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Turkey: Situation of Kurds, including in Istanbul, Ankara, and Izmir; situation of supporters or perceived supporters of the Peoples' Democratic Party (Halkların Demokratik Partisi, HDP); situation of Alevi Kurds (July 2018-December 2019) [TUR106385.E]

Research Directorate, Immigration and Refugee Board of Canada

1. Overview

Sources estimate that Kurds make up between ten and twenty-three percent of Turkey's population (BBC 15 Oct. 2019; US 6 Nov. 2019; MRG June 2018a). Kurds in Turkey originate from and are concentrated in the eastern and south-eastern regions of the country (BBC 15 Oct. 2019; Institut kurde 12 Jan. 2017; MRG June 2018a).

A representative of a confederation of Turkish trade unions, cited in a UK Home Office report, stated that the situation in the areas of south-eastern and eastern Turkey, which are mainly populated by Kurds, can be "harder," with "problematic" economic and social issues (UK Oct. 2019, 24). The same representative further stated that the Kurdish regions are less developed than western Turkey and that Kurds in this area suffered "serious forms of human rights violations" by the Turkish government, which has prompted westward Kurdish migration (UK Oct. 2019, 95). Similarly, an Australia Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade (DFAT) report states that eastern and south-eastern Turkey are less developed and have higher poverty rates, lower incomes, less industry and less government investment, noting that "approximately half of Turkey's Kurdish population has migrated to Western Turkey both to escape conflict ... and in search of economic opportunities" (Australia 9 Oct. 2018, para. 3.2). The US Department of State's *Country Reports on Human Rights Practices for 2018* states that conditions in the south-eastern region of Turkey included roadblocks, curfews, early and forced marriages and abuses by police and other government security forces, as well as by the Kurdistan Workers' Party (Partiya Karkerên Kurdistanê, PKK) (US 13 Mar. 2019, 20, 21, 37, 51). Additionally, sources report that the south-eastern region of Turkey faces security challenges related to operations against the PKK or conflict between the PKK and government security forces (EU 29 May 2019, 5; Australia 9 Oct. 2018, para. 2.49).

Sources indicate that the majority of Kurds are Sunni Muslims (BBC 15 Oct. 2019; UK Sept. 2018, para. 3.4.2; Australia 9 Oct. 2018, para. 3.3) that follow the Shafi'i school [of jurisprudence] (UK Sept. 2018, para. 3.4.2)] (Australia 9 Oct. 2018, para. 3.3; UK Sept. 2018, para. 3.4.2), rather than the "Hanafi school to which most ethnic Turks adhere" (Australia 9 Oct. 2018, para. 3.3). A report on the Kurds by Austria's Federal Ministry of the Interior states that other Kurds are Shia, Alevi, Yezidi, atheist, agnostic or Christian, among others (Austria Nov. 2015, 22).

1.1 Visibility of Kurds

The UK Home Office report, citing a human rights lawyer and the Director of a Turkish organization, states that Kurds in Turkey can be recognized by their names or their accents (UK Oct. 2019, 23). However, the same report cites a co-founder of Peace in Kurdistan [1] as stating that, while possible, distinguishing a Turk from a Kurd could be difficult or very difficult (UK Oct. 2019, 23). Citing the President of Turkey's Federation of Women's Associations, the report also states that distinguishing between Turkish and Kurdish women in Istanbul was not possible and that women of both ethnicities dress similarly, whereas "Kurdish women are more noticeable in the east as they wear traditional clothes" (UK Oct. 2019, 30). Further and corroborating information could not be found among the sources consulted by the Research Directorate within the time constraints of this Response.

1.2 Situation of Kurds in Istanbul, Ankara and Izmir

Information on the situation of Kurds in Istanbul, Ankara, and Izmir was scarce among the sources consulted by the Research Directorate within the time constraints of this Response. Australia's DFAT report states that while many Kurds are "very poor," a "Kurdish middle class is growing in urban centres, particularly in western Turkey" (Australia 9 Oct. 2018, para. 3.2). The Kurdish Institute (Fondation-Institut kurde de Paris, Institut kurde), an "independent, non-political, secular" organization based in Paris (Institut kurde n.d.), reports that larger Turkish cities, including Istanbul, Ankara and Izmir, are home to "strong Kurdish communities" (Institut kurde 12 Jan. 2017). Sources state that three or four million Kurds live in Istanbul (Institut kurde 12 Jan. 2017; UK Oct. 2019, 61), which is greater than the Kurdish population in Ankara (UK Oct. 2019, 61) or is the largest Kurdish population in the world (Institut kurde 12 Jan. 2017). Australia's DFAT report states that "[m]any Kurds" in western Turkey "who are not politically active, and those who support the [ruling Justice

ecoi.net summary:

Query response on the situation of Kurds and of supporters or perceived supporters of the Peoples' Democratic Party (HDP - Halkların Demokratik Partisi) (July 2018 - December 2019)



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and Development Party (Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi, AKP)], are integrated into Turkish society ... and live their lives in a normal fashion"; the source adds that "[h]uman rights observers report, however, that some Kurds in western Turkey are reluctant to disclose their Kurdish identity, including through speaking Kurdish in public, for fear of provoking a violent response" (Australia 9 Oct. 2018, para. 3.8).

According to a UK-based Turkish organization, interviewed in May 2019 by the UK Home Office, Turkish nationalist militia groups, "which arrange violent attacks against Kurdish groups" can be found throughout Turkey, "but particularly in the west and in major cities such as Istanbul and Ankara" (UK Oct. 2019, 58). The same source further states that Kurds tend to live in "particular neighbourhoods in cities" outside of south-eastern Turkey in response to militia groups (UK Oct. 2019, 61). Corroborating information could not be found among the sources consulted by the Research Directorate within the time constraints of this Response.

2. Treatment of Kurds by Authorities and by Society

Turkey legalized the use of the Kurdish language in broadcasts and education in 2002 (*Encyclopaedia Britannica* 8 Oct. 2019; *The New York Times* 21 Nov. 2002). However, according to sources, the Turkish government targets Kurdish media outlets with closures and Kurdish journalists face detention, prosecution, and threats (EU 29 May 2019, 33, 34; Australia 9 Oct. 2018, para. 3.64). US *Country Reports 2018* states that "[n]early all private Kurdish-language newspapers, television channels, and radio stations remained closed on national security grounds" (US 13 Mar. 2019, 24). The Australian DFAT report adds that "[m]any Kurdish journalists, including those working in the south-east, have reported threats, physical violence, and criminal investigations from state authorities," and "[j]ournalists in the south-east who have spoken out against the PKK or in support of the government have faced intimidation and threats from the PKK" (Australia 9 Oct. 2019, para. 3.64).

Deutsche Welle (DW) reports "a rise in discrimination against Kurds" in Turkey and cites an example, among other incidents, in which a Kurdish man in north-western Turkey was attacked in October 2019, "reportedly for speaking Kurdish," as well as a case in December 2018 in Sakarya province when a Kurdish man was killed and his 16-year-old son was injured by an assailant who reportedly asked if they were Kurdish before attacking them (DW 22 Oct. 2019). A Turkish lawyer cited by the same source stated that "[a]nti-Kurdish sentiment is on the rise" and that "[t]he number of attacks always increases whenever polarization increases" (DW 22 Oct. 2019). The same source also cites a co-director of the Turkish Human Rights Association (IHD), who is also a human rights lawyer, as indicating that "[h]ate speech and racism across Turkish society provide a breeding ground" for such attacks (DW 22 Oct. 2019). In a report on non-discrimination in Turkey, published in 2019 with a reporting period covering 2017, the European Commission similarly noted, among "[k]ey issues," that "[d]iscriminatory and hate speech and conduct against minorities," particularly the Kurds, among other groups, "is rampant in daily life, political discourse and the media" (EU 7 Jan. 2019, 10-11).

3. The HDP

The HDP is a pro-Kurdish political party (Al Jazeera 19 Aug. 2019; *The Guardian* 25 June 2018; Reuters 27 Mar. 2019). Sources report that the HDP received 11.7 percent of the vote [or over 5.8 million votes (IFES n.d.)] in the 24 June 2018 elections (Kirişçi 25 June 2018; *The Guardian* 25 June 2018; IFES n.d.), and 67 seats in Turkey's parliament (Kirişçi 25 June 2018; IFES n.d.). Sources state that the HDP thus passed the required ten percent threshold to be part of the parliament (Kirişçi 25 June 2018; *The Guardian* 25 June 2018). Citing Turkey's Supreme Electoral Council and the [state-run (AFP n.d.)] Anadolu Agency, the BBC reports that the party had a majority win in ten south-eastern provinces (BBC 25 June 2018).

3.1 Treatment of Supporters and Perceived Supporters of the HDP

According to sources, the Kurdish government alleges that the HDP has ties to the PKK, which is designated as a "terrorist" group by the EU, among others (Al Jazeera 19 Aug. 2019; Euronews 5 Nov. 2019), including Turkey (Al Jazeera 19 Aug. 2019). Sources further state that the HDP denies any link to the PKK (Al Jazeera 19 Aug. 2019; Euronews 5 Nov. 2019; Reuters 27 Mar. 2019). US *Country Reports 2018* indicates that prosecutors "used a broad definition of terrorism and threats to national security" and that, according to defense lawyers and opposition groups, "in some cases" used "what appeared to be legally questionable evidence to file criminal charges against and prosecute a broad range of individuals," including HDP politicians (US 13 Mar. 2019, 15-16). In its annual report for 2018, Human Rights Watch similarly stated that

[m]any terrorism trials in Turkey lack compelling evidence of criminal activity or acts that would reasonably be deemed terrorism, and the practice of holding individuals charged with terrorism offenses in prolonged pretrial detention raised concerns [that] its use has become a form of summary punishment. (Human Rights Watch 17 Jan. 2019, 2)

In a March 2019 article, Associated Press (AP) reports that, according to a statement by the HDP, party members were detained in the lead-up to municipal elections in late March 2019; the statement indicated that "53 people were detained in Istanbul overnight. They include candidates running for municipal council seats" (AP 30 Mar. 2019). The same source further states that "[t]he government accuses the HDP of links to outlawed Kurdish militants, and 10 lawmakers, 40 mayors and thousands of activists remain jailed," and quoted President Erdoğan as calling the HDP "terror lovers" (AP 30 Mar. 2019). According to sources, three mayors were removed from office and 400 people were arrested or detained in August 2019 based on alleged links to the PKK (Al Jazeera 19 Aug. 2019; BBC 19 Aug. 2019). A BBC article explains the following:

The mayors, who were elected in March, are accused of spreading "terrorist propaganda" and "financing terrorism".

...

Those detained include the mayors of Diyarbakir, Mardin and Van provinces - all of whom secured large majorities in the March elections.

They are members of the [HDP], but are accused of sharing links with the PKK. (BBC 19 Aug. 2019)

Sources also report police raids of HDP offices and arrests targeting hunger strikers who were supporting jailed HDP members (Rudaw 9 Mar. 2019; VOA 11 Dec. 2018). A December 2018 article by Voice of America (VOA) reports that Turkish police "detained dozens of people, mostly women, in multiple raids" on HDP offices in Batman, Diyarbakir and Van, "targeting party members and supporters who were on a hunger strike in support of the imprisoned HDP lawmaker Leyla Guven" (VOA 11 Dec. 2018). Bianet, an independent news source based in Istanbul (Bianet n.d.), reports that Turkish police blockaded an HDP-organized "Democracy Watch" [a series of HDP-led anti-government protests (IPA News 1 Oct. 2019)] demonstration in Izmir (Bianet 26 Sept. 2019). According to the same source, the Democracy Watch that was to take place in Istanbul's Esenyurt square was also blockaded, and police announced that the demonstration and march were banned by the governorship; the source adds that police "attacked the group with tear gas and plastic bullets" and "[t]ook several people into custody" (Bianet 26 Sept. 2019). Corroborating information could not be found among the sources consulted by the Research Directorate within the time constraints of this Response.

According to the Director of a UK-based Turkish organization cited by the UK Home Office, "[b]eing ethnically Kurdish and outspoken politically" "could cause the authorities to suspect an HDP member/supporter of supporting the PKK," and that individuals that "may attract the attention of the authorities" include the following: "[e]lected HDP officials or persons on a regional board"; "[m]anagement committee members"; "[e]lection organisers"; "[c]anvassers (knocking on doors, leafletting)"; "[b]eing a [m]ayor or a [municipal] [c]ouncillor" (UK Oct. 2019, 18). The source also explained that "local officials can be more influential than elected officials and many [m]ayors are in prison. The HDP is the third-largest political party with thousands of activists, and so they are seen by the authorities as a threat" (UK Oct. 2019, 18). A human rights lawyer cited in the same report stated that HDP supporters could also be arrested "for handing out leaflets" and targeted for posting on social media, attending a march, meeting or rally, or entering/exiting an HDP-associated building (UK Oct. 2019, 19). In the same report, the Director of the UK-based organization also noted that family members of HDP member may be at risk "if they show interest in their relative's court case or make political statements on social media or attend political rallies," and that they may be targeted with threats, raids, beatings or imprisonment (UK Oct. 2019, 20). In contrast, a representative of the Turkish Ombudsman's Office stated that family members are not targeted, noting that family members will not be arrested or detained (UK Oct. 2019, 20). Corroborating information could not be found among the sources consulted by the Research Directorate within the time constraints of the Response.

Further information, including on the treatment of perceived supporters of the HDP, could not be found among the sources consulted by the Research Directorate within the time constraints of this Response.

4. Situation of Alevi Kurds

According to sources, Alevism is a heterodox branch of Islam (Australia 9 Oct. 2018, para. 3.21; MRG June 2018b). Alevis comprise the largest religious minority group in Turkey and follow a branch of Shia Islam (MRG June 2018b; Harvard n.d.). The Australian DFAT report explains that "[w]hile most Alevis regard their faith as a separate religion, some identify as Shi'a or Sunni or see their Alevi identity predominantly in cultural rather than religious terms" (Australia 9 Oct. 2018, para. 3.21). The same source notes the "absence of official figures" and that estimates of the Alevi population in Turkey range from 10 to 31 percent, or between 8 and 30 million individuals (Australia 9 Oct. 2018, para. 3.20). Minority Rights Group International (MRG) reports that different sources estimate that Alevis make up 10 to 40 percent of Turkey's population, or that, according to "recent figures," there may be 20 to 25 million Alevis in Turkey (MRG June 2018b). MRG also states that "a significant number" of Kurds are Alevis (MRG June 2018a). According to Australia's DFAT report, academic sources estimate that there are one half to several million Alevi Kurds in Turkey (Australia 9 Oct. 2018, para. 3.20).

While Alevis are "widely distributed" across Turkey, they are "concentrated in central and inner-eastern Anatolia, Istanbul and other major cities" (Australia 9 Oct. 2018, para. 3.20). According to Lima Charlie, a news website providing analysis by "military veterans, intelligence professionals and foreign policy experts" (Lima Charlie n.d.), Alevis that have moved from their rural homes into larger cities have expressed "discontent" and faced "brutal police measures to contain Alevi protests," including in Istanbul and Ankara (Lima Charlie 7 Apr. 2019). Corroborating information could not be found among the sources consulted by the Research Directorate within the time constraints of this Response.

According to sources, the Turkish government does not recognize the Alevi religion nor their places of worship, which are *cemevis* (Lima Charlie 7 Apr. 2019; Harvard n.d.; US 21 June 2019). The US Department of State's *International Religious Freedom Report for 2018* adds that "[i]n May [2018], President Erdogan promised to grant legal status for Alevi cemevis as part of his election platform for

the presidential elections, but he took no steps to do so after winning re-election on June 24 [2018]” (US 21 June 2019, 11). The same source adds that, as of the end of 2018, the government “had not legally recognized cemevis as places of worship,” although in November [2018] the Supreme Court of Appeals ruled that they are “places of worship and therefore they should receive the same benefits as Sunni mosques”; in a “similar case” in 2015, the Supreme Court “gave the same judgment” (US 21 June 2019, 11). Individual cemevis can be recognized [on a case-by-case basis] on the grounds of a 2014 European Court of Human Rights (ECHR) judgment (US 21 June 2019, 11).

According to the Australian DFAT report, “[t]he ECHR ruled in April 2015 that the Turkish government was violating the European Convention by not recognising Alevi places of worship and religious leaders” (Australia 9 Oct. 2018, para. 3.22). According to the same source, Turkey “does not recognise Alevism as a separate religion and considers Alevis to be Muslims” (Australia 9 Oct. 2018, para. 3.22). According to sources, Alevi students must attend mandatory religious education classes (Australia 9 Oct. 2018, Sec. 3.22; MRG June 2018b), which focus on Sunni Hanafi Islam; Christian and Jewish students are exempt from these classes, but Alevis are not (Australia 9 Oct. 2018, Sec. 3.22).

Australia’s DFAT report states that national IDs, which are valid for ten years,

are compulsory for all citizens from birth and must be carried at all times. The cards are required for a wide range of everyday activities, including work, access to health and social services, registration to vote, access to courts, obtaining a passport or driver’s licence, registration for school or university, registration of property or vehicle ownership, and obtaining telephone, internet, and home utilities. (Australia 9 Oct. 2018, para. 5.33)

The source adds that religion is indicated on the back of the card, although this field “can be left blank” (Australia 9 Oct. 2018, para. 5.34). According to the US *International Religious Freedom Report for 2018*, “[n]ew” Turkish identity cards, distributed since late 2018, no longer have a field for religion, while older cards, which are still in circulation, have a field for religion and did not grant the option of selecting Alevi as religion, though it was possible to leave this field blank (US 21 June 2019, 6).

For further information on Alevis, as well as the situation and treatment of Alevis in Turkey, see Response to Information Request TUR106206 of November 2018.

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.

Note

[1] Peace in Kurdistan is a UK-based “campaigning organisation dedicated to advancing the rights of the Kurdish people and achieving a political resolution of the Kurdish question” (Peace in Kurdistan n.d.).

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Oral sources: Assistant professor that conducts research on Kurds in Turkey; associate professor who studies ethnicity in the Middle East; Kurdish Studies Network; Kurdish Human Rights Project.

Internet sites, including: Amnesty International; ecoi.net; *The Globe and Mail*; Heinrich Böll Stiftung; Middle East Eye; US – Congressional Research Service.



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