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26 November 2021

TUR200820.E

Turkey: The Alevi faith, including principles, beliefs, traditions, and ritual practices (2019–November 2021)

Research Directorate, Immigration and Refugee Board of Canada

1. Overview

According to sources, there are an estimated 10–25 million people in Turkey that identify as Alevi (US Apr. 2019; Australia 10 Sept. 2020, para. 3.12). Sources state that Alevis are the largest religious minority in Turkey (MRG June 2018; US Apr. 2019). Sources note that the Turkish government classifies Alevis as Muslims and does not recognize them as distinct from Sunni Muslims, which make up the majority of the Turkish population (US Apr. 2019; Australia 10 Sept. 2020, para. 3.12). In its report on Turkey, the Australian Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade (DFAT) defines Alevism [*Alevilik*] as "a heterodox branch of Islam that emerged in the medieval period and incorporates Shi'a [Shia, Shiite], Sufi, Sunni and local traditions" (Australia 10 Sept. 2020, para. 3.20). Minority

Rights Group International (MRG) defines "Alevi" as "the term used for a large number of heterodox Muslim Shi'a communities with different characteristics"; Alevis "follow a fundamentally different interpretation than the Shi'a communities in other countries" and "differ considerably" from Sunnis as well (MRG June 2018). An Al Jazeera article notes that "[l]ike Sunni and Shia Muslims, Alevis revere Ali, the son-in-law of Prophet Muhammad"—the name Alevi in fact comes from "Ali"—but they view themselves as separate from the Sunni and Shi'a religious traditions (Al Jazeera 18 Dec. 2014). In an article published in the *Journal of the Anthropological Society of Oxford* [1], Cristina Cusenza, a graduate student in social anthropology at the University of Oxford, notes that Hacı Bektaş Veli [Haji Bektash Veli] is the founder of the Alevi-Bektaşî [Bektashi] [2] spiritual philosophy (Cusenza 2016, 295). UNESCO states the Alevi-Bektaşî belief system is "based on admiration for Ali, the fourth caliph after the prophet Muhammed" (UN [2010]). The British Alevi Federation (Britanya Alevi Federasyonu) notes that "Ali represents honesty, equality, generosity and spiritual knowledge" (Britanya Alevi Federasyonu n.d.). The US Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF) states that "some Alevis self-identify as part of a unique non-Muslim culture" (US Apr. 2019). According to the Australian DFAT report, "most" Alevis view their beliefs as a distinct religion, but "some" identify as Shia or Sunni or view being Alevi as "predominantly ... cultural rather than religious" (Australia 10 Sept. 2020, para. 3.20). Similarly, a *New York Times* article states that "[f]or some members, Alevism is simply a cultural identity, rather than a form of worship" (*The New York Times* 22 July 2017).

According to a paper by Ahmet Kerim Gültekin, a researcher affiliated with Leipzig University, Alevism "covers heterogeneous ethno-religious communities throughout a vast geographic area" and "refers to various social, political, historical and religious contexts" (Gültekin 2019, 7). In correspondence with the Research Directorate, an emeritus professor at Utrecht University stated that Alevism is "not homogenized" and that "there is no generally accepted set of beliefs," adding that "many Alevis may in fact deny that Alevism is a religion, and Alevis who practice some of the distinctive rituals probably constitute a minority among them" (Emeritus Professor 2 Nov. 2021). Gültekin further notes that Alevis "speak different languages, have diverse historical backgrounds, belong to various ethnic identities and have different citizenships" and they also "have diverse religious customs" and live in different geographical areas, though "most" live in Turkey (Gültekin 2019, 6–7). According to MRG, the "vast majority" of Alevis are "probably" of Qizilbash [Kizilbash] or Bektaşî origin; the Qizilbash are

"predominantly rural and acquire identity by parentage," while the Bektaşî "are predominantly urban, and formally claim that membership is open to any Muslim" (MRG June 2018). The Australian DFAT report states that Alevis live throughout Turkey with a concentration "in central and inner-eastern Anatolia" as well as in Istanbul and "other major cities," adding that "Tunceli is the centre of the Alevi faith" with 95 percent of its population being Alevi (Australia 10 Sept. 2020, para. 3.19). In correspondence with the Research Directorate, an assistant professor at a Turkish university whose research focuses on contemporary Alevism stated that there are four main subgroups of Alevi:

- Turkish speaking, "mainly" in western and northwestern Turkey
- Kurdish speaking, in central and southeastern Turkey
- Zazaki speaking, "around" the province of Tunceli in the Dersim "cultural region"
- Arabic speaking, along the Syrian border (Assistant Professor 2017) [3].

The Australian DFAT report notes that "[m]any" Alevis are also Kurdish (Australia 10 Sept. 2020, para. 3.19). Gültekin states that "Kurdish Alevis live in several eastern provinces of Turkey," as well as central and western Anatolia with Tunceli in eastern Anatolia as "the only ... Alevi-majority province in Turkey" (Gültekin 2019, 9).

MRG states that "[p]olitically, Kurdish Alevis have faced the dilemma of whether their primary loyalty should be to their ethnic or religious community" (MRG June 2018). According to David Shankland, an anthropologist with a research focus on Turkey and Alevis (University of Bristol n.d.), while the Alevi identity is said to be "very strong" to the point where it can sometimes "surmount ethnic differences", the Alevi "have embraced a secular conception of society and self" (Shankland 2003, 18). Further information could not be found among the sources consulted by the Research Directorate within the time constraints of this Response.

2. Beliefs

The Canadian Alevi Culture Center (CACC) (Kanada Alevi Kültür Merkezi, KAKM) defines Alevism as [translation] "a way of life and a universal belief system based on the fundamental belief that all human beings, regardless of their religion, ethnicity, race or gender, are a part of God and that they each carry a spark of God's beauty, and therefore, deserve to be respected and loved" (CACC n.d.a). According to the Institute of Alevi-Bektashi Culture (Alevi Bektasi Kültür

Enstitüsü), Alevism does not "discriminat[e]" on the basis of "gender, race, nationality [or] faith" and values "tolerance, equality and sharing" (Alevi Bektasi Kültür Enstitüsü n.d.). According to the British Alevi Federation, the key features of Alevism are as follows:

- In Alevism, every human being is a carrier of the essence of (God).
- God in Alevism is *Hakk*, which means "the truth."
- If God has created everything, then human beings are sacred in the world.
- Therefore, Alevis consider everything as sacred and as the carrier of an essence from God.
- Alevis call each other "*Can*" (soul), which is a gender-neutral name. As a result of this understanding, the position of women in Alevism is equal to that of men.
- Alevis consider Hakk[](God), the cosmos and humanity [to be] in a state of total unity. (Britanya Alevi Federasyonu n.d., italics added)

The CACC lists the following key features of Alevism:

[translation]

- Alevism is a platform of ideas that is very different from other major religions (Islam, Christianity, Judaism) in terms of its interpretation of humanity and God.
- In the Alevi belief, our goal is to live our lives in a way that honours the divine beauty we receive from God, and to return to the Truth by proving that we have preserved those values.
- Stealing, causing corruption and committing adultery are strictly forbidden and the punishment for these acts is ostracization.
- Women and men are indisputably equal. Women cannot be treated as different from men or as second-class citizens in religious rituals or in everyday life.
- The concepts of *cem* [gathering ceremony], *dede* [grandfather/spiritual leader], *rehber* [spiritual guide], *musahip* [spiritual companion], *talip* [spiritual seeker], and worshipping with music (*saz* [traditional stringed instrument]) and dance (*semah* [whirling]) are unique to Alevism.
- Religious service is believed to be unnecessary since each and every moment of life is regarded as worship. (CACC n.d.a)

CACC notes that there are various interpretations of Alevism, including Anatolian Islam led by the Cem Foundation, which it defines as [translation] "a religious teaching that is completely interwoven with Islam but also fused with ancient Anatolian beliefs, and is different from other sects of Islam in terms of the priority given to humanitarian values and extreme reverence shown to Hazrat [Hadrat] Ali [Ali ibn Abi Talib], the last major caliph of Islam" (CACC n.d.b). Shankland describes the *Ehli-beyt yolu* version of Alevism as follows:

[R]ather than reject[ing] the links with Iran that were formerly part of Alevi history, [it] welcomes them, and has forged links with the modern Iranian state. Instead of the traditional local dedes, [members of the Ehli-beyt yolu] regard themselves bound to spiritual leaders who are sent from Iran. From them, they learn a form of Shi'ism that insists on the veiling of women, on men and women worshipping apart, and upon the importance of the *şeriat*. Rather than reject mosques, this movement, which is known as the "Ehli-beyt yolu," appears to create or build Shi'ite mosques which act as centres of religious activity in a way that is unusual in Alevi villages. While active in Germany, particularly in Berlin, it is also said to influence the Alevi community in Turkey in urban Çorum, a province to the east of Ankara. (Shankland 2003, 169, italics in original)

The CACC states that the view from the Ehlibeyt Foundation is [translation] "Alevism, with its ennoblement of Hazrat Ali and reverence shown to the 12 imams and the ahl-al-Bayt [the family of Prophet Muhammad], and other mutual characteristics shared with Shiism, is essentially a more moderate version of the Shia practiced in Iran" (CACC n.d.b).

The CACC indicates that another interpretation of the intention of Alevism [translation] "is to live our lives in a way that honours the divine beauty we are all endowed with and to return to the Truth by proving that we have not lost any those values" and that "[s]ince God has created the universe in order for His beauty to be known and revered, the true meaning of worship then is to serve, love and respect human beings who were created by God to know and revere Him" (CACC n.d.b).

According to Shankland, the *Buyruk*, the "Alevi sacred text," is referred to by dedes who "absorb those aspects they find interesting in their own time and recount them in the course of commentaries ... on songs and poetry first sung by minstrels" and there is more than one modern edition of the *Buyruk*, with no particular version being the final one (Shankland 2003, 186, 99). The same sources also notes that "the *Buyruk* provides the villagers with a blueprint of the roles which different people should fulfil, traditions by which they can justify their position and reminders as to various rituals they can conduct" but does not give a set of principles which must be followed; "neither dedes nor their followers justify their behaviour by direct reference to the *Buyruk*" (Shankland 2003, 103–104, 99–100).

Shankland states that Alevis believe *ruh* (their soul) is a part of Allah and when someone dies, the ruh returns to Allah and during their time on Earth, one's ruh can be reached by "by being patient, by not retaliating when injured, by doing deeds with no expectation of return, by hurting nobody, by being courteous, peaceable and honest in one's daily dealings and by respecting the rights due to others" (Shankland 2003, 118).

According to MRG, urbanization "broke down" traditional Alevism, which was based upon rural life, and this change resulted in Alevism "strongly identif [ying] with the political left" (MRG June 2018). The Australian DFAT report states that "mos[t]" Alevis support the separation of religion and politics (Australia 10 Sept. 2020, para. 3.20).

3. Practices

According to the Australian DFAT report, Alevis "worship in a *cemevi* (prayer hall)" (Australia 10 Sept. 2020, para. 3.20, italics in original). Shankland notes that "*cem evi*," or "'cem houses'," serve as places of worship but also "centres for publication, discussion and celebration of Alevi culture, discussions that attract sceptics as well as the pious" (Shankland 2003, 169, italics in original). According to Talha Köse, an associate professor of political science at Ibn Haldun University (Ibn Haldun University n.d.), cemevis adapt to fit the "needs and vision of life" of Alevi people, and so cemevis range from "places of worship" to "community centres" to "archaic institutions" in need of reform (Köse Oct. 2012, 581). The Al Jazeera article cites a dede as stating that it is "recommended" for Alevis to visit the cemevis weekly, but not required (Al Jazeera 18 Dec. 2014).

The British Alevi Federation describes the following forms of worship:

- Singing Alevi *deyiş* (hymns) during cems with *zakirs* (cem musicians)
- Performing semah ("ritual whirling" or "a set of mystical and aesthetic movements in rhythmic harmony") during cems with *zakhir* accompaniment
- eating or helping to prepare a "communal meal" called a *lokma* (Britanya Alevi Federasyonu n.d.).

The Emeritus Professor noted that

the most important distinctive ritual is the cem (jam), a communal meeting that ends with a meal of consecrated food, and in which sacred poetry is sung/recited. There may also be a symbolic dance (semah), in which men and women take

part. The cem is led by a religious specialist called a dede, who (in most Alevi communities) has to belong to one of a small number of *ocak*, families of religious specialists. (Emeritus Professor 2 Nov. 2021)

UNESCO describes semahs as "a set of mystical and aesthetic body movements in rhythmic harmony" and notes that they "constitute one of the twelve main services found in Cem rituals" (UN [2010]). UNESCO further states that semahs are performed by both men and women together but the form of semah varies among Alevis; each has its own "distinct musical characteristics and rhythmic structures" (UN [2010]). The same source notes that there are two types of semah, the *içeri semahs*, which are performed only in cems, and the *dışarı semahs*, which are used to promote semah culture to younger generations; semahs are a means to pass on Alevi traditions (UN [2010]).

The British Alevi Federation states that, while traditions differ from place to place, Alevis "common[ly]" have a *musahip* ("eternal brother of the path") and are supposed to adhere to "certain moral principles" (Britanya Alevi Federasyonu n.d). According to the British Alevi Federation, a community will hold a *görgü cemi* ("manners ritual"), to evaluate whether each member of the community is following these principles; violation will result in punishment according to the severity of the trespass, varying from organizing a lokma to being excommunicated (Britanya Alevi Federasyonu n.d).

According to Shankland, both wives and husbands go to shrines in search of health or fertility and together sacrifice a blessed sheep (Shankland 2003, 95). The same source also notes that before a bride is wed, women will dance alone in the bride's house and after the bride is given to the groom, the women will dance together with the men (Shankland 2003, 95).

3.1 Household Practices

The information in the following section comes from David Shankland's 2003 book on Alevis in Turkey:

The household social structure of Alevis is "similar" to that of Sunni Muslims, with women "usually" giving up their maiden name after marriage, moving to the husband's home, and gradually having their husband take over control of their life from their father. The head of the household is the senior male and women are "shown respect according to their age, are subordinate to men's wishes, and expect to be treated accordingly." Alevi women are responsible for

the household tasks of cleaning, cooking, gardening and caring for the children, but they do so in the same space as the men and there is also no segregation when preparing food, eating or entertaining other Alevi guests. Women and men are separated in public, however. For example, in public spaces, women are told to leave if the men want to talk or if a stranger is present. Additionally, women must not "cross any open space" without male accompaniment, nor should they pass through a door before a man (Shankland 2003, 95).

The Alevi men do not use Islam to control women in the same overt way [as Sunni Muslims do]; thus, where a Sunni man might accuse a woman of *günah*, sinful conduct, if she does not obey her husband or fails to wear her headscarf, the Alevi use *ayip*, a general word with a powerful connotation of "not done," of transgressing a specific rule but with no religious overtones. The Alevi have other ways of expressing the control of women by men too: that a women must not go out into the open spaces of the village simply because she is a woman, that women are equal to men but just a little bit weaker, that she must not cross a man's path because it causes bad luck to the man if she does so, that it destroys the household's honour, *namus*, if she is unfaithful, but none of these are explicitly rooted in their religious practice. (Shankland 2003, 97, italics in original)

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

4. Ceremonies and Festivals

Shankland states that in Susesi, [the Alevi village where Shankland lived to produce his study (Shankland 2003, 25)], the "most important collective *Tarikat* [Islamic brotherhood (Shankland 2003, x)] rituals" are the cem and the görgü (Shankland 2003, 121). The görgü is an annual festival taking place before ploughing season (Shankland 2003, 121). Shankland notes that a görgü is a ritual which marks the new year; no one can sow their fields until after it has been conducted (Shankland 2003, 128). According to Shankland, dedes from the different village quarters are invited to officiate, and the "most senior" is invited to be *köy dedesi*, dede for the whole village (Shankland 2003, 128). Shankland adds that

[d]uring the course of the three days, a couple from every household in the village go forward to Ali's space to answer whether or not they have a quarrel with anyone in the room.

...

In the village, after the congregation has collected together in an appropriate house, the *görgü* begins with a *halkacık namazı* ["collective prayer" (Shankland 2003, 120)]. Then, rather than a sacrifice being brought forth (as it would in a *cem*), couples begin to go forward to the *meydan* ["ritual space at the centre of the congregation" (Shankland 2003, 189)].

...

When the existence and circumstances of a dispute have become clear, the *dede* suggests a reconciliation based on whether the disputants have shown the correct degree of respect to each other (a young man must respect an older, a wife her husband), or abused one another's rights (*hakki yemek*). The congregation then must agree with his decision, or else it is not valid. The *dede*'s suggestions are supplemented by a "*görgü* committee," *görgü heyeti*, of which he is the head. The other members of the committee are not necessarily *dede* but must be respected men of the village. (Shankland 2003, 128–130, italics in original)

Describing a *cem*, Shankman states that the objective is "to worship, to come closer to God through collective, peaceful prayer, but it also commemorates the Alevis' allegiance to Hacı Bektas and the twelve imams through a series of rituals which they refer to as the 'twelve duties', *oniki hizmet*" (Shankland 2003, 121, italics in original). The ceremony has no specific time-frame, lasting up to five hours (Shankland 2003, 121). While there is no limit on the number of *cem* ceremonies, none can take place before the *görgü* or after Hıdrellez on 6 May (Shankland 2003, 121).

An article from *Hurriyet Daily News*, a nationwide Turkish newspaper, describes Hıdrellez as a traditional Spring festival that "marks the only moment of the year when Hızır (or Khidr), symbolizing earth and vegetation, meets İlyas (Elijah), who is associated with the sea and the water" (*Hurriyet Daily News* 6 May 2019). According to UNESCO, Hıdrellez takes place every year on 6 May and involves rituals and ceremonies at the local, regional and national level with "wide participation" (UN 2017).

According to Shankland, Alevis believe that after a person's death Allah will send them to heaven or hell "according to their conduct this earth" but Allah's decision can be influenced by *sefaat* (intercession) on behalf of the deceased through a service known as *dar çekme* (Shankland 2003, 113). Shankland reports

that this service, which takes place three days after the person's death as they are said to be standing before Allah to receive their judgement, includes a *can ekmegi* (sacrifice) (Shankland 2003, 113). Shankland further states that *can ekmegi* "implies 'food (or bread) for the spirit of the dead person'" and can be held at any time that the relatives wish to remember the dead; it involves the preparation of a sacrifice served with food, and representatives from all village households attend the meal, where a dede says a prayer (Shankland 2003, 115).

Australia's DFAT states that Alevis are "generally" able to hold their ceremonies and festivals without "official" interference (Australia 10 Sept. 2020, para. 3.20).

5. The Sunni Faith and Alevism

According to sources, one difference between Sunnis and Alevis is that Alevis do not pray in mosques (*The New York Times* 22 July 2017; MRG June 2018; DW 26 Jan. 2020). Other sources report that, unlike Sunnis, Alevis do not separate by gender during prayers (BBC 12 Apr. 2002; *Forbes* 10 Feb. 2017; *The New York Times* 22 July 2017). Sources also note that Alevis do not fast during Ramadan (BBC 12 Apr. 2002; *Forbes* 10 Feb. 2017; MRG June 2018) but fast during Muharram (*Forbes* 10 Feb. 2017; MRG June 2018). The BBC states that another difference is that Alevis do not perform ritual washing before they pray (BBC 12 Apr. 2002). According to sources, Alevis are not required to pray five times a day (*The New York Times* 22 July 2017; Kosnick Sept. 2004). Sources also state that Alevism permits the consumption of alcohol (Al Jazeera 18 Dec. 2014; Kosnick Sept. 2004) and pork (Kosnick Sept. 2004).

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] The *Journal of the Anthropological Society of Oxford (JASO)* is a peer-reviewed journal published by the Oxford University Anthropology Society and School of Anthropology and Museum Ethnography (University of Oxford n.d.).

[2] According to an article on Alevis and politics published in *Nationalities Papers*, a peer-reviewed journal on nationalism and ethnicity (Cambridge Core n.d.), Alevism is an ethno-religious group, while Bektashism is a religious order (Arkilic and Gürcan July 2020, 6). The same source adds, however, that the terms "are sometimes used interchangeably" due to "similar belief system[s]" (Arkilic and Gürcan July 2020, 6).

[3] The Assistant Professor confirmed in recent correspondence that "nothing [has] changed" regarding the information provided in 2017 (Assistant Professor 2 Nov. 2021).

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Additional Sources Consulted

Oral sources: Britanya Alevi Federasyonu; Kanada Alevi Kültür Merkezi; professor at a German university who specializes in the Turkish-Muslim community; professor at a UK university who researches refugees and vulnerable populations including Alevi.

Internet sites, including: Alevi Bektaşî Federasyonu; Alevi Federation Germany; Amnesty International; Asylum Research Centre; Austrian Red Cross – Austrian Centre for Country of Origin & Asylum Research and Documentation; Belgium – Commissariat general aux réfugiés et aux apatrides; Bertelsmann Stiftung; Christian Solidarity Worldwide; Denmark – Danish Immigration Service; ecoi.net; *European Journal of Turkish Studies*; EU – European Asylum Support Office; Factiva; France – Office français de protection des réfugiés et apatrides; Freedom House; The Freedom of Belief Initiative; Human Rights Watch; *The Independent*; International Association for Human Rights Advocacy Geneva; *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies*; Netherlands – Ministry of Foreign Affairs; The New Humanitarian; Norway – Landinfo; Organisation suisse d'aide aux réfugiés; Romanian National Council for Refugees; Sage Journals; *Studies in Oriental Religions*; Swedish Research Institute in Istanbul; Taylor & Francis Online; *Turkey's Alevi Enigma: A Comprehensive Overview*; UK – Home Office; UN – Office for the High Commissioner of Human Rights, Refworld; US – CIA, Department of State, Library of Congress; Veli University; The Washington Institute for Near East Policy.

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