkish Studies indicated that, according to media reports, the houses and Alevi *cemevis* were not only marked with an "x" but also with such slogans as "'dirty Alevi, we will burn all of you'" or "'Death to Alevi'" (24 Apr. 2013). She also indicated that "[n]obody has taken the responsibility, and no one has been charged or penalized yet. However, in some cases Sunnite neighbours showed solidarity with the Alevi families and marked their own houses, too" (Professor of Turkish Studies 24 Apr. 2013).

According to the Professor of Sociology, since Alevi do not practice the ritual of ablution or *al-wudu*, they are regarded by the Sunnis as neither "pure" nor "clean" and their food is viewed as contaminated (17 Apr. 2013). The Emeritus Professor also expressed the view that Alevi are considered "unclean" (20 Apr. 2013). The Professor of Sociology added that Alevi students in public schools frequently face "traumatizing discrimination" (17 Apr. 2013). Additional or corroborating information could not be found by the Research Directorate among the sources consulted within the time constraints of this Response.

Massicard indicated that [translation] "Alevi are still required ... to take the compulsory courses on 'religious culture and ethics' at school, which is close to a religious education of Sunni Islam which they do not recognize" (19 Apr. 2013). The Professor of Turkish Studies indicated that

90 percent of the topics are located in Sunnite Islam, and it often includes "practical exercises" such as reciting Quran or demonstrating how to do the ritual prayer. There is a new possibility to opt out from Religious Education but practice shows that the fear of being ostracized or losing credits in High School and university entrance exams makes parents shy away from exercising their right to exemption. (24 Apr. 2013)

She also indicated that discrimination at public schools also depends on the individual teacher, the region, and the neighbourhood (Professor of Turkish Studies 24 Apr. 2013).

Massicard indicated that Alevi may face discrimination in employment, delivery of public services, and may be victims of harassment by authorities (Massicard 19 Apr. 2013). However, she also highlighted that these are [translation] "informal practices, fragmented [and] partial" (ibid.).

The Emeritus Professor indicated that

the Alevi have always been suspected of disloyalty to the nation. As recently as the 1970s, when the country was polarized along left-right lines, there were major anti-Alevi pogroms, carried out by ultranationalists and Islamists.

... Kurdish Alevi (whose tenets of belief are further removed from Islamic orthodoxy than those of Turkish Alevi and Alawis) are most distrusted and discriminated against. The Alawis are more invisible than the Turkish or Kurdish Alevi and are rarely mentioned explicitly.

Alevi leaders have usually allied themselves with the secular elite (i.e. the Republican People's Party) for most of the Republican period. Both the AKP leadership and the Gülen movement - the two major movements of conservative Sunni Islam - perceive the Alevi members of the secular establishment (the judiciary and several other institutions of the state) as conspiring against them to prevent the Sunni majority gaining control of the state. Both Erdogan [Turkish Prime Minister] and Fathullah Gülen [the spiritual leader of the Gülen movement] have repeatedly made emotional anti Alevi statements (which they later regretted and said were quoted out of context). (20 Apr. 2013)

3.1 Syrian Civil War (2011-Present)

Regarding the treatment of Alevis by Turkish authorities within the context of the war in Syria, the Professor of Turkish Studies indicated that

[some] countries are using their potential of exercising influence on the conflict, that is "Sunni" countries such as Turkey and the Arab states support Sunni (combat) groups, whereas Iran and the Shi'ite government of Iraq support Alawi groups which are considered to be Shi'ite because of their veneration of Ali. For this reason, the Alawi population [in Turkey] is indeed afraid of a victory of Sunnites because they will allegedly not only destroy the Assad-System but also punish every single Alawi. But currently, the situation is not that "clear," and Alawi members of the opposition have become imprisoned or had to take refuge outside Syria. (21 Apr. 2013)

Corroborating information could not be found among the sources consulted by the Research Directorate within the time constraints of this Response.

Sources indicate that Syrian president Bashar al-Assad's family are Alawis (DW 22 Mar. 2012; Reuters 22 Apr. 2013). Reuters reports that the conflict in Syria is "increasingly pitting majority Sunnis against the minority Alawites who have controlled Syria since the 1960s" (ibid.). A report by Deutsche Welle (DW), Germany's international broadcaster, cites the head of the Turkish Hubyar Sultan Alevi cultural society as saying that "some groups fighting Assad's regime were identifying with historical Sunni figures who fought the formerly repressed Alawite minority" (22 Mar. 2012).

The Professor of Turkish Studies also indicated that

the anti-Assad stand of the Turkish AKP [Justice and Development Party] government fuels the Turkish Alevis' general criticism of this government. The term "Alawi" is constantly translated as Alevi into Turkish, and the Alevis understand from the news that Turkish troops are killing "Alevis" in Syria, or that President Erdogan intends to annihilate "the Alevis of Syria." This is interpreted as a further proof of the AKP's Alevi-hatred. (21 Apr. 2013)

Deutsche Welle reports that, according to the head of the Turkish Hubyar Sultan Alevi cultural society, "whenever [the Turkish Prime Minister] talks about Syria, he refers to Assad as an Alevi" thus "stoking the fires of sectarian tensions in Turkey" (22 Mar. 2013). According to the Professor of Sociology, the "most critical issue which causes great tension among Alevis is the warmongering policies of the AKP government that explicitly stigmatizes Alevis in Turkey as a pro-Syrian community" and refers to its "denominational proximity" with the regime of al-Assad (Professor of Sociology 15 Apr. 2013). The Professor explained that, for the AKP, Alevis in Turkey are pro-al-Assad "just because they share similar denominational values" thus being regarded an "internal enemy of Turkey" (ibid. 17 Apr. 2013). For more information on the treatment of Alevis by society and government authorities, including state response to mistreatment, please consult Response to Information Request TUR104076.E.

This Response was prepared after researching publicly accessible information currently available to the Research Directorate within time constraints. This Response is not, and does not purport to be, conclusive as to the merit of any particular claim for refugee protection. Please find below the list of sources consulted in researching this Information Request.

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Additional Sources Consulted

Oral sources: Researchers from the following universities could not provide information: Lund University, University of Copenhagen, and University of Munich.

Attempts to contact representatives of the following universities were unsuccessful: Bilkent University, Hecettepe University, Heidelberg University, and University of Munich.

Internet sites, including: Amnesty International; ecoi.net; Avrupa Alevi Birlikleri Federasyonu; Factiva; Fédération union des alévis; Human Rights Watch; *Middle East Times*; National Public Radio; Turkey – Ministry of the Interior; TurkishPress.com; United Nations – RefWorld; United States – Central Intelligence Agency, Department of State.

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