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Responses to Information Requests

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12 June 2015

TUR105167.E

Turkey: Situation of Alevis, including political and religious rights; treatment of Alevis by society and authorities; state protection (June 2012-May 2015)

Research Directorate, Immigration and Refugee Board of Canada, Ottawa

1. Overview

For information on the Alevi in Turkey, including religious origins, history, population information and treatment until June 2012, see Response to Information Requests TUR104076, TUR102821 and TUR104391

1.1 Political Rights

Sources note that the Justice and Development Party (JDP or AKP) has been in power since 2002 (*The Economist* 28 Mar. 2015; Reuters 25 May 2015). Sources state that the AKP lost its parliamentary majority during the June 2015 election (BBC 8 June 2015; *The Guardian* 7 June 2015; Reuters 8 June 2015) and will either attempt to form a coalition, most likely with the right-wing Nationalist Movement Party (MHP), or call for early elections (ibid.).

An article published by the Washington Institute for Near East Policy, a US non-profit organization that works to promote US Middle East policy (Washington Institute n.d.), states that the opposition party, the Republican People's Party (CHP), is supported by a "majority" of the Alevi population (ibid. 24 Mar. 2014). Sources report that the leader of the CHP is Kemal Kilicdaroglu, who is an Alevi (US 1 Aug. 2014, 52; EPC 24 Jan. 2014). The Washington Institute reports that over the past 12 years "the Alevis have been almost entirely cut out of power, except in a few cities where the local government belongs to opposition parties like the ... CHP" (24 Mar. 2014). Corroborating information could not be found among the sources consulted by the Research Directorate within the time constraints of this Response.

According to the US Department of State's *Country Reports on Human Rights Practices for 2013*, Alevis are underrepresented within the bureaucracy and "held none of the country's 81 provincial governorships appointed by the central government" (US 27 Feb. 2014, 45). An article written for the European Policy Centre (EPC), an independent not-for-profit think tank that "fosters European integration" (EPC n.d.), similarly states that all of the country's 81 governors, "who are directly appointed by the government, are Sunni" (EPC 24 Jan. 2014).

1.2 Religious Rights

Sources indicate that the Alevi are not recognized as a distinct religious group (Akdemir 2014, 65; Al Jazeera 4 Dec. 2014). Freedom House similarly states that the Alevi "lack protected status" (10 Mar. 2015). *Country Reports 2013* states that "religious minorities, including Alevis ... are prohibited from fully exercising

their linguistic, religious, and cultural rights and continued to face varying levels of pressure to assimilate" (US 27 Feb. 2014, 44). Sources indicate that mosques are being built in Alevi communities (Professor 21 May 2015; Reuters 2 Dec. 2014). Sources note that this is viewed by some as an attempt at assimilation (ibid.; Al-Monitor 11 Sept. 2013) or "conversion" (Professor 21 May 2015).

Sources indicate that the Turkish government does not recognize Alevi *cemevis* [houses of worship] as official houses of worship (ibid.; Al-Akhbar 9 Feb. 2015; EPC 24 Jan. 2014). Sources report that Alevi *cemevis* do not receive state funding (US 27 Feb. 2014, 45; Professor 21 May 2015; EPC 24 Jan. 2014), unlike Sunni mosques, which do (ibid.). Sources report that in December 2014, the European Court for Human Rights (ECHR) ruled against Turkey for failing to give the same status to Alevi houses of worship that mosques, churches and synagogues have (Professor 21 May 2015; Reuters 2 Dec. 2014; *Today's Zaman* 18 May 2015). *Today's Zaman*, a daily English-language newspaper in Turkey (ibid. n.d.), reports that in particular, the ECHR ruled in favour of the Alevi community in relation to electricity costs paid by individual *cemevis*, finding that the costs should be covered by the government's Religious Affairs Directorate and that the state's failure to pay for these costs amounts to discrimination (ibid., 18 May 2015). Al Jazeera reports that the Directorate pays for the electricity costs of mosques, churches and synagogues (Al Jazeera 4 Dec. 2014). *Today's Zaman* reports that the ECHR was to hold another hearing in June to further examine whether the fact that *cemevis* are not legally recognized by the state constitutes discrimination under the European Convention on Human Rights (18 May 2015). According to *Hurriyet Daily News*, a daily English-language newspaper in Turkey, the hearing was held on 3 June 2015 and the court is expected to have concluded its ruling within 6 to 12 months (3 June 2015).

Unlike Jewish and Christian students, Alevi students are unable to be exempted from compulsory [Sunni Islamic] religion classes (Norwegian Helsinki Committee Jan. 2015, 16; US 30 Apr. 2015, 187; RNS 18 Feb. 2015). According to sources, the ECHR ruled in September 2014 that the state's compulsory religious education for students discriminated against Alevis (Freedom House 2015; US 30 Apr. 2015, 187); and held that the state should allow pupils to be exempted from religious classes without parents having to disclose their religious beliefs (ibid.). According to a briefing produced by the German Information Centre on Asylum and Migration (IZAM), which provides specialist information to the Federal Office for Migration and Refugees (BAMF) in Germany (Germany 27 Feb. 2013), as of 23 February 2015, the Turkish government had "refused to implement" the ECHR ruling (ibid. 23 Feb. 2015).

2. Treatment by Society

In correspondence with the Research Directorate, a professor at the Department of History, Anthropology & Philosophy at Georgia Regents University, who specializes in the political history of Turkey, explained that some "who consider themselves to be devout Sunni Muslims feel that Alevis are non-believers or 'devil worshippers'" (21 May 2015). Other sources state that "many" Sunni Muslims regard some Alevi practices as "heresy" (Reuters 2 Dec. 2014; Al Jazeera 18 Dec. 2014; CACI and SRSP 11 June 2014). According to *Country Reports 2013*, "Alevis regularly faced societal discrimination" (US 27 Feb. 2014, 45). The Professor similarly stated that discrimination of Alevi "both subtle and more overt, takes place throughout the country" (21 May 2015). In contrast, a 2014 article in the *Turkey Analyst*, a bi-weekly publication of the Central Asia-Caucasus Institute & Silk Road Studies Joint Center that focuses on news and analysis of domestic and foreign policy issues in Turkey (CACI and SRSP n.d.), states that the "increasing frequency of anti-Alevi prejudice" comes from "members of the AKP leadership," that there has been no major increase in anti-Alevi sentiment "amongst the Sunni population as a whole" and that most Sunnis and Alevis co-exist with relatively few problems on a daily basis (CACI and SRSP 11 June 2014). Corroborating information could not be found among the sources consulted by the Research Directorate within the time constraints of this Response.

Sources report on incidents of violence against Alevis, including the following:

- During the month of Ramadan in 2012, the home of an Alevi family was *surrounded by local residents after the family tried to stop drum noise used to wake people for a predawn Ramadan meal* (*The New York Times* 4 Aug. 2012; *Hurriyet Daily News* 25 Aug. 2012; Akdemir 2014, 69). Sources report that the home was stoned and a stall next to the house was set on fire (ibid.; *Hurriyet Daily News* 25 Aug. 2012).
- According to *Hurriyet Daily News*, in August 2012 "[a]rsonists attempted to set fire to a *cemevi* ... in Istanbul's Kartal district" (ibid.). According to the same article, the day before the attempted arson, the houses of 25 Alevi families were "marked" by unknown individuals in the same neighbourhood (ibid.).
- In December 2013, the homes of 13 Alevi were marked with red paint, similar to that which occurred prior to the 1978 killings of Alevis [1] (US 27 Feb. 2014, 45; MRG July 2014, 181-182). Minority Rights Group International (MRG) indicates that this took place in Adiyaman province (ibid.).

- According to an article in *Today's Zaman*, in October 2014, nine apartment buildings in an Alevi-majority area in Istanbul were marked with the message "Death to Alevis and Kurds. ISIL" (13 Oct. 2014).
- In November 2014, Deniz Naki, a footballer playing for a Turkish club, was physically attacked and "insulted" for his Alevi and Kurdish origins (AFP 6 Nov. 2014; Reuters 6 Nov. 2014). *Hurriyet Daily News* reports that he had experienced past abuse for being an Alevi (4 Nov. 2014). As a dual Turkish and German citizen, he left the club and returned to Germany (Reuters 6 Nov. 2014).

3. Treatment by Authorities

According to sources, since the civil war in Syria [2011], Alevi in Turkey have faced increased discrimination [2] (Professor 21 May 2015; *Today's Zaman* 22 Dec. 2013; Akdemir 2014, 69). In correspondence with the Research Directorate, a PhD candidate and sessional lecturer at the University of Sydney who has published multiple academic articles on the Alevi in Turkey (University of Sydney n.d.), stated that discrimination of Alevi has increased "since the 1980s, but even more so throughout the AKP government rule" (28 May 2015). The EPC article describes the Sunni-dominated governorship in the country as signalling an "institutionalized discrimination" [against Alevis] (24 Jan. 2014). *Country Reports 2013* notes that Alevis "faced systemic discrimination from the state" (US 27 Feb. 2014, 45).

Sources note the following examples of the treatment of Alevis by state authorities:

- According to the *Turkey Analyst* article, AKP officials reportedly blamed a May 2013 car bombing in Reyhani which killed 53 people on the Alevis, claiming that the attack was carried out by Turkish Alevis based in Syria, even though no evidence was produced to this effect (11 June 2014).
- Sources report that the request of a prison inmate to see an Alevi religious figure was rejected and an imam was sent instead (*Today's Zaman* 22 Dec. 2013; Professor 21 May 2015; Bianet 31 Jan. 2013).
- According to Freedom House, in 2014, President Recep Tayyip Erdogan and "AKP officials" criticized members of the Alevi religious minority; in particular, Erdogan "made repeated disparaging remarks about Alevis" (Freedom House 2015). Al-Monitor, quoting a translated interview with the head of the Alevi-Bektashi Federation, Selahattin Ozel, similarly reports that Erdogan's rhetoric ... on the Alevis has been very divisive, very ostracizing" (9 May 2013).
- According to *Country Reports 2013*, there was excessive use of force by police in responding to Gezi Park protests [2013 protests against the development of Istanbul's Gezi Park that escalated to involve larger issues like the "oppression of individual liberties" (Akdemir 2014, 72)] involving Alevi citizens (US 27 Feb. 2014, 28). According to a 2014 article on the conflict between the Alevi and the AKP published in the *Eurasian Journal of Anthropology*, Alevi neighbourhoods were highly supportive of the Gezi Park protests and the majority of the people killed during the protests were Alevi, as a result of "the harshness of the police violence in certain neighbourhoods populated largely by Alevis" (Akdemir 2014, 72). Corroborating information could not be found among the sources consulted by the Research Directorate within the time constraints of this Response.
- Without providing further details, Freedom House reports that in May 2014, "violence between Sunni and Alevi groups in Istanbul claimed two lives" (2015). Similarly, the *Turkey Analyst* article reports that on 22 May 2014, members of the militant leftist group the Revolutionary People's Liberation Party/Front (DHKP/C), which "almost exclusively" recruits Alevis, "clashed with police in the Alevi part of the mixed Sunni-Alevi neighbourhood of Okmeydani in central Istanbul," and two people were killed (CACI and SRSP 11 June 2014). Sources report that one of the victims was shot while waiting in a cemevi courtyard to attend a funeral (ibid.; Human Rights Watch 23 May 2014). Human Rights Watch reports that the police had originally been targeting protestors after they threw a Molotov cocktail at a police vehicle (ibid.).
- According to Religion News Service, a non-profit online news source that aims to "provide in-depth, non-sectarian coverage of religion" (RNS n.d.), police responded to protests on 13 February 2015 by Alevis and other religious minorities regarding compulsory religion classes in primary schools with pepper spray, water cannons, and detaining and filing charges against protest leaders "for insulting the Turkish president" (ibid. 18 Feb. 2015). Corroborating and further information could not be found among the sources consulted by the Research Directorate within the time constraints of this Response.

4. State Efforts and Protection

4.1 State Efforts

Sources indicate that a plan was developed by Izzettin Dogan, a prominent figure in the Alevi community, and Fethullah Gulen, an Islamic scholar, to build a complex in Ankara that would house a mosque and a cemevi in an attempt to bridge the two communities (Akdemir 2014, 73; Al-Monitor 11 Sept. 2013). The same sources further state that this was not supported by several Alevi organizations (ibid.). According to the academic article published in the *Eurasian Journal of Anthropology*, because of some elements of Alevi rituals, such as men and women praying together and "music and dance in the rituals," there was concern that over time "their distinct rituals would be erased ... and ... [they] would eventually be assimilated into Sunni Islam" (Akdemir 2014, 73). The Al-Monitor article similarly states that "[m]any Alevis view this project as another step of Sunnification" (11 Sept. 2013).

In May 2015, Cihan News Agency (CNA), a global news agency with offices around the world and in 81 cities in Turkey that provides content in English, Turkish, Russian and Arabic (CNA n.d.), reported that the Ankara-based project had been halted as the "AK Party-led Mamak Municipality" did not issue a certificate of occupancy for the project on the grounds that it was being financed by "parallel funds" from businesspeople supportive of the Gulen movement (CNA 14 May 2015). Sources explain that the Gulen movement is based on a liberal understanding of Islam and is global in scope and membership (The Huffington Post 9 Jan. 2015; BBC 18 Dec. 2013; Al Jazeera 13 Mar. 2014). Sources report that the AKP is concerned about the Gulen movement creating a "parallel state" within Turkey (ibid.; The Huffington Post 9 Jan. 2015). Sources report that Gulen movement members are believed to hold influential positions in the government, including the police, judiciary (ibid.; BBC 18 Dec. 2013), secret services, and the AKP party itself (ibid.).

Sources describe several government-led initiatives, including the following:

- According to Anadolu Agency, a state-run press agency in Turkey (AFP n.d.), under the September 2013 democratization package, Nevsehir University was renamed Nevsehir Haci Bektas-I Veli University; Haci Bektas-I Veli is a prominent religious figure for the Alevi (Anadolu Agency 7 Nov. 2013).
- Sources reporting in late 2014 stated that an old military post in Tunceli was to be made into a museum (Al Jazeera 18 Dec. 2014; Anadolu Agency 24 Nov. 2014). Anadolu Agency reported that the museum would be named "Dersim Museum," after the Kurdish name for the area, which was changed to Tunceli in 1935 (ibid.). According to Al Jazeera, the museum would commemorate "the 1938 massacre" [of Alevis] [3] (18 Dec. 2014).
- Tunceli University will be renamed Munzur University (Anadolu Agency 24 Nov. 2014; Al Jazeera 18 Dec. 2014). The Al Jazeera article further states that the university is named after a "nearby valley that is a pilgrimage site for Alevis" (ibid.).
- On 21 March 2015 the Prime Minister held a meeting with representatives of the Alevi community (*Daily Sabah* 22 Mar. 2015; Dogan New Agency 22 Mar. 2015). According to Dogan News Agency, a Turkish news agency, after the meeting "many" of those who attended "stated they did not expect concrete solutions to their problems before the upcoming elections in June" (ibid.).
- Some local government authorities have recognized cemevi as official places of worship (ibid. 4 Feb. 2015; *Daily Sabah* 22 Mar. 2015; Anadolu Agency 7 Feb. 2015). Some sources identify the areas as the provinces of "Edirne and Zonguldak" (ibid.; *Daily Sabah* 22 Mar. 2015). The Dogan News Agency reports that it is the municipalities "run by the main opposition Republican People's Party (CHP)" that have started recognizing cemevis, including the Besiktas district of Istanbul, the Karsiyaka and Konak districts of Izmir, and the Mezitli and Akdeniz districts of Mersin, with the Avclar district of Istanbul placing the issue on a future agenda (4 Feb. 2015).

4.2 State Protection

According to the PhD candidate, there is no protection "specifically designed for Alevi victims" to their knowledge, and in reference to the marking of Alevi homes, "the fact that there has not been adequate investigation by state officials leaves the victims (and their Alevi witnesses) unprotected and in fear" (28 May 2015). In reference to the markings on apartments in an Alevi neighbourhood in Istanbul in October 2014, *Today's Zaman* quotes the CHP deputy as stating that "such incidents are not taken seriously by the government" and that "a police officer ... had implied that members of the Alevi community might have been behind the graffiti" (13 Oct. 2014).

According to Human Rights Watch, referring to the incident in which an individual waiting in a cemevi courtyard was shot on 22 May 2014, "it took 26 hours before a prosecutor visited the scene" (Human Rights Watch 23 May 2014). In relation to the Gezi Park protests, the same source notes that "investigations and trials of the police for alleged killings during the Gezi protests in the summer of 2013 have proceeded slowly and have been highly flawed" (ibid.).

According to a report produced by the Congressional Research Service (CRS), a legislative branch agency within the US Library of Congress that provides policy and legal analysis to members of Congress (US n.d.), "[m]inority Muslim sects (most prominently, the Alevis) and non-Muslim religions largely depend on legal appeals, political advocacy, and support from Western countries to protect their rights in Turkey" (ibid. 1 Aug. 2014, 57). The Professor similarly stated that obtaining recourse through the courts "can be a possible solution, depending on the situation. However, in recent years the government has been weakening the independence of courts" (21 May 2015). Other sources indicate that as a result of government attempts to block an anti-corruption investigation in 2013, there is concern with political intervention in the judiciary and its impact upon the independence of the court system (Reuters 8 Oct. 2014; AI 24 Feb. 2014; Ozbudun Jan. 2015, 3). According to some sources, the intervention by the government resulted in the reassignment of police officers, prosecutors (US 27 Feb. 2014, 1-2; AI 24 Feb. 2014), and judges (ibid.).

Further information on the availability and effectiveness of state protection for Alevis could not be found among the sources consulted by the Research Directorate within the time constraints of this Response.

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.

Notes

[1] According to Al-Monitor, a news website that reports on events in the Middle East, in December 1978 in Maras province, 111 people, mostly Alevis, were killed by explosives and gunfire and "more than 200 Alevi houses were set on fire" (24 Dec. 2014).

[2] A link has been drawn between the Alevi in Turkey and the Arab Alawites in Syria (US 1 Aug. 2014, 59; *The New York Times* 4 Aug. 2012). According to a 2014 article on the conflict between the Alevi and the AKP published in the *Eurasian Journal of Anthropology*, the Alevis have been accused of supporting the Assad regime in the Syrian war (Akdemir 2014, 72). *The Turkey Analyst* article notes that in 2013, AKP officials accused Alevis of "sympathizing with the Alawite regime in Damascus on the grounds that they shared similar religious beliefs" (CACI and SRSP 11 June 2014).

[3] According to *Hurriyet Daily News*, in 1938, 13,000 people were killed in Dersim [Tunceli] during a military operation which was intended to stop a "Kurdish tribal rebellion"; the article refers to those killed as Alevis (13 Nov. 2014).

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