Fate of the Minorities in the Islamic Middle East

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Edited by

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

FOREWORD

When it comes to religious minorities in Iran, one usually thinks of Zoroastrianism, Judaism and Christianity, which are mentioned in Article 13 of the Constitution of the Islamic Republic of Iran. Therefore, their followers are traditionally regarded as 'protected persons' (*dhimmī*). During the discussion of this constitutional text, representatives of Judaism, Zoroastrianism and Armenian and Assyrian Christianity tried to speak of 'communities' instead of 'minorities'. The mention of these religions in the Constitution should not overlook the fact that there are a number of other religious minorities in Iran, many of which are closely linked to ethnic – i.e. non-Persian – minorities. Important information on such ethno-religious minorities has already been provided by the book '*Ethnic Religious Minorities in Iran*' (ed. S. Behnaz Hosseini, Singapore: Palgrave Macmillan 2023). The present volume is a welcome addition and continuation of this important topic.

The term 'minority' is not without its problems. Mathematically or statistically, a 'minority' simply means that a group of people make up less than 50 per cent of the total. Sociologically and politically, however, the minority acquires an evaluative component when the 'minority' is contrasted with a 'majority', the latter assuming, among other things, sovereignty of interpretation over values and socio-political claims to power. As a result, a 'minority' is placed in a subaltern position vis-à-vis the majority, so that the term usually has negative connotation (cf. Muhammad Usman Shakir). As a result, members of a minority often experience discrimination from the representatives of the dominant religion, i.e. in Iran from the Twelver Shī'ism (*Imāmiyya*). This applies to Sunni communities as well as to Shī'ite communities that do not belong to the Twelver Shī'ism, and to the Yāresān (Ahl-e Haqq), who are appropriated by some Muslim representatives as part of (Shī'ite) Islam, and thus negating the religious self-understanding of their members, whose teachings have partly preserved and developed pre-Islamic ideas from the western Iran (cf. Ehsan Mahmoudi). The Alevis also belong to the larger Shī'ite context, the majority of whom are Kurds in Turkey, but about 1.3 million Alevis live in Iran, where the Alevis sought Iran's support against the Ottoman Empire, especially during the Safavid period. The study of their minority status in

Turkey (cf. Ali Hasannia, Zahra Fazeli & Mohammad-Reza Fazeli) is an enriching contribution to the volume compared to the treatment of minorities in Iran. The Ismā'īlis (or 'Sevener') are another Shī'ite movement in Iran (cf. Mansour Ambarmoo), whose minority status has contributed to their global worldwide spread throughout history; the associated migration has repeatedly led to innovations as minorities have had to adapt to new environments. After the death of Karim Agha Khan IV (died 4 February 2025), his son Rahim Agha Khan V leads the religious community as the 50th Imām. The Bahā'ī religion is clearly distinct from the Twelver Shī'a, although it originated in the Shī'ite milieu of the Qājār dynasty in the mid-19th century. Because of this origin, Bahā'īs in Iran are considered apostates from Islam and are subject to religious, cultural and economic persecution and restrictions of their human rights to a much greater extent than other minorities in the Islamic Republic of Iran (cf. Moojan Momen).

The individual examples of minorities discussed in this book provide an interesting insight into Iran's religious plurality. They show that religious minorities never exist in isolation, but must always shape their living conditions in dependence on and in contact with the majority. This can lead to social tensions, but at the same time these challenges offer minorities the opportunity to continually rethink their religious traditions and thus remain vibrant communities and parts of society.

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I extend my special gratitude to **Prof. Manfred Hutter** for writing the foreword—his contribution is highly valued. I am also especially grateful to **Paulina Niechciał** for her insightful introduction to this volume. My thanks go to **Zukunftfonds** for their generous financial support, which made this publication possible.

This volume brings together a diverse range of perspectives and research on the experiences of minorities, migration, and social challenges in the Middle East. Through extensive new research and fieldwork, it examines the realities faced by non-Muslim minorities in the region, exploring their cultural, social, and political struggles. By engaging with affected communities and documenting their lived experiences, this work aims to provide a deeper and more nuanced understanding of the challenges they endure.

I am grateful to the authors whose contributions have enriched this volume, and I appreciate the effort and dedication they have put into their research. I hope this publication serves as a valuable resource for scholars, policymakers, and anyone interested in the complexities of minority communities in the Middle East.

INTRODUCTION

This book integrates three pivotal subjects: the diaspora, minorities, and identity. Although extensive research and literature already exist on these topics, the ongoing changes induced by contemporary social realities ensure that they not only retain their relevance but are also profoundly topical, and their dynamics and intersections continue to present researchers with new inquiries and challenges to address. The contemporary world operates with formidable forces that dynamically and significantly transform social realities. Influenced by current economic policies, emergent technologies, transnational networks, and evolving cultural and ideological paradigms, this world is in perpetual flux. These profound transformations impact intergroup relations and the formation of identities and social boundaries (Eisenstadt 2007, 113). Moreover, current news highlights the wars and political unrest that are irrevocably transforming contemporary realities, particularly affecting the sociogeographic regions of the Middle East, which are a crucial point of reference in this book. While popular perception often associates Afghanistan and Iran with political turmoil and violence, and highlights Islamic dominance, it is important to acknowledge that these countries are also the homelands of numerous non-Muslim minorities. These groups are either striving to find their place within these challenging environments or are emigrating, thereby forming dynamic diasporic communities in more receptive parts of the world.

The examination of identity within the context of collectivities, anchored in such classical sociological categories as Emil Durkheim's "collective consciousness," Karl Marx's "class consciousness," or Ferdinand Tönnies' "Gemeinschaft" (community), initially pertained to the sense of community among the members of a given group, highlighting that the similarities uniting them and the attributes they share are inherent and derived from certain objective premises. However, over time, this essentialist nature of collective imagery has been subjected to scrutiny. Contemporary understanding posits that social categories such as "culture," "race," "gender," or specific "cultural traits" are not immutable and inherent characteristics that define individuals within a particular group. Rather, they function as mechanisms for reinforcing societal divisions, establishing reference points for group identification and differentiation of its members

from others, stabilizing social boundaries, and potentially perpetuating stereotypes and legitimizing discrimination. This construction of identity is predicated not on the objectively verifiable otherness of a particular group but on the processes of interpretation and evaluation of various symbols, narrations, and notions. The construction of identity may reference and underscore elements derived from history, geography, biology, collective memory, or religion, but modified and adapted (Castells 2010, 7).

Research on identity involves examining how individuals formulate the image of their group and their membership within this group, focusing on the attributes they ascribe to themselves and others that ensure consistent identification in terms of ethnicity, nationality, religion, gender, or other relevant dimensions within a given social, cultural, and political context. Identity construction entails delineating boundaries in pertinent contexts to distinguish "us," that is, our collectivity from "them," that is, others, serving as demarcations between what is familiar and accustomed, and what is foreign, different, and distinct; it separates and characterizes what is external to us. These boundaries emphasize internal solidarity, cohesion, and shared homogeneity, creating a sense of distinctiveness and integrating individuals who identify with the group in contrast to others (Hastings and Wilson 1999, 21–26; Eriksen 1995).

The demarcation established between "us" and "them" facilitates, on one hand, the differentiation from other groups, and on the other hand, the reinforcement of our own group by emphasizing the distinctions on both sides of the boundary. However, this delineation is always situational and relational. Consequently, our identification within our group is not fixed, and the criteria that foster the homogeneity among group members are subject to transformation; even if the individuals within the group remain constant, the symbols and narratives they reference to fortify internal cohesion can be reconstituted to align with the specific historical context (Eriksen 1995, 435). It is the interaction with external and different entities that generates certain social actions and transformations in the cultural domain. Thus, identity is not simply a description of who a group is, but rather an explanation of its "social locations in a world that is shaped by such locations, by the way they are distributed and hierarchically organized" (Alcoff and Mohanty 2006, 6).

A particular type of identity that attracts scholarly interest is minority identity. Despite certain controversies surrounding the term "minority," which in popular discourse may incorrectly imply a numerical smallness, it remains a valuable analytical category for describing social reality. In fact,

it denotes not numerical counts, but power dynamics, wherein the group designated as "minority" occupies a nonhegemonic and nondominant social position, facing unequal treatment, exclusion, and adversity (Alcoff and Mohanty 2006, 7–8). Consequently, a minority does not exist in isolation; this designation is meaningful only in the context of a group encountering the dominance of another group. The fact that a minority is invariably situated within a specific social, cultural, or political milieu and faces domination by another group influences its processes of identity construction. Diverse identity strategies can facilitate the mobilization of a minority, fortify its social boundaries against dilution, and safeguard its cultural heritage. Scholars elucidate the array of interrelated concepts and ambivalent dimensions involved in the identity formation of minority communities, striving to understand the circumstances of those most marginalized and undervalued, who exist outside the social mainstream.

Within the Middle Eastern context, Islam, as the prevailing structure, generates a distinct category of minority, specifically, a religious, non-Muslim minority. Islamic law serves as the foundation for categorizing members of society into various groups, each possessing different social standings based on their religious affiliations. At a fundamental level, the classification derived from the Qur'an and the formation of Muslim perception towards the surrounding world result in a division of individuals into Muslims and non-Muslims, identified as "infidels." These non-Muslims do not profess belief in one God, do not recognize Muhammad as the final prophet, nor the Qur'an as the ultimate revelation. However, this issue has additional layers of complexity. The criterion for the further distinction remains theological, and among the latter are communities categorized by the Qur'an as "people of the book," which includes followers of "revealed" religions with sacred texts predating Islam, such as Christians, Jews, and Zoroastrians, and polytheists, who adhere to newer religions deemed more "primitive." Consequently, individuals belonging to these categories receive different treatments within Muslim society (Waardenburg 1999, 18–20). This categorization created a distinction between individuals recognized as full-fledged citizens and those identified as non-Muslim minorities occupying different positions within society. An example provided in the book is the Baha'i minority, adherents of a rapidly growing global religion, who paradoxically face significant discrimination in their native Iran, primarily because they do not belong to recognized religious minorities, as their faith originated long after the emergence of Islam.

Over time, the increasing diversity within Islam itself has generated divergent views on the communities constituting the local reality.

Examining the situation in a specific region, it becomes evident that different branches of Islam may not necessarily regard other branches as equal Muslims, and the treatment of non-Muslims, even those officially recognized due to their status as "people of the book" or "protected people" (*dhimmis*), varies significantly across different regions and under various political authorities. In the book, the intricate group dynamics within Islam are illustrated in the chapter focusing on the Iranian Ismailis who adhere to the Shi'a faith, representing its branch distinct from the dominant Iranian Twelver Shi'a Muslims. Although the topic of religious identities has been overlooked by scholars for a considerable period for ethnic, national, and other identities, the contemporary world evidences how critical a role religion plays as a driving force for both majorities and minorities. Herein lies an important research area, as the validity of the religious dimension of modern identities signifies not the resurgence of traditional forms of religion but that the religious component has undergone extensive reconstruction (cf. Eisenstadt 2005).

The identities of various marginalized minorities, who strive to maintain their distinctiveness against the domination of others in different countries, are discussed in this book. As previously stated, minorities are leveraging the mobility opportunities provided by the modern world to seek a place for themselves within new socio-political contexts, with aspirations for acceptance and a tranquil existence. Consequently, the processes of identity construction evolve in tandem with changes in the group's social position and the surrounding environment of the host countries. Other communities become relevant in shaping identities, and boundaries are drawn to strike a balance between assimilating into the new society and maintaining unique identity. Thus, minorities transition into immigrant minorities, distinct from nationals. However, the underpinnings of these categories remain fluid and subject to continuous revision, as nation-building processes and policies regarding various societal members are perpetually reevaluated (Wimmer 2013, 28).

For diaspora identities, the preservation and recreation of ancestral culture are significant in new contexts. The term "diaspora" originally referred to Jewish communities in Europe, and it still raises various questions in scholarly discourse and can be defined in multiple ways. However, generally, the use of this term implies a connection between identity and ancestral territory, even if the community resides elsewhere. This also implies potential tensions between such a community and the host society. Consequently, there exists an ambivalence within diaspora identities: The pursuit for continuity and stability is intertwined with adaptation and

openness to the surrounding reality (Eriksen 2010, 186–87; cf. Cohen 2008, 1–2). Furthermore, dispersed diaspora communities, enabled by social networks and cross-border activities, have transformed into transnational communities, and this acknowledgement of multilocality and transnational awareness further modifies identities (Vertovec 2009, 5–6). Cultural, ethnic, national, religious, and other notions are recreated, achieving new meanings and locations, or losing their explanatory power within the process of identity formation.

Shakir Muhammad Usman's chapter, ***Middle Eastern Minorities: A Constant Struggle of Survival***, examines the religious minorities in the Middle East, highlighting their unique identities, efforts to endure, and involvement in the political sphere. It discusses the persecution and challenges faced by such minority groups as Yazidis, Muslims, Jews, Christians, Manicheans, and Mandeans. Stressing the significance of tackling the oppression of minorities in the Middle East, it calls for academic and international efforts to protect and promote the rights of these endangered groups.

The chapter titled ***The Baha'is of Iran: A Minority?***, authored by Moojan Momen, explores the idea of minorities and their rights through the case study of the persecution faced by the Baha'i community in Iran. It also covers the community's response to these persecutions, such as the creation of a robust network for mutual support and resilience, and the adoption of a "constructive resilience" strategy, engaging in community-building activities and working together with other social actors. Additionally, the chapter indicates how the idea of minorities can be utilized by the dominant elite to divide society.

The chapter titled ***Iranian Ismailis: A Religion in Motion; Migration, Assimilation, and Evolution*** by Mansour Anbarmoo, utilizing qualitative research findings, portrays the Iranian Ismaili minority as a global and culturally varied community. It explores the timelines and motives behind the migration of Ismailis from Iran and the characteristics of this migration. Against this backdrop, the chapter discusses how the migration of Ismailis has resulted in notable transformations (such as depoliticization, westernization, secularization, and more) in Ismailism, along with their religious practices and identity, which merge influences from both their place of origin and their destination.

The focus of the chapter titled ***The Political, Social, and Religious Dynamics of Alawites in Contemporary Turkey: Analysis of Their***

Historical Struggle and International Implications by Ali Hasannia, Zahra Fazeli, and Mohammad-Reza Fazeli is the Alawites in Turkey. The chapter investigates the historical challenges faced by this religious community over time, and delves into its political, social, and religious standing. It emphasizes the major transformations concerning the socio-political identity of Alawites, as well as the recent events that have posed challenges to their traditional religious leaders.

The chapter ***Historical Roots of Yāresān (Gorān) Religion*** by Ehsan Mahmoudiis is devoted to the Yarsan religion (also known as Ahle-Haqq) and based on interviews with community elders and desk-based research. The chapter examines the origins and beliefs of Yarsanism, underlining its uniqueness compared to the Abrahamic religions (Judaism, Christianity, Islam) and its distinct rituals and customs, which bear resemblances to Eastern religions like Hinduism and Buddhism. It addresses the misconceptions about the Yarsan religion, such as classifying its followers within other religions or sects, which arise from limited access to primary sources and the reticence of some historians due to the political and religious climates of earlier societies.

As demonstrated in this book, the study of identities in minority and diasporic contexts remains a compelling and perpetually relevant subject of academic inquiry. There is still much to uncover regarding the multicultural nature of the Middle East and the presence of its cultures in various regions around the globe.

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The Political, Social, and Religious Dynamics of Alawites in Contemporary Turkey: Analysis of Their Historical Struggle and International Implications

Ali Hasannia[1], Zahra Fazeli[2] and Mohammad-Reza Fazeli[3]

Abstract

Alawites can be regarded as the third pole of the Islamic world. They possess significant potential and a suitable demographic to influence Sunni trends in the region, while also maintaining close ties with Shi'a communities. Alawites constitute a part of Turkish society and have played interactive and conflictual roles within the political and social layers of Turkey for at least the past 700 years. Therefore, their presence in Turkish society is historical, primarily manifested in their struggle against the existing order and their conflict with the ruling political systems. This study employs an analytical approach using qualitative data obtained from library sources to examine and analyze the fate and political, social, and religious status of Alawites in Turkey, as well as its international implications over various time periods. The findings indicate that Alawites have been unable to play a decisive role in the political and social landscape of Turkey due to internal divisions and classifications. However, they have successfully established overarching goals for their identity struggle. Furthermore, for

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centuries, the strategy of Alawites has focused on survival, and they have yet to conclude that they can assume a political and religious role.

Keywords: Political Status, Social Dynamics, Islamic World, Identity Struggle, Cultural Status, Alawites in Turkey

1. Introduction

Religion, politics, and society in Turkey have always been influenced by the country's ethnic and demographic conditions. Among these, the Alawites of Turkey are considered one of the most important religious groups, playing a significant role in the country's political, social, and religious history. As part of Turkish society, Alawites have had interactive and conflictual roles in the social and political layers of the country for at least the past 700 years.

The presence of Alawites in Turkish society is historical, primarily manifested in their struggle against the existing order and conflict with ruling political systems. This historical struggle, both during the Ottoman Empire and in the formation of modern Turkey, has always placed Alawites in a decisive and influential position (Massicard 2019, 78). Throughout history, the religious and cultural identity of Alawites has faced numerous challenges, placing them in a complex situation.

In contemporary Turkey, the Alawite issue is considered one of the most complex and least understood issues. Recent research shows that despite progress made in minority rights, Alawites still face religious and social discrimination. This situation not only affects Turkey's internal dynamics but also has international implications.

From an international perspective, the situation of Alawites in Turkey has attracted the attention of the global community. Reports from human rights organizations and international institutions, including the European Union, emphasize the need for greater attention to the rights of religious minorities in Turkey, especially Alawites (European Commission 2024). This issue has influenced Turkey's relations with other countries and its position in international forums.

Alawites can be considered the third pole of the Islamic world; they possess significant potential and a suitable demographic to influence Sunni trends in the region while maintaining close ties with Shi'a communities (Olsson, 1998, 250). This unique position has placed Alawites at the center of geopolitical and religious studies in the region.

Therefore, this study, in line with the political and social analysis of Alawites, aims to examine the political, social, and religious foundations and other issues related to Alawites from various aspects, focusing on contemporary Turkey. Additionally, this study will explore the international implications of the Alawite situation in Turkey and its impact on the country's relations with other countries and international organizations.

1.1. Literature Review

Research on Alevis in Turkey can be categorized into several main themes:

a) Alevi Identity and Culture:

Jenkins et al. (2020) in "Alevism as an Ethno-Religious Identity" examine various aspects of Alevi identity in relation to religion, politics, culture, and national identity. This interdisciplinary work contributes to broader discussions on ethnicity, religion, and transnational identity. Markussen (2010) also explores the evolution of identity among Alevis as a religious minority in Turkey.

Zimmermann et al. (2019) investigate the processes of transmitting religious knowledge and Alevi rituals, considering social, cultural, and migration conditions. This research demonstrates how Alevi identity is redefined in new contexts.

Taş (2015) examines the contrasting representations of Alevism in the early writings of Stephen van Rensselaer Trowbridge, a Protestant missionary, and Baha Said Bey, a Turkish activist and researcher. This study shows how cultural and ideological motivations influenced these researchers' studies and how these works, despite their seemingly benevolent appearance, negate Alevi agency and portray them as waiting for salvation by external representatives - whether Western missionaries or the Turkish state.

b) Relations with Government and Society:

Tuğsuz (2020) explores the symbolic boundaries between Alevis and Sunnis in Turkey, showing how group perceptions influence the relationships between these two groups. This study helps to better understand the dimensions and aspects of Alevism and Sunnism.

Cansun (2014) evaluates the approach of the ruling party (Justice and Development Party) and the main opposition party (Republican People's

Party) towards Alevi demands. This research, through content analysis of two ideologically different newspapers and examination of party programs, shows that the conservative democratic party understands Alevis under the Islamic umbrella but does not accept them according to Alevi expectations.

Çarkoğlu and Bilgili (2012) examine the historical evolution of Alevis in Turkey and argue that migration to cities and the emergence of the Justice and Development Party (AKP) in 2002 created new challenges for Alevis. However, they believe that in the 21st century, the divide between Alevis and the Sunni majority has decreased, and Alevis have become more important actors in the political scene.

c) Politics and Citizenship Rights:

Boyraz (2019) argues that the emergence of Alevi identity and the collective capacity of Alevis to make demands has turned into a struggle for citizenship rights. This article shows how the demands of the Alevi community challenge Turkish secularism and citizenship regimes.

Soner and Toktas (2011) examine the process of opening up in Alevi political activities and the motivations of the Justice and Development Party to address the Alevi issue. This research shows how the Alevi issue has become an important topic in Turkish politics.

d) International Implications:

Karakaya-Stump (2018) examines the impact of Justice and Development Party policies on the situation of Alevis and its implications for Turkey's international relations. This research shows how the Alevi issue affects Turkey's image in the international community.

e) Comparative Studies:

Yılmaz and Erdem (2024) in a recent study, compare the situation of Alevis in Turkey with religious minorities in other countries in the region. They conclude that despite existing challenges, Alevis are in a relatively better position compared to some religious minorities in neighboring countries (Yılmaz & Erdem 2024, 123).

Karademir and Şen (2020), comparing the situation of Alevis with other religious minorities in Turkey, argue that the liberal multicultural understanding of minority rights may conflict with Alevi goals. This

research shows how the case of Alevis necessitates a review of the concept of group rights.

Conclusion and Relation to the Present Research:

The literature review shows that numerous studies have been conducted on identity, social relations, politics, and citizenship rights of Alevis in Turkey. However, there are gaps in the comprehensive examination of the international implications of the Alevi situation and its impact on Turkey's relations with other countries and international organizations. The present research aims to fill this gap and provide a comprehensive analysis of the current situation of Alevis in Turkey and its domestic and international implications.

1.2. Conceptualization

Alevi and Alevism are complex and multifaceted concepts that require a comprehensive definition within the historical and social context of Turkey:

Alevi literally means a follower of Ali (peace be upon him). In the Istanbul Turkish dictionary, Alevi refers to someone who "considers the fourth caliph of Islam superior to the other three caliphs and belongs to the Alevi faith". It is also stated that "Alevism means loving the fourth caliph of Islam, Ali, and following him and his descendants. Alevism is the general name for religions and sects based on this foundation" (Arkadaş Türkçe Sözlüğü, 1966, 53).

In terms of beliefs, Turkish Alevis are Twelvers and have a firm belief in the infallible Imams. Their worldview revolves around the concept of Imamate, and their perspective on the Imam is ontological (Abdollahi 2019). This view distinguishes Alevis from Shiites, as it encompasses not only religious aspects but also specific cultural and social dimensions.

In modern Turkey, despite the country's secular structure, Alevism plays a significant role in cultural and political identity. Alevis have been active participants in Turkey's political and social transformations (Çarkoğlu & Bilgili 2012).

It is important to note that there is a diversity of views and different tendencies among Alevis. Additionally, there is a close connection between Alevis and the Bektashi order, which has played a crucial role in shaping Alevi identity (Jenkins et al. 2020).

2. History of Islam and Shi'ism in Turkey

Islam and Shi'ism have a long and complex history in Turkey. The people in Turkey never achieved the necessary unity and agreement through the acceptance of a single, common religion before embracing Islam. After the Turks accepted Sunni Islam, they became acquainted with Shi'ism during the time of Khwaja Ali, the grandson of Sheikh Safi al-Din Ardabili. This acquaintance is considered a turning point in the influence of Shi'ism in Turkey. After Khwaja Ali's death, "Sheikh Shah" became the leader of the Shi'ites, and after him, his son "Junaid" took over the leadership of Shi'ites in Iran. Junaid's excessive influence and the people's affection for him led the king of Iran to exile him, and Junaid went to the Ottoman Empire (Abdollahi 2019).

When the Ghaznavids (366-583 AH) gained control over Iran, the period of Turkish domination in this land began, and Sunni Islam flourished while pressure on Shi'ism increased. However, later, during the Khwarazmian and Seljuk periods, the influence of Shi'ite figures in the government apparatus led many Turks to convert to Shi'ism.

During the Safavid era, especially during the reign of Shah Ismail, Shi'ism expanded significantly in Turkey. Shah Ismail was the most successful Safavid king in spreading Shi'ism in Iran and neighboring countries. When he ascended to the throne, he officially declared Shi'ism as the state religion in Iran and gained many supporters in the Turkey region. During this period, Shi'ism in Turkey manifested in two forms: the Qizilbash, who were affiliated with the Ardabil lodge and followed Ismail, and the Bektashi, who were affiliated with the lodge of Haji Bektash Veli and whose guide was "Balim Sultan" (Jenkins et al. 2020).

The growing strength of Shah Ismail and his spiritual influence among the Turkmen of Turkey frightened the Ottomans. As a result, Bayezid II exiled many Shi'ites to Morea, Crete, Modon, and Coron. During the reign of Sultan Selim I in the Ottoman Empire, the influence of Shi'ism in Turkey was so great that even some Ottoman princes joined the ranks of the Qizilbash. Sultan Selim I took strict measures against the Shi'ites, including issuing a fatwa against the Qizilbash by Sheikh al-Islam Ibn Kemal and ordering the execution of many people. He also considered war with Shah Ismail, which led to the Battle of Chaldiran (Çarkoğlu & Bilgili 2012). Sultan Selim had two main objectives in this war: first, to purge Ottoman lands of Shi'ite influence and dominate Greater Khorasan, and second, to transfer the caliphate to the Ottoman dynasty by conquering Egypt. Both of

his goals were achieved through the Battle of Chaldiran, and he was able to prevent the spread of Shi'ism in Turkey.

After the fall of the Safavid state, the Shi'ites of Turkey gradually distanced themselves from Iran. Some Imami Shi'ites, under pressure from Sunni rulers in the Levant, took refuge in inaccessible mountainous areas or non-Muslim towns. This separation and pressure paved the way for the formation of distinct Shi'ite communities in Turkey. Over time, the beliefs of these groups were influenced by the beliefs of other religions, sects, and prevalent ideas (Abolghasemi & Ardoush, 1378, 140).

Today, the Ja'fari Shi'ite population in Turkey is estimated to be around 4 to 6 million. Most of them are of Azeri ethnicity and are scattered throughout various regions of Turkey. The geographical distribution of Ja'fari Shi'ites in Turkey includes eastern and northeastern Turkey along the borders with Iran, Armenia, and Nakhchivan, northwestern Turkey, central Turkey (with the largest concentration in Ankara), and western Turkey (Sobhani & Parvand, 1994, 2 & 88).

This history demonstrates that the Shi'ite community in Turkey is the result of complex interactions between religious, political, and social factors over centuries. Understanding this historical background is essential for comprehending the current position of Shi'ites in Turkish society (Yılmaz & Erdem 2024).

3. Alevis in Turkey

Alevis are one of the most important religious groups in Turkey, playing a significant role in the country's history and contemporary society. According to recent estimates, the Alevi population in Turkey is estimated to be around 15 to 20 million people, although there are no precise statistics in this regard. This statistical uncertainty is due to the lack of religious questions in official censuses and the historical practice of taqiyya (dissimulation) among Alevis. Some researchers believe that Alevis constitute about one-third of Turkey's population (See: Zelut 2002).

The historical roots of Alevis date back to the eleventh century CE, when Shi'ism spread among the nomadic communities of Anatolia. During the Ottoman Empire, due to the connection of some Alevis with the Safavid state in Iran, they were persecuted and took refuge in remote and mountainous areas. This historical isolation had a profound impact on Alevi culture and beliefs, leading to the formation of a distinct identity. The

concealment of Shi'ite and Alevi religious beliefs and their practice of taqiyya, as well as their isolation, led to severe scientific poverty and illiteracy among them. The terms Alevi and Shi'ite were synonymous with infidelity, atheism, and irreligion during the Ottoman era. After the Ottoman rule and with the establishment of the republic in Turkey, Alevis gradually emerged from their hiding places and returned to the social scene. Although Turkish Alevis are Twelver Shi'ites, unlike Iranians, they do not have an organized and cohesive clergy. They also have another difference with their Iranian brothers: Alevi theology, due to its independent religious upbringing, added quite unexpected topics to the religion and sanctified certain personalities (Toual, 1380).

3.1. Racial Structure of Alevis

The Alevis living in Turkey are divided into three main racial groups: Turkmens, Kurds, and Zazas.

a) Turkmens

Turkmens are a branch of the Turkish race, also called Oghuz. They accepted Islam in the second half of the 10th century CE. Those groups of Oghuz who became Muslims were called Turkmen, while the non-Muslims among them remained known as Oghuz. This naming became prevalent after the 13th century (Üzüm, 1997, 13). Among those who chose Alevism, some migrated to Iran (some stayed there, and some returned after a while), and the majority remained in Anatolia. The groups that are currently living in Anatolia are divided into three:

1. Çepnis: They are mentioned in the Velayetname of Haci Bektas Veli and are associated with the Üç-Ok branch of the Oghuz. They migrated to the east during the early Seljuk conquest of Anatolia. Some settled in the Empire of Trebizond region and were later confined after the capture of Sinop. Today, Çepnis live in various regions of Trabzon, Giresun, Tirebolu, and Görele.

2. Tahtacis: They live in the western and southern mountainous and forested areas of Anatolia. Their name comes from their occupation of woodcutting and woodworking. Tahtacis are found in various provinces including Adana, Maraş, İçel, Antalya, Burdur, Isparta, Denizli, Muğla, Aydın, İzmir, Balıkesir, and the Thrace region of Turkey.

3. Bedis: They are from the Bozok branch of Turkmens, and a significant portion of them are Alevis. They played a role in the establishment of the Safavid state (Eyyüboğlu 1993, 297).

b) Kurds

According to some researchers, one-third of the Kurds living in Turkey are Alevis. Currently, they are scattered in cities such as Bingöl (especially in the districts of Karlıova and Kiğı), Tunceli, Erzincan, Sivas, and Yozgat (Üzüm, 1997, 17).

c) Zazas

There is debate about whether Zazas are a separate ethnic group or a subgroup of Kurds. They have their own distinct language, which shares similarities with Kurdish. Some Zazas are Sunni, while others are Alevi. Alevi Zazas live in regions from the Munzur Mountains in the north to the Murat River, and in areas to the right of the Euphrates River from the Bingöl Mountains to the Malatya Valley (Üzüm, 1997, 17).

d) Arabs

In the southern part of Turkey, bordering Syria, in the cities of Hatay and Adana, there are Alevis of Arab descent. Although their population is smaller compared to other ethnic groups, they are known for their grand celebration of Eid al-Ghadir in Hatay, which is unique in Turkey both in terms of quantity and quality. This celebration involves thousands of participants and includes invitations to Sunni muftis and government officials (Üzüm 1997, 17).

3.2. Beliefs of Alevis

From a doctrinal perspective, Alevis in Turkey share common principles with other Muslims, but their interpretation and implementation differ. The main doctrinal principles of Alevis include Tawhid (Oneness of God), Adl (Divine Justice), Nubuwwah (Prophethood), Imamah (Leadership), and Ma'ad (Resurrection).

a) Tawhid (Oneness of God)

Alevis believe in the existence of God, who is unique and has no partners or equals. They believe that God created both the material and immaterial worlds and is omnipotent and omniscient. God is not separate from

anything, needs nothing, and is beyond our description (Özdemir 1998, 71). This belief is summarized in the phrase "La ilaha illa Allah" (There is no god but Allah) and forms the foundation of all Muslim beliefs and is the key to paradise (Kılıçoğlu 1998, 17).

b) Adl (Divine Justice)

This is the belief in divine justice and being just. One who is not just cannot be a Muslim. God rejects oppression and oppressors (Kaya 1989, 39).

Justice means believing and having faith that God does not oppress anyone and that God is free from evils and wrongs that a sound mind can perceive (Kılıçoğlu 1998, 23).

c) Nubuwwah (Prophethood)

Prophethood is a divine duty and divine representation. God appoints some people to guide His servants to the right path, teach them beneficial rules for this world and the hereafter, purify them from evils and corrupt customs, and make them wise and knowledgeable. The prophets' duty, in addition to conveying God's commands and prohibitions to people, is to be good examples for people. The first of them was Adam, the first human and prophet, and the last of them was Prophet Muhammad (Kılıçoğlu 1998, 21).

d) Imamah (Leadership)

One of the principles of Alevi belief is Imamah, which means belief in the twelve Imams. The prophet's duty is to preach and warn. It is divine tradition that after each messenger, God sends one or more prophets to preserve the religion and guide people to the right path. But since no prophet comes after the Messenger of God (Muhammad), those who protect the religion and guide people to the right path are the Imams (Özdemir 1998, 75-76).

In the school of Ahl al-Bayt, an Imam is someone appointed by God through the prophets as a successor to guide and lead the community after the prophet. Especially after the last prophet, Muhammad, passed away and no prophet will come after him, this duty was given to his successors by God's will and through our prophet to preserve this religion and transmit it purely to future generations (Kılıçoğlu 1998, 24).

e) Ma'ād (Resurrection)

In Alevism, belief in the afterlife is also fundamental, and belief in resurrection and life after death is considered one of the principles of the Alevi faith. Resurrection in the Alevi view is the belief in the Day of Judgment, accountability, heaven, and hell. Resurrection means believing in the Day of Judgment and being resurrected. Belief in the afterlife means believing in resurrection after death and punishment or reward for the deeds done in this world (Nouri Donmez 2005, 158-161).

4. Understanding the Political and Social Developments of Alevis in Turkey

To understand the political and social position of a social or religious group, we must first understand the identity of that group and its doctrinal principles. This allows us to know, firstly, what distinguishes their identity from other groups and what effects this distinct identity has on their position in the system of political and social privileges. Secondly, how governments have dealt with this particular group throughout history. Therefore, we will examine the reasons and ways in which historical factors have influenced the political and social position of Alevis in Turkey's power and political system.

4.1. Alevis in the Ottoman Period

It is a historical and undeniable fact that the Anatolian Alevis were oppressed under the dominant Sunni majority and their governments. This issue reached its peak during the Ottoman period. The Ottoman government was a fanatical Sunni orthodox state that claimed Islamic caliphate, and it was evidently alienated from a group like the Alevis with their unique identity. The Ottoman government did not recognize Alevis and believed that all Muslims should perform religious rituals. For this reason, during the Ottoman rule, Alevis preferred to settle and live in rural areas of central Anatolia, concealing their religious beliefs and refraining from performing their rituals in areas where Sunnis were present. This issue also became one of the important factors in reducing Alevis' attention to jurisprudence and Sharia, leading to the forgetting of jurisprudence in their subsequent generations (Özyüksel 2004, 64).

Given that politics and power were completely in the hands of Sunnis, and classical Turkish governments imposed serious discrimination against Alevis, the Alevis of Turkey in the classical Islamic era or during the Seljuk and Ottoman periods always had an oppositional attitude towards the

existing government and were considered rebellious opponents of the status quo. Alevi rebellions against the extortion and inequalities of existing governments, such as the Baba Ishak rebellion and the Pir Sultan Abdal uprising, are examples of Turkish Alevi protest movements against the existing Sunni orthodox order (Talhamy 2008, 42-94).

The oppression of Alevis during the Ottoman period has been further elaborated in recent scholarship. Karakaya-Stump (2019) argues that the formation of Kizilbash-Alevi identity was largely a response to confessional and persecutory pressures in the sixteenth century. However, she also reveals that Alevis developed strategies to interact with and accommodate themselves within the Ottoman state apparatus, challenging the notion of constant persecution (Karakaya-Stump 2019).

4.2. Alevis at the Beginning of the Republican Era and the Single-Party Period

With the decline and subsequent fall of the Ottoman Empire, the new country of Turkey was established as the main heir to this empire. The period from 1923 to 1950, marked by the rule of Atatürk's Republican People's Party, is known in Turkish political literature as the single-party era. The elites and founders of the new Turkey took serious measures to reduce the influence of religion in the public, political, social, and cultural spheres. The abolition of the caliphate, the closure of several religious institutions, and the inclusion of the principle of laicism in the 1937 constitution were among the important actions of the newly established state to reduce the influence of religion in the public sphere.

The establishment of the Turkish Republic coincided with Turkey's liberation from the old Ottoman system and the definition of a nation-state based on national values or secularist foundations. As a result, Alevis entered the scene as supporters of the republic, firstly because this republic was secular and not religious, and secondly because Atatürk's free and Turkish approaches were highly compatible with the humanistic values inherent in the Alevi tradition (Okan 2004, 95).

Although the closure of religious and worship places such as Alevi Cem houses was part of the Kemalists' general policies, because these policies led to the weakening of Sunni religion in the public sphere, it reduced the sensitivities of Alevis. The weakening of Sunnism and Ottomanism, the ideology responsible for Alevi genocides in the era of sultans, was a kind of breathing space and fresh air for Anatolian Alevis.