



World Directory of Minorities

Europe MRG Directory → Turkey → Alevis

Print Page

Close Window

Alevis

Alevi is the term used for a large number of heterodox Muslim Shi'a communities with different characteristics. Thus, Alevis constitute the largest religious minority in Turkey. Technically they fall under the Shi'a denomination of Islam, yet they follow a fundamentally different interpretation than the Shi'a communities in other countries. They also differ considerably from the Sunni Muslim majority in their practice and interpretation of Islam.

The number of Alevis is a matter of contention. Estimates range from around 10 per cent to as much as 40 per cent of the total population. An academic study launched in November 2006 estimates that Alevis are around 11.4 per cent of the population. A survey conducted for the daily *Milliyet* and launched on 21 March 2007 claims that the proportion of those who disclosed themselves as Alevis is much lower at per cent (4.5 million). The methodology and findings of the survey were criticized by all Alevi organizations. The Alevi-Bektas,i Federation claims that there are around 25 million Alevis in Turkey, constituting nearly 33 per cent of the population.

The vast majority of Alevis are probably of Kizilbash or Bektashi origin, two groups subscribing to virtually the same system of beliefs but separately organized. The Alevis (Kizilbash) are traditionally predominantly rural and acquire identity by parentage. Bektashis, however, are predominantly urban, and formally claim that membership is open to any Muslim.

Linguistically, they consist of four groups: Azerbaijani Turkish, Arabic, Turkish and Kurdish (both Kurmanci and Zaza). The last two categories constitute the largest Alevi groups. Politically, Kurdish Alevis have faced the dilemma of whether their prior loyalty should be to their ethnic or religious community. Some care more about religious solidarity with Turkish Alevis than ethnic solidarity with Kurds, particularly since many Sunni Kurds deplore them. Some fear such tensions may lead to new ethno-religious conflict.

Alevi and Bektashi beliefs are presumed to have their origins in Central Asian Turkmen culture. However, they are likely to have absorbed Christian beliefs when Byzantine peasantry moved into the Alevi faith during the Turkic conquest of Anatolia during the tenth and eleventh centuries, and Iranian pre-Islamic ideas, since kizilbash beliefs derived from the founders of the Iranian Safavid dynasty.

Alevis share a way of truth unavailable to the uninitiated, and like Sufis claim that the Koran has both an open and a hidden meaning. There are progressive levels of divine understanding from obedience to shari'a Islam through *tarika* (brotherhood) to *ma'rifa* (mystical understanding of God) and ultimately to *hakkika* (immanent experience of divine reality). Their profession of faith includes Ali along with God and the Prophet Muhammad. Alevis differ outwardly from Sunni Muslims in the following ways: they do not fast in Ramadan but do during the Ten Days of Muharram (the Shiite commemoration of Imam Husayn's martyrdom); they do not prostrate themselves during prayer; they do not have mosques; and do not have obligatory formal almsgiving, although they have a strong principle of mutual assistance.

Isolated within what became Sunni Ottoman territory, Alevis have always been reviled as non-Muslims

of dubious loyalty, victims of scurrilous libels. To avoid persecution, Alevism practice taqiyya (dissimulation). Many Alevism celebrate the life of the sixteenth-century saint, Pir Sultan Abdal, a symbol for community cooperation and opposition to injustice.

Until the present century Alevism survived by living in remote areas. Hopes of faring better under a secular republic failed to take account of popular prejudice. With conscription and the drift to towns in search of work, Alevism, especially Kurds, have increasingly been exposed to Sunni prejudice and animosity.

However, there has also been a change in what Alevism signifies. Traditional Alevism, based upon village and rural life, broke down in the context of urbanization. In its place Alevism strongly identified with the political left. The Sunni Islamic revival of the 1980s has provoked a reaction among Alevism. The revivalist process has been an ethno-political movement rather than a strictly religious one, with a spate of publications in Turkey concerning Alevi religion and history. Initiation into the esoteric aspects of the religion is dying out, but an Alevi cultural renaissance is undoubtedly taking place.

Tension between the Sunni rightists and Alevi leftists grew from the 1970s. In part it was the migrant drift of Alevism from mountainous or unproductive land to seek work in predominantly Sunni towns which was a major catalyst in Sunni–Alevi tensions. At a local level the state has connived with this harassment, frequently to the point of persecution. Alevism harassed by Sunnis have seldom sought redress either from the police or the law courts since they believe the latter to be deeply prejudiced against them. In 1978 well over 100 Alevism were massacred in Maras by members of the extreme right National Action Party. In July 1993, 67 Alevism were killed in Sivas at the climax to the eight – hour siege of a hotel by Sunnis, while the police stood by. In March 1995 more than 20 Alevism were killed by vigilantes and police in Istanbul. Alevism remain economically underprivileged.

Alevism continue to suffer discrimination on a number of levels. Alevi cemevis (places of gathering) have no legal status as places of worship. Alevism in the Kartal district of Istanbul have continued to fight a court battle against a decision by local authorities to deny them permission to build a cem house. In January 2005 Alevism in the Cankaya district of Ankara applied to acquire property to open a cem house. Municipal authorities consulted the Directorate of Religious Affairs (Diyanet – the government body which oversees Muslim religious facilities and education), which issued a letter stating that Alevism in Cankaya did not need cemevis because they could worship at a local mosque. Also in January the Diyanet issued a letter to authorities in the Sultanbeyli district of Istanbul stating that cemevis violated Islamic principles and the law. The letter was sent in response to an application to build cemevis.

Compulsory religious education classes at primary and secondary school in Turkey also penalise Alevism. Though the classes cover basic information about other religions, they are predominantly about the theory and practice of Sunni Hanefi Islam. The classes are particularly discriminatory against non-Sunni Muslim minorities; Christian and Jewish students are exempt from the classes; Alevism are not. A case filed by an Alevi parent arguing that compulsory religious instruction violates Article 9 of the European Convention on Human Rights, is currently pending in Strasbourg.

In the previous parliament, there were no Alevism among the 354 AKP deputies. Upon protests, the AKP leadership nominated a number of Alevism, as a result of which there are four Alevi AKP members of the 2007 parliament. In 2010, only one out of Turkey's 81 provincial governors was an Alevi.

In 2008, 200,000 Alevism rallied on the streets of Istanbul to protest against government policies and demand equal rights. In 2009 the government launched a series of workshops with Alevi groups to try and address their concerns. But these dialogue meetings did not lead to any concrete changes. For example, during discussions, representatives of the Alevi minority called for children from the group to

be exempted from attending obligatory religious culture and ethics classes (which remain centred on Sunni Islamic teachings, despite some revisions), but this request was denied.

powered by [the webbler](#)