

The AKP and the “Alevi Opening”: Understanding the Dynamics of the Rapprochement

TALHA KÖSE*

ABSTRACT

The AKP government has undertaken a series of steps to understand and respond to Alevi identity-based claims. Popularly known as the “Alevi opening” process, the initiative is the first systematic effort to deal with the identity-based discontents of the Alevis. This step is also part of the broader policy of “democratic opening,” which intends to address the burning problems of various identity groups (the Kurds, Alevis, religious minorities and the Roma people) in Turkey. This study provides an analytic background for understanding the governing AKP’s “Alevi opening”, which was launched in the summer of 2007. More specifically, the issues that are discussed are the Alevi claims, the obstacles to the fulfillment of these issues, and the methods and the processes of the ongoing “Alevi opening”. In order to provide a holistic analysis, the political, legal, psychological as well as cultural dynamics of the Alevi issue are emphasized here. At the end, a set of policy recommendations are formulated that are consistent with the analytic perspective.

Since coming to power in 2002, the governing Justice and Development Party (*Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi*, AKP) has introduced a number of reforms to democratize the political system in Turkey. After winning elections for the second time in 2007 the AKP government has undertaken a series of steps to understand and respond to Alevi identity-based claims. Popularly known as the “Alevi opening” (*Alevi açılımı*) process, the initiative is the first systematic effort to deal with identity-based discontents of the Alevis. This step is also part of the broader policy of “democratic opening,” which intends to address the burning problems of various identity groups (the Kurds, Alevis, religious minorities and the Roma people) in Turkey. The stated objective of the “democratic opening” is to reconcile the Turkish state with the marginalized segments of Turkish society.

This study provides an analytic background for understanding the governing AKP’s “Alevi

* Department of Political Science and International Relations, İstanbul Şehir University, talhako@yahoo.com

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opening” initiative, which was launched in the summer of 2007. More specifically, the issues that are discussed are the list of Alevi claims, obstacles to the fulfillment of these issues, and the methods and the processes of the ongoing “Alevi opening”. In order to provide a holistic analysis, the political, legal, psychological as well as

cultural dynamics of the Alevi issue are emphasized here. At the end, a set of policy recommendations are formulated that are consistent with the analytic perspective.

The Alevi Quest for Recognition

The Alevis, one of the largest communal groups in Turkey, are geographically spread throughout Turkey. There is no sect-based data that would reflect the actual population of Alevis in Turkey but estimates range from 5 million to 25 million. Arguments about the population of Alevi citizens are part of identity politics; therefore, it is best to assume a population somewhere between those two figures. The Alevi identity has traditionally been a strong communal group identity¹ with clear cultural boundaries, moral values, rituals, and shared collective emotions. This identity, historically and culturally, has sectarian origins which have been maintained for centuries through an endogamous social order in rural contexts.² Specific rituals and cultural practices have played important roles for the maintenance of a strong identity.³

The “Alevi issue” is one of the most complicated and, at the same time, largely misunderstood problems in Turkey. Conflicts, resentments, grievances, and perpetual fears about the Alevis have existed for centuries and have been publicly voiced through different mechanisms; yet, the message had never been understood thoroughly by the interlocutors of the Alevis. The discussions on the issue in various social and political contexts have often revolved around a rather limited list of Alevi identity-based claims. It would serve us better to think of contemporary Alevi identity politics and Alevi activism as a struggle for recognition of the Alevi identity.

The common claim made by a variety of groups within the Alevi community involved in this struggle is that they seek *public recognition* of the Alevi identity and institutions as well as acknowledgement of the grievances caused by the Turkish state. There is a wide range of disagreements among urban Alevi groups about almost all aspects of social and political issues, including the very definition of Alevism itself, though, they agree on the need for recognition.

Recognition and acknowledgment have two main components:

- First and foremost, the acknowledgment of the past crimes, assaults, and unjust practices against the Alevis by the Turkish state and the Sunnis (especially the extreme right and Islamist groups).
- Secondly, the legal and political steps that would meet the demands related to the group rights of the Alevi community.

According to popular Alevi narratives, for centuries, especially during the last four centuries of the Ottoman era, Alevis have been persecuted, oppressed, discriminated against, and marginalized by the central governments. The Alevi identity, culture, and institutions were either denied recognition or assimilated into the majority Sunni identity during this era. Alevis became the equal citizens of the Republic of Turkey and they embraced the secularization reforms. Throughout the early years of the Turkish Republic, Alevis were considered citizens loyal to the founding principles, in particular secularism, of the Republic. Alevis were often portrayed as defenders of the modern secular principles against bigotry and religious fundamentalism, though many Alevis challenged this depiction.

The Dersim episode of 1937-38⁴ was an exception, where tribalism and ethnic identity also played a role in the rebellion. The discourse of loyalty of the “Republican values” was based on the Alevis’ ability to embrace secular values. In fact, the purpose of the Republican identity-building project was to create an ethnically and religiously homogenous, modern, and secular society. The state establishment has never recognized their “Alevi-ness” or traditional values and life style during Republican Turkey, either. There were legal and institutional barriers against the traditional Alevi institutions, while there were also prevailing cultural biases against Alevis at the social level. No specific effort has been spared to address the identity-based discontents of Alevi citizens.

Starting from the early 1960s, Alevi citizens have been migrating to the cities and rapidly becoming urbanized. Because of the processes of rapid urbanization and modernization, the traditional Alevi identity and social order are being transformed.⁵ There were efforts by some Alevi activists to establish Alevi civil society institutions during the 1960s. Parallel to the Kurdish and Islamist identity movements that resisted the homogenizing notion of Republican identity-building project, Alevis also initiated uncoordinated efforts to reinvigorate the Alevi identity. However, those earlier efforts were at the periphery of the wide scale left-wing activism of Alevi citizens. The September 12, 1980 coup curtailed ideological activism and the fall of the Berlin Wall further restricted the ideologi-

cal struggle. These developments paved the way for Alevi identity politics independent of ideological contexts.

Within this new context, Alevi identity politics formulated certain demands. Starting from the late 1980s, the academic and popular literature on Alevism has often been referred to as the “Alevi revival.” This “revival/transformation” has manifested itself in forms of heightened group consciousness, greater ease to express their identity in the public sphere, increased public visibility, and the making of claims of Alevi identity in social and political arenas. These expressions of revival have been achieved not as a consequence of a natural awakening of the Alevi and Sunni public in Turkey, but as the conscious struggles and hard work of the entrepreneurs and activists of Alevi identity politics. Identity-based claims of Alevi institutions, however, could not find any official support, and consequently Alevi citizens occasionally resorted to the ECtHR (European Court of Human Rights) to publicize their concerns.⁶

The main objective of Alevi identity politics is to create the conditions for the maintenance of the Alevi identity in the modern urban context and to be recognized and accepted as equal actors by the Turkish state as well as by the other social and political actors and groups in Turkey. The “Alevi opening” of the current AKP government intends to create an environment conducive to a deeper level of reconciliation. However, the emotional and perceptual barriers between Alevi citizens and the Turkish state as well as between Alevi and Sunni citizens are still obstructing the broader reconciliation.

The “Alevi opening” is still in its early stages but it has already enabled some conciliatory moves. For the first time in the history of the Turkish Republic and the Ottoman state, state authorities have acknowledged the victimhood and traumatic experiences of Alevis. A verbal apology for the oppressions and direct violence that the Alevis had historically suffered from the central authorities was given by the Minister of Culture on behalf of his government and the Turkish state.⁷ A commitment to accommodate Alevi requests has been clearly voiced by Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdoğan and his cabinet ministers. The leaders of the Alevi community and Alevi associations have been recognized by the government. And currently, a set of legal reforms are being publicly discussed.

The “Alevi opening” of the government is a belated, yet significant, attempt to understand the “Alevi issue” and to respond to the demands of Alevi citizens. It is intended to create a safe, secure, and legitimate venue for the leading figures of the Alevi community to express their resentments, grievances, and public de-

mands directly to state officials. Creating a participatory space for social and political deliberation with regard to sensitive social problems is a new approach for Turkish governments. The workshop series tried to bridge the communicative and relational gaps between Alevi leaders and the Turkish government.⁸ Workshops also raised public consciousness and the awareness of Sunni citizens about the contentions of Alevi citizens.

The Alevi opening should be seen as an initial step that would allow for the improvement of communication and trust between the Alevi community and the Turkish state

The Politics of the Alevi Opening

The early years of the AKP administration, particularly the first term (November 2002- July 2007), was a period that led to disappointments for Alevis. During this period many Alevis felt they were socially, politically and economically discriminated against and marginalized by the governing party and its constituents, as had always been the case during center-right governments of the past. There were some reasons that would substantiate the concerns of Alevi citizens related to discrimination and marginalization. Among the 363 MPs of the AKP (over a total of 550MPs), there were no Alevi MPs. Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdoğan did not refer to Alevis in his public speeches. There were no attempts by the AKP government to engage with the representatives of Alevi associations and Alevi civil society institutions. Alevi social, political and identity-based claims had either been denied or had been avoided during this period. There were no specific statements and policies with regard to Alevi claims in the party program,⁹ as well as in the election statement of June 2007.¹⁰

There was a statement in the *Diyanet İşleri Başkanlığı* (the Administration of Religious Affairs, from now on the *Diyanet*)¹¹ in the section related to religious services in the election declaration of the AKP in June 2007. In that section there was an emphasis on the perspective of the *Diyanet* with regard to the religious services for various sects. However, the term “Alevi” was not specifically mentioned in that statement:

The Diyanet does not discriminate on the basis of sect when it is providing the religious services. The social and cultural diversity are seen as richness, and everybody is treated equally based on equal citizenship rights.¹²

The Alevi issue was a blind spot in the policy agenda of governing AKP until the second half of 2007.

The AKP-Alevi relations, which for a long time was a stalemate, have become much more dynamic with the AKP's second term in government, starting from July 22, 2007. The new approach by the AKP can be described as an Alevi engagement policy. High-ranking politicians and statesmen, including President Abdullah Gül, Prime Minister Erdoğan, and other cabinet members made many symbolic yet important gestures. Many Alevi leaders responded positively to this engagement, although there is still a wide range of skepticism within the Alevi community about the objectives and approaches of the "Alevi opening."¹³

In terms of addressing the problems of Alevi citizens, there is a suitable political context. Yet, the "Alevi opening" was not received as positively as one would expect by Alevi citizens mainly because the policy was initiated by the "other." According to a recent opinion poll, 49.2% of Alevi citizens expressed their discontent with the "Alevi opening," while only 14.9% said that they were happy about the situation.¹⁴ A more striking finding, according to this report, was the response given to the question, "Is AKP's Alevi opening a policy of Sunnification?," where 59.8% of the Alevi respondents said, "Yes, these openings are a policy of the Sunnification of Alevis," whereas only 21.9% of the Alevi respondents said, "no, the Alevi opening intends to solve the problems of the people."¹⁵ The opinions of Alevi citizens about the recent opening reflect a deep mistrust towards the governing party.¹⁶ The roots of this mistrust lie in historical experiences as well as the prevailing psychological and cultural barriers, which will be elaborated below.

There had never been a history of inter-communal confrontation and violence between Alevi and Sunni communities. The remaining stereotypes, biases and misinformation between Alevi and Sunnis still constitute obstacles to inter-communal integration. The "Alevi opening" should be seen as an initial step that would allow for the improvement in communication and trust between the Alevi community and the Turkish state. In terms of the state (both Ottoman and Turkish Republic)-Alevi relations, the opening should be considered an historical breakthrough. Alevi communal leaders and their identity-based demands are gradually being recognized by the government. The early steps of the governing AKP's Alevi engagement policy included the nomination and election of MPs Reha Çamuroğlu and İbrahim Yiğit, who are known in the public sphere for their Alevi identity, on the AKP ticket. Çamuroğlu played an important role in Prime Minister Erdoğan's participation in the Alevi *iftars* (breaking fast) in 2008 and 2009. Most importantly, Erdoğan's speeches on both *iftars* can be considered as historical moments for the recognition of the Alevi community leaders and acknowledgment of Alevi victimhood:

“I came here to share all our mourning, not just your mourning. This is together our mourning. We have been drinking from the same spring, we have been turning to the same qibla, we should not put the blame of history on each other

Our path, our guides and our destinations are the same.¹⁷”

Besides the symbolic gestures and embracing speeches, a series of Alevi workshops were also set up. The Ministry of State initiated the seven-step Alevi workshop series.¹⁸ The Minister of State, Faruk Çelik, was present at all seven workshops. The workshop series were intended to incorporate into the engagement process a multiplicity of related actors and stakeholders. The final report of the workshops will be presented to Prime Minister Erdoğan and his ministers.

With the ongoing Alevi initiative, official authorities directly engaged with the representatives of the Alevi community and Alevi civil society organizations. This is one of the rare moments in the history of the Turkish Republic where the Alevi identity with certain rights and responsibilities is symbolically recognized.

The Objectives of Alevi Identity Politics

The motto of the November 9, 2008 Alevi meeting was “equal citizenship rights under the rule of law.”¹⁹ Many Alevi associations at those meeting formulated their struggle as that for broader democratization. However, democracy, secularism and human rights discourses are not the only available frameworks for formulating the Alevis’ identity-based claims. Some associations have formulated them as religious rights. In fact, there is a wide range of variation with respect to the identity-based claims of different Alevi associations and foundations, which in itself is a source of intra-communal tension and struggle. For example, the Alevi Bektaşî Federation (the ABF) is against the very existence of the *Diyanet*, various religious courses, and salaries for the Alevi *dedes*,²⁰ whereas the CEM (*Cumhuriyetçi Eğitim ve Kültür Merkezi Vakfı*, or the Republican Education and Culture Center) and the *Ehl-i Beyt* Foundation want a special directorate for Alevis, similar to the *Diyanet*, or representation of Alevis within the *Diyanet*. The ABF wants the Turkish state to refrain from activities and services related to religion, as a requirement of secularism/laicite. The CEM and the *Ehl-i Beyt* Foundation demand equal delivery of public services to all citizens regardless of ethnicity, sect, religion, rank, and age. They also agree with the plan for salary payments to Alevi *dedes*. There is a consensus on abandoning discriminatory practices against Alevi citizens and on equal representation of Alevi culture and lifestyle in public media forums.

The most challenging set of obstacles for dealing with the roots of Alevi-Sunni opposition in Turkey is the psychocultural and emotional obstacles

society; iii) allocation of material resources for the Alevi identity-based institutions; iv) acknowledgement of the historical traumas and victimhood of Alevis and certain guarantees that would prevent the possible recurrence of traumatic experiences.

Many of the contemporary challenges that the Alevi community is facing are related to the urbanization and modernization of the Alevi community. The issues, such as the status of *cemevis*, position of Alevi *dedes* within the Alevi community, use of modern media outlets, and institutional problems of Alevis, all derive from the adaptation problems of the Alevi community to the modern urban context. The need for *cemevis* as a religious space in modern urban contexts is predominantly related to the urbanization of the Alevi community.²¹

Alevi leaders acknowledge the fact that there was not a specific need for a separate permanent religious space in rural contexts since the *cem* ceremonies were held in the largest hall of each village. But today, there is a need for a separate space in modern-urban contexts to perform these rituals and to maintain intra-communal networks since such ceremonies and rituals cannot be easily accommodated as would be the case in rural contexts. In comparison to the traditional Sunni communities (*cemaat*) and other groups, which have managed to build their institutions and reorganize in modern urban contexts, the Alevi experience with modernization is a relatively delayed process. Today, many of the social, economic, and cultural problems that the Alevis experience are related to these ongoing social and political transformations. It may, therefore, be overly ambitious to expect to meet all the major challenges that the Alevi community has been experiencing through the political processes.

Some particular demands can fall under more than one category; for example, the establishment of Alevi religious institutions, such as *cemevis*, that serve the preservation and “survival” of the Alevi identity can also help in obtaining legal status for *cemevis* as a place of worship (*ibadethane*), which is a step towards the legal recognition of the Alevi identity. The request for the payment of salary to Alevi *dedes* is both a form of resource allocation and a form of recognition of

the traditional Alevi elite. Commitment to secularist principles against the pro-Islamist tendencies is considered a necessity for the prevention of the assimilation of the new generation of Alevi youth into the “Sunni identity.”

The Sivas events of July 2, 1993, as well as the Çorum, Maraş and Sivas events of the late 1970s, have had a significant impact on the Alevi collective memory. There are still ongoing discussions over whether those dark episodes were planned and instigated by a group within the state establishment, or the “deep-state,” in order to polarize and manipulate Turkish society in the 1970s. For many years, Alevis vigorously accused “Islamists” and “ultra-nationalists” as the primary perpetrators of those crimes. Victimhood narratives related to those episodes are, at the same time, the primary psychological background of Alevi identity politics. This perception is gradually changing as a result of investigations of illegal organizations within the Turkish state establishment. New assassination plots against two Alevi leaders, Ali Balkız and Kazım Genç, were revealed during the Ergenekon investigation.²² According to the plans, Alevi and various minority community leaders were to be assassinated in order to drag Turkey into chaos and social polarization.²³ The objective of those plots was to create a social crisis ripe for a military coup.

Obstacles to a Sunni-Alevi Rapprochement

There are many obstacles in the way of satisfying Alevi identity-based claims. Legal obstacles and barriers about the status of *cemevis* or compulsory religious courses are the publicly known issues. Besides these legal issues, there are much deeper psychological, normative, and political barriers for reaching a social and political reconciliation between Alevi citizens and the state, and between Alevi and Sunni citizens. Because of these barriers and lack of mutual trust, even conciliatory steps are interpreted as malignant acts. A holistic model of reconciliation has to incorporate policies that would address all these obstacles, at least to a certain extent.

One of the major difficulties of contemporary Alevi identity politics is the multiplicity of definitions of “Alevi identity.” These diverse definitions and positions often compete with each other in social and political domains as well. It is almost impossible to present a particular perspective as the representative voice of an Alevi identity.²⁴ There are people who believe and support the idea that “there can be Alevilik²⁵ without Ali (*Alisiz Alevilik*).”²⁶ They consider the *Ehl-i Beyt*²⁷ and Islamic sources as merely minor components of the syncretic tradition of Alevism. Others argue that “Alevilik is the essence and/or Turkish interpretation of Islam.”²⁸

Alevi citizens may have different meaning systems and different social and political objectives along with these self-definitions; however, they all define themselves nominally as Alevis. Interpretations of “Alevi history” are also very varied. Especially, among the educated young generation of Alevis, it is not uncommon to hear voices claiming that they just happened to be born into Alevi families and they do not attribute any specific value to their being Alevi. However, on some occasions, they feel discriminated against because of their Alevi identity. In sum, intra-group diversity and competition is a significant challenge for addressing Alevi identity-based claims.

*1. Psychocultural Issues*²⁹

The most challenging set of obstacles for dealing with the root causes of Alevi-Sunni and Alevi-Sunni oppositions along with the ongoing “Alevi opening” are the psychocultural and emotional obstacles. There are no legal or political mechanisms to deal with the intense emotional dimensions of threatened identities. Shared collective traumas and the feelings of perpetual victimhood and marginalization are the most common collective emotions of Alevis that have been maintained for centuries. Remembrance and mourning the Karbala massacre is an important component of the Alevi ritual, known as the *cem*.³⁰ Commemoration of Hacı Bektaş Veli, founder of the *Bektaşî* order, Pîr Sultan Abdal, and the recent Alevi traumas of the Sivas massacre of 1993, as well as remembrance of other painful experiences such as the Maraş events of 1978, play important roles in the maintenance of Alevi identity.

Without understanding these emotional elements, it is impossible to comprehend the social actions, narratives, and emotional responses of the people involved in the Alevi identity movement.³¹ Fears of direct violence and assimilation with other more sophisticated cultural and structural forms of violence are possibilities for many Alevis. Although Alevi associations and community leaders seek certain legal protections and policy changes from the government, fears and traumatizing historical experiences cannot be addressed only through legal and political measures. Many Alevis interpret the conciliatory gestures of the right-wing, nationalist, and pro-Islamist politicians as assimilatory tricks.³²

2. Social and Normative Differences

Popular discourses of politicians usually emphasize the “experience of Alevi-Sunni coexistence in Anatolia” or the “experience of coexistence.” In contradiction to the popular belief that there was always a happy coexistence, Alevis and Sunnis mostly lived in isolated places, especially in rural areas.³³ The urbanization



Photo: AA, Aycan Demirel

For the first time in the history of the Turkish Republic and the Ottoman state, state authorities have acknowledged the victimhood and traumatic experiences of Alevi.

process eroded the well-protected boundaries between the Alevi and Sunni communities and required them to coexist or, at least, share the common social, economic, and political spaces.³⁴ However, the Alevi and Sunnis' moral positioning of one another has been maintained with minor improvements.³⁵ These biases and stereotypes can be overcome in the long run by improving the social spaces that would enable inter-communal communication and interaction.

At the social level, there are many barriers between Alevi and Sunni citizens. For example, a recent opinion survey, conducted by the A&G Research Company, asked questions about Turkish people's preferences on marriage. Half of the participants (50.1%) gave a negative response to the question, “Do you consider marrying someone from another sect (e.g., Alevi, Sunni) as normal?” Only 29.8% of the participants responded affirmatively, whereas 20.1% partially agreed.³⁶ Despite rapid modernization, secularization, and urbanization of Turkish society, the social and cultural boundaries between the Alevi and Sunni identities are still resilient.

3. Legal Obstacles

There are three major legal obstacles that prevent the fulfillment of Alevi identity based claims: i) the legal status of *cemevis* as places of worship; ii) the status

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and content of the compulsory religious courses in public schools; iii) restructuring the legal status and services of the *Diyamet*.

The status of *cemevis* is the most important item in Alevi identity politics. The demands related to the *cemevis* include the legalization of *cemevis* as places of worship (*ibadethane*). Alevi associations also want *cemevis* to benefit from all the privileges that mosques enjoy, including free electricity, free water, and the allocation of free building sites. Different Alevi associations, foundations, and civil society institutions have different expectations from the *cemevi* debate. Some associations consider the debate over the legal status of *cemevis* to be an opportunity to allow for *Alevilik* to be recognized as a separate religion³⁷ or a separate belief system. Some other institutions want to benefit from the privileges of places of worship. Official recognition may also imply government control over *cemevis*.

Law 677³⁸ bans places of worship other than mosques, such as shrines, dervish lodges, and gathering places of sects and mystical movements (*tarikats*). The law is considered one of the most important pieces of legislation among Atatürk’s reforms. Alevi associations and foundations do not openly request the amendment to this law from the Republican era, but they expect the outcome would pave the way to the legalization of *cemevis*. This is somehow problematic because many Alevis oppose the idea of the legalization of Sunni shrines, *tekkes* and *dergahs*. It is a highly risky subject for the governing AKP to amend Law 677. The AKP may end up facing a new closure case at the Constitutional Court on the basis of trying to “alter” the secular fundamentals of the Turkish Republic.³⁹

Prime Minister Erdoğan has signaled that there may be some legal and institutional modifications in the status of *cemevis*⁴⁰ as part of the Alevi engagement policy. Establishing a new “Alevi Directorate” under the Prime Minister’s office and funding and regulating *cemevis* through this new institution may be an ideal solution. Another option may be giving autonomy to Alevi institutions and creating a credible audit mechanism that would ensure compatibility with the interests of the general public. Alevi civil society institutions will resist any option that may bring about the *Diyamet*’s control over *cemevis*. Another option is to give *cemevis* status similar to cultural centers and support them accordingly. Legalizing *cemevis* under the status of cultural centers will not fully satisfy some of the Alevi activists, as the debate over granting the status of religious place is an important element of Alevi identity politics.

The second important legal obstacle for addressing the Alevi identity-based demands is the status of compulsory religion courses in public schools. Embedded within the broader context of this problem is the problem of religious education in Turkey. According to the 24th article of the 1982 Constitution of the Republic of Turkey, education and instruction in religion and ethics is compulsory in primary school curricula.

Almost all Alevi foundations and associations are against the current form and the contents of the compulsory religious courses. There are also ECtHR and court decisions against the contents of the compulsory religious courses.⁴¹ The Council of State’s (*Danıştay*) March 2008 ruling also declared that Turkey’s religion courses cannot be obligatory in their current form.⁴² Parallel to the earlier ECtHR’s decision, the Council of State’s ruling objected to the contents and the curriculum of compulsory religious courses on the grounds that they focus solely on Sunni Islam.⁴³

There are three major criticisms against the compulsory religious courses from the Alevi point of view. While the majority of Alevi citizens object to the compulsory nature of the courses in a modern, secular state, almost all criticize the contents of the courses for being “biased” and “discriminatory.” The general conviction among Alevi citizens is that the religious courses teach Sunni beliefs and religious practices. Changing the compulsory character of religious courses necessitates a constitutional amendment, and therefore the consent and support of the opposition parties is also required. The AKP will not take such a risk unless the amendment is initiated with the consensus of the two opposition parties, which does not seem a possibility in the foreseeable future. It is relatively easier to modify the curricula of the religious courses, which the Ministry of Education has already done to include subjects on *Alevilik* in the curricula.

The third major legal debate triggered by the Alevi identity-based claims is about the legal status of the *Diyanet*. There are diverse views among Alevi associations about what to do with the *Diyanet*. The ABF wants the abolishment of the *Diyanet* and the confiscation of all its property by the Treasury. They argue that “there is no place for an institution like the *Diyanet* in a modern secular social and political regime.”⁴⁴ Some Alevi want the *Diyanet* to be financed from sources outside the public budget. They argue that in a secular (*laic*) state, religious services should not be financed from the public budget.⁴⁵ Others argue that Alevi deserve tax exemptions since they do not benefit from the services of the *Diyanet*. Lack of sympathy towards the *Diyanet* is a shared theme among the diverse views in the Alevi community, but there is disagreement as to what needs to be done.

The common claim made by the Alevi community is that they seek *public recognition* of Alevi identity and institutions and acknowledgement of grievances caused by the Turkish state

The *Diyanet*⁴⁶ is one of the most well-rooted institutions in Turkey, and was established in 1924 by Atatürk himself. The *Diyanet* provides religious services, and, at the same time, regulates the majority of religious activities in Turkey. The *Diyanet* played a significant role in the establishment of the Turkish style of sec-

ularism in the early years of the Republican era. Today, it is predominantly an institution that provides essential religious services; the abolition or incapacitation of the *Diyanet* may gradually lead to a strengthening of the religious communities and faith-based organizations in Turkey. Such a potential trend is considered a potential threat against Turkish secularism by the secular state establishment.

Since there is strong support for the services of the *Diyanet* from the majority of Turkish society, no democratically elected government in Turkey can risk abolishing the *Diyanet*. Debating the status of the *Diyanet* along with the “Alevi opening” may be controversial, since the majority of Sunni citizens approve and support the services of the *Diyanet*. A possible abolition of the institution could lead to sectarian polarization between Alevi and Sunni citizens. It is crucial to accommodate Alevi demands without alienating and offending Sunni citizens, otherwise, the opening process may lead to inter-communal polarization, rather than inter-communal reconciliation. Incorporating Alevis into the *Diyanet* is also not a practical approach, because, for a long time, many Alevi groups have perceived the *Diyanet* negatively.⁴⁷ It is difficult to change this perception in the short run. An establishment of an Alevi version of the *Diyanet* with a separate budget may not find supporters among Alevi citizens, either. Establishing a separate publicly funded institution to provide cultural and religious services for Alevi citizens seems to be a more viable option. In this case, however, the differences between Alevi and Sunni citizens may be institutionalized, which may, in return, limit the opportunities of inter-communal reconciliation. There is no perfect solution when it comes to the *Diyanet* that would satisfy both Alevi and Sunni citizens, as well as the secular state establishment.

Overall, the legal obstacles to addressing Alevi identity-based claims such as the legal status of *cemevis*, compulsory religion courses, and the status of the *Diyanet* are not problems only of Alevis. These issues are, at the same time, related to some of the major paradoxes of Turkish secularism as well as state-society relations in Turkey. Nevertheless, there are some available practical legal measures,

discussed in the recommendations section, which may help address demands by the citizens.

4. Political Contentions

The “other” of Alevi identity in Turkey has traditionally been a combination of “conservative Sunni,” “right-wing nationalist” and “pro-Islamist”⁴⁸ identities. Currently these political identities are represented in the Turkish parliament by the AKP and the National Action Party (*Milliyetçi Hareket Partisi*, MHP). Both political parties have made public statements about their willingness to engage with the Alevi community and to address Alevi identity-based claims. The leader of the MHP, Devlet Bahçeli, recently announced the details of his party’s new Alevi policy.⁴⁹ The MHP’s efforts on the Alevi issue would be immensely important for social and political reconciliation in Turkey, especially because the MHP and the party’s idealist (*ülküçü*) constituents were considered by many Alevis to be their archenemy during the ideological struggles of the 1970s.⁵⁰ There is traditionally a deep-rooted animosity between the MHP and Alevi activists, who were involved in left-wing activism in the 1970s.

Bahçeli’s package included the following themes that are also parallel with the AKP’s:

1. Allocation of budget to *cemevis*,
2. Representation of Alevis within the *Diyanet*,
3. Opening of government-funded Alevi research centers and institutes,
4. Public broadcast of informative productions about Alevi culture on Alevi special days on official state TV, the TRT,
5. Representation and teaching of Alevi culture and beliefs in religion classes.⁵¹

Because of both the AKP’s and MHP’s recent public declarations, there is a suitable ground for dealing with the legal obstacles. However, this policy move may not have a direct return in terms of political support for both parties. Even if the AKP leads the process to allow for legal amendments concerning Alevi identity-based claims in the parliament, they will most probably not get the political support of Alevi citizens in the foreseeable future. There is also a possibility that the AKP may alienate their conservative Sunni constituents as a consequence of such a political move. These political limitations may render the governing AKP hesitant on taking more concrete steps to deal with Alevi identity-based claims.

It is crucial to accommodate Alevi demands without alienating and offending Sunni citizens, otherwise, the opening process may lead to inter-communal polarization, rather than inter-communal reconciliation

a change in the status quo, unless the CHP comes up with an alternative plan. Some of the Alevi identity activists as well as certain factions benefiting from the maintenance of Alevi-Sunni and secularist-Islamist conservative Sunni polarizations are also unhappy about the new engagement policy.

The AKP's legislative moves about the Alevi requests and the entire process of the "Alevi opening" may not directly bring about political support by Alevi citizens. Therefore, when concrete policy items are discussed, these discussions may lead to political repercussions within the governing party. The main drive for the governing party in the "Alevi opening" is not direct political gain. Thus, some indirect gains may be necessary in order to counterbalance the political risks of the "Alevi opening." Nevertheless, maintaining the "Alevi opening" may strengthen the secular and pluralistic credentials of the governing party, which can be considered an important incentive for the governing party. Given that the EU reforms seem to have been stalled,⁵² the "Alevi opening," and the broader "democratic opening," which encapsulates the Kurds as well, will help strengthen the credentials of the AKP in its commitment to democratic values, pluralism, and secularism.

Prospects for a Sustained Rapprochement

Identity-related conflicts like the Alevi issue have deep historical, cultural, emotional, economic, and political dimensions; therefore, there is no magic formula or prescription to address all these issues. There are, however, many potential steps that would help eliminate barriers to social and political reconciliation. Legal and political reforms are crucial for overcoming structural inequalities and preventing the practices of marginalization. These reforms and structural adjustment policies are not alternatives to processes of multi-layer intervention; they are rather crucial complementary steps. Initiating a comprehensive and holistic reconciliation process is a long-term project but continuing the symbolic gestures are helpful in order to address certain cultural and psychological sensitivities.

Educating Turkish society about the cultural and emotional sensitivities of Alevi citizens is a necessary step for a broader inter-communal reconciliation. Policy recommendations outlined below are aimed at providing a perspective for a multilayered intervention.

Legal and Political Reforms

1. Revising the legal status of the compulsory religion courses should be part of a broader reform of religious education policy. Providing multiple religion course options in public schools or revising the content and curricula of religion courses can be another option.
2. Forming a commission in the National Assembly, the parliament, to explore the possible options for the legal status of *cemevis*. A subcommittee on the constitution can explore the constitutional obstacles and alternative paths to deal with these obstacles.
3. Re-structuring the *Diyanet* so that it may provide religious services equally to different sects.
4. Opening of government funding for Alevi research centers and institutes and providing government grants to research projects.
5. Providing free public benefits such as electricity, water, and financial aid to the activities of *cemevis*.
6. Certain forms of financial compensation for the Alevi *dedes*. The details of the project can be decided by the Alevis themselves through participatory workshops, moderated by a mixture of academics and public policy experts.
7. Making the diaspora Alevis a part of the engagement policy in Turkey. Alevi associations in Europe have significant influence over shaping the political discourse and institutionalization of Alevi associations in Turkey. There is still an ongoing interaction between European Alevi associations and Alevi associations in Turkey.
8. The legal amendments can resonate with the constituency of the governing AKP only if they are framed under a broader policy package of democratization and improving religious freedoms in Turkey.
9. The opposition parties, bureaucratic institutions (the *Diyanet*, the local governorships) and civil society institutions (bar associations, human rights organizations, and religious organizations) should also be integrated into the process to broaden the constituency of the reconciliation process.

Transforming the Public Discourses

1. Making some changes in the educational textbooks and revising parts that create biases against Alevi culture and Alevi citizens.
2. Establishing a permanent advisory council from the Alevi community leaders and consulting the council on matters concerning the Alevi community.
3. Designing a memorial library or a cultural center for the memory of citizens who lost their lives in the Sivas Events of July 2, 1993.
4. Creating a Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) to investigate the political and sectarian violence of the 1970s (Sivas, Çorum, Malatya, and Maraş). In addition to the Sivas events of 1993, the period of ideological/sectarian violence during the 1970s have left a traumatic legacy in the Alevi public memory. Memory of those events feed the victimhood psychology among the new generation of Alevis. Mistrust towards the state and conservative Sunnis is primarily a residue of the political violence of the 1970s. Investigations and public recognition of these events may be a step towards settling some of the fears of Alevi citizens.

Expectations from the Alevi Leadership

1. It is crucial for the leaders of the Alevi community to abandon confrontational language against the “Alevi opening.” Public support for the “Alevi opening” may accelerate the process of legal reforms.
2. Using derogatory terms such as “*Yezid*,” “*dinci*” (pejorative term used to denote ultra-conservative), or “*gerici*” (retrograde) alienates Sunni citizens, community leaders, and politicians. It is important to condemn these pejorative terms as a sign of reconciliation.
3. Reaching an intra-communal consensus or at least a set of priorities on the fundamental legal and political issues may help clarify the paths to be taken towards concrete reforms.
4. Developing alternative educational models to train the Alevi communal leaders, the *dedes*, and the Alevi citizens about their tradition, rituals, and culture.

Conclusion

Addressing the Alevi demands should not just be a matter of political pragmatism for the governing AKP administration; it is rather a historical opportunity

to mitigate centuries old tensions. It is, at the same time, a requirement to ensure equal rights for all Turkish citizens. It is not clear whether the AKP administration will be able to accommodate the Alevi requests during their tenure because of the enduring social, political, legal, and psychological obstacles. It is also unrealistic to expect a resolution of complex historical problems within a relatively short period of time. However, if the process is managed constructively, the engagement process will have a positive impact at the political as well as at the grassroots levels. Therefore, the success of the “Alevi opening” should be evaluated on its contribution to the formation of channels of sustained dialogue and deliberation between Alevi and the state, and between Alevi and Sunni citizens.

The legal amendments can resonate with the constituency of governing AKP only if they are framed under a broader policy package of democratization and improving religious freedoms in Turkey

The “Alevi opening” process will have both direct and indirect constructive consequences. First, the Alevi identity-based claims will continue to be on the public agenda until they are settled through a process of public deliberation. Second, the process of dialogue and deliberation will empower Alevi citizens. As a result of the “Alevi opening,” Alevi and Sunni citizens will get to know each other better through exposure to one another’s culture, worldviews, and problems. Third, polarizing figures and political discourses can be marginalized if the process is managed successfully. There may emerge a more constructive leadership on both sides and constructive language may gradually replace confrontational discourses. The “Alevi opening” can only be sustained with the efforts and support of Alevi leaders and community members.

Endnotes

* I would like to thank to Professor Talip Küçükcan for his valuable comments.

1. I prefer analytically to use the concept of “communal group identity” to define Alevi as a collective entity. According to Gurr, communal groups define themselves based on common descent, shared historical experiences, valued cultural and normative traits, and belief systems (Ted Robert Gurr, “Minorities, Nationalists, and Islamists. Managing Communal Conflict in the Twenty-First Century,” Chester A. Crocker *et al.* (eds.), *Leashing the Dogs of War: Conflict Management in a Divided World* (Washington DC: United States Institute of Peace Press, 2007), pp.131-160; “Why Minorities Rebel: A Global Analysis of Communal Mobilization and Conflict since 1945,” *International Political Science Review*, Vol. 14, No. 2 (1993), pp. 161-201.

2. Krisztina Kehl-Bodrogi, “Tarih Mitoosu ve Kollektif Kimlik,” *Birikim*, 88, (1996), pp. 64-67.

3. There is an increasing academic literature on Alevi tradition, culture, and rituals. For a few of the recent studies, see İlyas Üzümlü, *Günümüz Aleviliği* (İstanbul: Türkiye Diyanet Vakfı İSAM

Yayımları,1997); David Shankland, *The Alevi in Turkey: The emergence of a secular Islamic tradition* (Routledge Curzon, 2003); Tord Olsson, E. Özdalga, and C. Raudvere (eds.), *Alevi identity: Cultural, Religious and Social Perspectives* (Routledge Curzon, 1998).

4. Relevance of the debates related to Dersim rebellion are elaborated in the section about psychocultural obstacles.

5. For the impact of modernization and urbanization on the Alevi community, see Aykan Erdemir, "Tradition and modernity: Alevi's ambiguous terms and Turkey's ambivalent subjects," *Middle Eastern Studies*, Vol. 41, No. 6 (2005) pp. 937-951; Necdet Subaşı, *Sırrı fâş eylemek: Alevi modernleşmesi*, (İstanbul: Ufuk Çizgisi, 2008); Nail Yılmaz, *Kentin Alevileri: Reşadiye İkitelli örneği*, (İstanbul: Kitabevi, 2005).

6. Two major cases where Alevi citizens resorted to ECtHR were on compulsory religious education (Eylem Zengin vs Turkey) and the required religious designation in Turkish ID cards (Sinan Işık vs Turkey).

7. On December 12, 2008, Minister of Culture, Ertuğrul Günay, apologized to Alevi citizens as the representative of the state for the past victimhood that the ancestors of Alevi had suffered. Günay said that "Alevi had experienced many painful experiences such as the Sivas and Maraş events in the past. As a representative of the state I would like to apologize." For the first time, a representative of the Turkish state apologized to the Alevi community, "Bakan Günay'dan Aleviler için tarihi çıkış," *Milliyet*, December 24, 2008.

8. Necdet Subaşı, "Çalıştay Bitti ... Sıra Açılımda," *Star-Açık Görüş*, February 8, 2010.

9. For the AKP party program see <http://eng.akparti.org.tr/english/partyprogramme.html>, last accessed on March 18, 2010.

10. "Güven ve İstikrar İçinde Durmak Yok Yola Devam", June 2007.

11. Diyanet İşleri Başkanlığı (Presidency of Religious Affairs), referred as *Diyanet* here, is an official institution established in 1924. The *Diyanet* is providing religious services, and at the same time regulating the religious activities in Turkey.

12. Diyanet İşleri Başkanlığı, din hizmetlerini yürütürken mezhep, anlayışı ve uygulama ayrımı yapmadan toplumdaki farklılıkları ülkemizin zenginliği görecelik herkeşe eşit mesafede durmuş ve vatandaşlık esasına göre hizmet sunmuştur.

13. "AKP'ye Alevi öfkesi," *Radikal*, February 04, 2008; "Aleviler çalıştay için umutsuz," *Milliyet*, June 7, 2009; "Aydınlardan Alevi çağrısı," *Milliyet*, November 7, 2008.

14. *Alevi Raporu* (Ankara: Stratejik Düşünce Enstitüsü, November 2009), p. 50.

15. *Alevi Raporu*, p. 56.

16. Alevi Bektaşî Federation (ABF) defines AKP's Alevi Opening as an assimilatory move, "AKP Alevileri asimile etmeye çalışıyor," *Radikal*, November 25, 2007. Pir Sultan Abdal Kültür Derneği (PSAKD) organized a meeting in Istanbul (Kadıköy) in February 2008 to protest JDP's Alevi opening, "AKP'ye Alevi öfkesi," *Radikal*, February 4, 2008.

17. "Erdoğan'dan Alevilere: Acıyı bal eyleyelim," *Radikal*, January 12, 2008.

18. The outline of the 7 step workshops incorporate the following actors: 1) Representatives of Alevi associations and foundations, 2) Academics, 3) Journalists and intellectuals, 4) Syndicates, business associations, civil society organizations and human rights organizations, 5) Diyanet and theology professors, 6) Politicians, and 7) Presentation of the findings to the government.

19. Alevi claims for broader democratization are expressed with the following words: "Democracy, rule of law, and the principle of laicism are the guarantees for the maintenance of Alevi identity. Therefore, they should be defended." "Ankarada Alevi Bektaşî mitingi," *Sabah*, November 9, 2008.

20. *Dedes* are the religious leaders within the Alevi community; they are considered as the religious specialists who are descendants of the *ehl-i beyt* (*ahl-al bayt* which means the Prophet Muhammad’s household). *Dedes* are hereditary holy lineages; in order to be a *dede*, one has to be born from a *dede* lineage.

21. *Cemevis* are becoming more widespread in many cities today. *Cemevis* are not only the centers of worship and faith; they also function like community cultural centers. They offer Alevi a range of services such as lute (*saz*) courses, *semah* courses, computer courses for the youth, *cemevi* kitchens providing free food for people in need.

22. Ergenekon is a clandestine ultra-nationalist network, which has connections with the military and security forces. Political assassination plans were exposed and the promotion of polarizing social tensions were among the plans of the Ergenekon. Assassination plots of two important Alevi leaders were also exposed during the ongoing investigation.

23. “Balkız: suikast iddiaları ciddi, *Ergenekon* davasına katılacağım,” *Bianet*, July 23, 2009, “My blood froze” says potential *Ergenekon* terror victim,” *Today’s Zaman*, March 11, 2009. “Suikast listesinde adı geçen ABF başkanı konuştu,” *Sabah*, January 27, 2009.

24. Observations about different visions on Alevi identity presented here are briefly introduced with reference to my doctoral research (Talha Köse, “Re-Negotiating Alevi identity: Values, emotions and contending visions on future,” Unpublished doctoral dissertation, George Mason University, December 2009). Ethnic identity, political movement, and religious oriented communal group identity were three of these contending discourses. The subject is part of a broader academic discussion, which is elaborated in several other studies as well. Faruk Bilici, “The function of Alevi-Bektashi theology in modern Turkey,” Olsson, Tord, Elisabeth Özdalga and Catharina Raudvere (eds), *Alevi Identity: Cultural, Religious and Social Perspectives*, (London: Routledge Curzon, 1998), pp. 51–62; Tahire Erman, and Emrah Göker, “Alevi Politics in Contemporary Turkey.” *Middle Eastern Studies*, Vol. 36, No.4 (2000), pp. 99–118; Markus Dressler, “Religio-Secular Matamorphose: Re-Making of Turkish Alevism.” *Journal of the American Academy of Religion*, Vol. 76, No. 2, (2008), pp. 280-311.

25. I prefer to use the Turkish term Alevilik to define the broader Alevi phenomena rather than Alevism which sounds more like a political ideology or a social movement.

26. This perspective is especially emphasized by some of the political activists with revolutionary Marxist background; however, this version of Alevi understanding is unpopular among the majority of Alevi citizens.

27. Meaning of the Arabic phrase is literally the “people of the house.” In the Islamic tradition *ehl-i beyt* (*ahl-al bayt*) refers to the family of the Prophet Mohammed.

28. This is a widely shared understanding, especially, among the Alevi citizens who try to participate in the activities at *cemevis* and other traditional Alevi institutions.

29. For a comprehensive analysis of psychocultural and emotional dimensions of Alevi identity struggle, Talha Köse, “Re-Negotiating Alevi Identity”.

30. Alevi communal rituals.

31. Talha Köse, “Re-Negotiating Alevi identity.”

32. *Alevi Raporu*, p. 56.

33. Krisztina Kehl-Bodrogi, “Tarih Mitosu ve Kollektif Kimlik,” *Birikim*, 88, (1996), pp. 64-67; Martin van Bruinessen, “Kurds, Turks and the Alevi revival in Turkey,” *Middle East Report*, 200, (1996), p. 7.

34. Dressler defines the “traditional Alevism” as the pre-urbanization and pre-secularization phenomena (Dressler, “Religio-Secular Matamorphose: Re-Making of Turkish Alevism,” p. 295).

35. Toprak et al (2009)'s field research presents recent examples of marginalized groups during the AKP administration, Binnaz Toprak et al., *Türkiye'de farklı olmak: Din ve muhafazakarlık ekseninde ötekileştirilenler*, (İstanbul: Metis Yayınları, 2009). Alevi is frequently mentioned as a group, which experience marginalization in this study. The study had certain repercussions and it has been criticized in terms of its methodology and overall argument.

36. "Ha başka dindensin ha başka mezhepten," *Milliyet*, June 11, 2009.

37. The group that defines Alevilik as a separate religion is very marginal among the Alevi community, however, it is more common among the Diaspora Alevi in Europe.

38. Commonly known as the "Tekke, Zaviye ve Türbelerin Kapatılmasına Dair Kanun."

39. On March 14, 2008, The Chief Public Prosecutor of the Supreme Court of Appeals, Abdurrahman Yalçınkaya, formally asked the Constitutional Court to close the AKP with the allegation that "the party had become a hotbed of anti-secular activities." The Constitutional Court delivered its verdict on July 30, 2008. The AKP was found guilty of becoming the focus of anti-secularist actions. Six members of the Constitutional Court voted in favor of banning the party, yet, those votes fell short of the qualified majority of seven out of eleven, which was necessary for banning the party altogether.

40. "Erdoğan: Cemevi talebine uzak kalmayız," *Radikal*, January 14, 2008.

41. For the details of the case and decision with legal justification http://www.ius-software.si/EUII/EUCHR/dokumenti/2007/10/CASE_OF_HASAN_AND_EYLEM_ZENGIN_v._TURKEY_09_10_2007.html.

42. "Danıştay: Din dersi hukuka aykırı" *Hürriyet*, March 4, 2008.

43. "Danıştay: Zorunlu din dersi hukuksuz," *NTVMSNBC*, retrieved on February 2, 2010 from <http://arsiv.ntvmsnbc.com/news/437852.asp>.

44. Personal interview with the Vice President of the Alevi Bektaşî Federation, October 4, 2006. Personal interview with the President of ABF, July 25, 2006.

45. Personal interviews with the leading figures of several Alevi foundations and associations.

46. For a critical perspective on the position of Diyanet for organizing state-society and state-religion relations in Turkey, İştâr Gözaydın, *Diyanet: Türkiye Cumhuriyeti'nde Dinin Tanzimi*, (İletişim Yayınları, 2009). Muslim World's special issue on Diyanet includes analysis on social, political, religious, historical and practical aspects of Diyanet, *Muslim World*, Vol. 98, No. 2-3, pp. 159-396; "A Special Issue on the Presidency of Religious Affairs in Turkey: DIYANET," Special Editor: Gazi Erdem (2008).

47. Personal contact and interviews with Alevi citizens and leaders in various cities including İstanbul, Ankara, and Malatya from summer 2006 to summer 2008.

48. Alevi is often associate "pro-Islamist" or "Political Islamist" with the former Welfare Party (*Refah Partisi*) and the conservative wing of the AKP. Some of the religious communities that are highly involved in politics are also included in this category.

49. "MHP'den Alevi açılımı." *Milliyet*, June 10, 2009.

50. Alevi is predominantly active in the left and ultra-left poles of Turkish politics during the 1970s.

51. "MHP'den Alevi açılımı." *Milliyet*, June 10, 2009

52. The period of 2000-2005 was the period of EU reforms in Turkey. The incentive of EU integration accelerated the social and political reforms. The EU reforms have been stalled since 2007, because of the Cyprus gridlock, domestic political problems and internal crises within both the EU and Turkey.