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**Editorial of Special Issue of National Identities: Alevism as an  
ethno-religious identity: Contested boundaries**

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## **Editorial**

Celia Jenkins, Suavi Aydın, and Umit Cetin

### **Alevis: Trans/national ethno-religious identities and belonging**

This special issue on Alevism and trans/national Alevi identity critically engages with the relationship between religion, ethnicity and national identity. The core issues are as follows:

- how ethnicity and religion are conceptualised for a relatively invisible ethnic group in different national contexts;
- how religion and ethnicity intersect when Alevism is both a faith and an ethnic identity, especially when conceptions of that identity are contested;
- how identity is shaped through state policies within different national policy contexts and how etic definitions of minority communities are constructed by the state or other agencies with the power to impose them on the community in contrast to the emic or self-definitions of Aleviness from within the Alevi community;
- how despite the fragmented, heterogeneous nature of Alevi communities, there is also a sense of a single, transnational imaginary community, at least for the purposes of political assimilation/integration and activism;
- how education and other arenas of political, religious and cultural engagement at local, national and transnational levels create the possibilities, both positively and negatively, for future action/policy to situate minority ethnic communities.

Within the rapidly expanding field of Middle Eastern Studies, this special issue on Alevis contributes to debates on ethnicity, religion and national identity, using the case of Alevis to integrate a national and transnational perspective. Religion and ethnicity are both fundamental aspects of national identity and, in the current global context, the clash between religion, ethnicity and national identity has become particularly volatile as an integrative or divisive force. This is especially the case in the Middle East from where many Alevi communities originate. Currently, an awareness of Syrian Alawites has led to some confusion about whether they are the same ethnicity as Alevis. ‘Alevi’

is generally seen as an umbrella term used to refer to a distinct ethno-religious group mainly residing in central Turkey, but also extending to the Balkans and the Middle East. The Alevi community share some similarities with the 'Alawites' in Syria, but the latter mostly identify religiously with Shia Islam, whereas the association with Shia Islam is much more contested among Alevis, ranging from a recognition of an affinity or even identity with Shia Islam to an insistence on its non-Islamic distinctiveness. However, politically, the allegiances between them are more fluid depending on the context, especially as the Turkish ruling party, the AKP (Justice and Development Party) is pursuing a national and international Sunni Islam-based politics which works against both the Alawites and Alevis, who are united in their opposition to Sunni Islam. The Syrian conflict has led to an intensification of sectarianism not only between religious and ethnic groups but also within the state politics of the surrounding countries (Phillips 2015; Altug 2013).

Whereas much research on ethnic groups can apply clear-cut concepts of either ethnicity or religion to describe them, Alevis cannot be simply confined within one of these categories alone. Instead, an intersectional approach is required which embraces ethnic, religious, cultural, political and other dimensions. Depending on the context, Alevism can refer to three different types of identity: ethnic, religious or ethno-religious. Aydin (this issue) expands the concept of ethnicity in relation to the history of Alevi communities as something that has been both ethnically and religiously shaped, and with this in mind develops a broader understanding of ethnic boundaries as fluid and contingent on the wider historical and socio-political context. What is particularly challenging about studying Alevism as a social formation and identity is its fluidity since there is no agreed definition of Alevism or Alevi identity. This makes it difficult, if not impossible, to pin down the exact origins and doctrines of Alevism and to define its geographical boundaries; but these difficulties are important in understanding its contemporary meanings as a cultural, political or religious identity.

This special issue introduces articles from the emergent, interdisciplinary field of Alevi studies in Turkey and the UK which employ theoretically and empirically dynamic understandings of the diverse ethno-religious identities encompassed by the term 'Alevi' and the impact they have. The Alevis in Turkey offer an interesting case given the intersection between ethnicity, religion and national identity, particularly in relation to Turkey's reputation as a 'laicist' country where religious neutrality is supposedly observed (Karakas, 2007). However, as Karakas points out, Turkey is now

officially described as 99% Muslim and the state actively promotes a national identity based on ethnic Turkishness and Sunni Islam which excludes other ethnic and religious minorities. This is reinforced by the national identity cards which automatically state 'Islam' under the category of religion unless a person specifically requests that it be removed and even then the indication of 'Alevi' is not allowed, despite the fact that the European Court of Human Rights granted Alevis the right to register Alevi instead of Islam (Council of Europe/European Court of Human Rights, 2011). In exploring the case of the Alevis, it is interesting to see how their preferred identity is religious, but they can be both integrated and excluded within Turkish society depending on whether and how their ethnic or religious identification is articulated. While the majority of the approximately fifteen to twenty million Alevis in Turkey<sup>1</sup> are ethnically Turkish, about three to five million are ethnically Kurdish or Zaza and as Alevi Kurds are a 'twice minority' (Cetin, 2014). When Turkishness is emphasised as the dominant identity there is some common ground ethnically on which the Turkish Alevis can align themselves with the national hegemonic identity and thus gain limited concessions in support of their religious differences. There are also approximately twelve to twenty million Kurds in Turkey, of which approximately fifteen million are Sunni Muslim, and so can align themselves with the national identity through religion. However, this option is not open to the Alevi Kurds who cannot be accommodated within this framing of national identity and have as a result experienced persistent persecution for their faith and ethnicity, especially since the sixteenth-century Ottoman Empire, a persecution that continues to this day (see Aydin and Karakaya-Stump this issue).

The religious identity of Alevism is a source of controversy with tensions emerging in the political context in terms of whether it can be linked to Shia Islam or whether it is seen as an entirely distinctive syncretic religion (see Aydin and Okan, this issue). However, it is not the purpose here to define whether Alevism lies inside or outside Islam, although it is important that the articles do cover the spectrum of definitions; rather the aim is to examine the construction of Alevi identity in terms of its local, national and transnational political, cultural, social and religious dimensions. Without wishing to enter into theological debates, the interest here is in how religious identities intersect with ethnic and national struggles around identity in Turkey and abroad. Definitions of Alevi identity are neither fixed nor unitary in terms of what 'Aleviness' means and depends partly on who is defining it. Instead there is a spectrum of types of Alevi identities that range from conventional religious identities associated with Shia

Islam to modernist secular, leftist political identities which are not interested in the religious dimension (Tekdemir, this issue). There has also been a more recent revival of a distinctive Alevi politicised religious identity emerging in political movements in Turkey and the diaspora that aims to make Alevi identity more visible and to form the basis of a campaign to expose discrimination and the promotion of their rights (Tekdemir, this issue; and see also Karakaya-Stump, Okan, Emre-Cetin and Keles this issue). In the intersection between religion, culture and politics, Okan's analysis of gender equality in Turkey explores the links between the Turkish Republic's modernist view of women and the claims of gender equality within Alevism (seen by Alevis as an important aspect of their distinctive identity) but suggests that neither the Turkish State nor the Alevis have achieved it.

The articles on Turkey show how Alevis have been subject to the assimilationist policies of the state which have led to the persecution of Alevis and the construction of negative discourses around their identity. As a result many Alevis have hid their identity. Tekdemir and Karakaya-Stump analyse the assimilationist state policies against Alevis, while Emre-Cetin in her article on the making of a transnational Alevi identity touches upon how Alevis are represented in Turkish national television dramas. Karakaya-Stump's analysis focuses on the AKP's education policy and the role of religious education in constructing and reproducing the national Turkish Sunni identity and how this will negatively impact on the future prospects for Alevi children. Conversely, in the diaspora, such as Germany and the UK, where many Alevis migrated as political refugees, Jenkins and Cetin demonstrate how education has been mobilised more positively to assist the integration of Alevi pupils through religious education that specifically includes Alevism. The extent to which Alevis can express their identity and make demands on the state is contested in the articles with Tekdemir offering a new conception of political activism and process that is more inclusive, whereas Emre-Cetin promotes the importance of the transnational political imaginary where Alevis in the diaspora can mobilise support and campaigns to challenge the Turkish government's discrimination against them. This is supported by Keles' analysis of how diasporic Alevi communities mobilise their faith as a form of capital to achieve material and non-material objectives in their country of settlement and transnationally. The articles engage with the emic and etic definitions of Alevi identity and how Alevi communities define themselves and how they engage politically at the local level, nationally in

Turkey and transnationally in their diasporic countries of settlement, and how they envisage their future as a social and political movement.

### **The field of Alevi Studies in Turkey and the UK**

This special issue captures the emergent international inter-disciplinary field of Alevi Studies whose origins have three main strands. Firstly, there are the monographs written throughout the twentieth century on the religious aspect of Alevism written by Alevi-Bektaşî *dedes* (religious leaders) and researchers. Early studies by European researchers such as the German orientalist Franz Babinger (1921, 1922), F. W. Hasluck (1921, 1929), and J. K. Birge (1937) from the UK are examples of this approach which also examine the religion's Ottoman syncretism and the *Bektaşî tekkes* (dervish lodges). Within this tradition lie also the work of Fuad Köprülü (1918, 1926, 1929) and Rıza Tevfik Bölükbaşı (1914-1922) who wrote a history of Sufism and folk literature concentrating on Alevi-Bektasi. There has also been an increase from the 1980s onwards in studies of the history and genealogy of Alevism undertaken by Alevi non-academic researchers.

The second strand is of historical research from a nationalist perspective which traces the origins of Turkish ethnicity and culture. As an example, there is the early twentieth-century study by Baha Said (1926a, 1926b, 1927) on Alevi-Bektaşî communities in which he traces the formation of the ethnic composition of Anatolia. From the late 1970s, Ahmet Yaşar Ocak (1980, 1983, 1992, 1998, 2009, 2011) and Suraiya Faroqhi (1975, 1981) introduced their ground-breaking research on the Turkish heterodoxy and Sufism, although the history of Sufism in Ottoman times was pioneered by the Russian-born French Turkologist Irène Mélikoff (1999). The next generation, like Ocak and Faroqhi, used their historical research to rebut the conservative nationalist historicism which had marginalised Alevis by attempting to prove that the heterodox pastoral-nomad groups in Ottoman times were really Sunnis. Within this conservative and nationalist tradition, the sociologist Mehmet Eröz (1977) claimed that Alevism is a pure Turkic faith which was carried from Inner Asia and uses his argument to criticise Alevi youth who affiliated to the leftist movement of the 1960s and 1970s and whom he identified as misguided in their anti-nationalist politics.

The third strand consists of the anthropological/ethnographic studies of Alevi village communities and their adaptation following their migration to urban areas in the 1980s. The British social anthropologist, David Shankland (2003), studied an Alevi village in

Turkey as an example of the emergence of a heterodox Islamic community while there has been an increasing number of studies concerned with the problems of urban Alevi in terms of identity and recognition and the ways in which Alevi accommodate to the changing socio-political context (for example, Karaosmanoğlu, 2013; Kaleli, Okan, 2004; 2000; Üzümlü, 1999; Yavuz, 1999; and Ollson *et al*,1999).

However, there are still many areas within these strands of research that require attention, such as the history of religious orders, the change in heterodoxy in the rural Ottoman Empire after the sixteenth century, the relationship between the state and the community, the history of particular Alevi *ocaks* (hearths) and *dergâhs* (lodges), and the assimilation of Alevi since the nineteenth century.

Research in the UK on Alevism began in the 2000s with research on migration from Turkey, refugees and diasporic identity (Demir 2012; Griffiths, 2002; Atay 2002; Gül, 1999 and Wahlbeck, 1999); but such research predominantly used ethnicity as the main conceptual tool, by which the migrants were defined as either Turkish or Kurdish speaking, Kurds or Turks, while their Aleviness was only mentioned briefly. More recent research has been more detailed around Alevi identity and communities (Akdemir 2015; Keles, 2014; Geaves, 2003;) and Cetin (2014) conducted an ethnography of the London Alevi community and its response to the rising incidence of suicide amongst second-generation young men, linking it to transnational identities.

### **The current context**

At the time of writing (early 2016) this special issue is timely because the Syrian crisis has highlighted the importance of religious and ethnic conflicts that transcend national boundaries. The Syrian war has intensified global fears of Islamic fundamentalism, especially regarding the activities of ISIS, which have been felt worldwide. The Turkish government is playing a leading role both in mobilising international attacks on Syria and in supporting Islamist groups based there who are opposed to the Syrian regime (Graeber 2015, see also Karakaya-Stump and Keles this issue). There is a belief among Alevi communities worldwide that the Turkish government's involvement in Syria is part of their wider neo-Ottomanist project, based on intensifying Sunni Islam domestically and abroad, and the reason why the Turkish government is so opposed to the Syrian regime of Assad. The Syrian war and the related Sunni-Islamic oriented domestic and international politics of the Turkish state have deepened and intensified fear amongst the Alevi communities and have forced many Alevi to support the Syrian

regime and also to support the Kurds who are fighting against ISIS. For this reason, the Alevi population have been amongst the first to protest against Western and Turkish support for groups fighting the Assad regime whom they see as radical Islamists. Indeed, recent worldwide terrorist attacks, especially in Suruc, Ankara and Paris can be seen to confirm the fears of the Alevi community concerning these Islamists groups; a fear also reflected in the recent change of attitude amongst Western powers and their increasingly ambiguous position with regard to the Assad regime, and in the Russian government's bombing of ISIS strongholds in Syria and other groups opposed to Assad. The latter has created an escalation in tension between Turkey and Russia while there are claims and counter-claims as to whether Turkey has been supporting radical Islamist groups in Syria, including ISIS.

Whilst some articles in this special issue touch upon the contemporary political situation in Syria and the Turkish government's approach to it (see Karakaya-Stump and Keles), the analyses of the Alevi communities in Turkey that follow demonstrate the historical continuities in the treatment of Alevis as a 'suspect community' (Cetin 2014, Hickman *et al* 2011) and their persecution by the Turkish state that goes back to at least the fifteenth century. But by moving beyond Turkey to also include the diasporic Alevi communities, this special issue draws together articles from different disciplines and perspectives to highlight the complex dimensions of national and transnational identities. The articles are by no means exhaustive, but are rather illustrative of recent work which contributes to wider theoretical debates and empirical research concerning ethnicity, religion and trans/national identity; for there is plenty of scope for on-going research on Alevis in Turkey, in diasporic communities, and their transnational political engagements within and across ethno-religious boundaries.

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## Notes

1. The size of the Alevi population is approximate because there are no demographic statistics on Alevi populations worldwide. No official data is collected in Turkey as Alevis are not recognised as a separate religious group but are subsumed under Islam, while Alevis are also invisible in diasporic countries where they are assumed to be ethnically Turkish (see Jenkins and Cetin, this issue for more details).



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