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Alevi Opening and the Democratization Initiative in Turkey

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CONTENTS

1. CONTEXTUALIZING THE ISSUE	6
2. THE JUSTICE AND DEVELOPMENT PARTY (JDP)-ALEVI RELATIONS AND THE ALEVI OPENING	9
3. WHAT DO ALEVIS ASK FOR?	10
4. WHAT ARE THE OBSTACLES FOR A BROADER RECONCILIATION?	12
4.1. PSYCHOCULTURAL OBSTACLES	13
4.2. SOCIAL AND NORMATIVE OBSTACLES	14
4.3. LEGAL OBSTACLES	15
4.4. POLITICAL OBSTACLES	17
5. A PRACTICAL AGENDA FOR REFORMS	19
5.1. LEGAL AND POLITICAL REFORMS	19
5.2. TRANSFORMING THE PUBLIC DISCOURSES	20
5.3. EXPECTATIONS FROM THE ALEVI LEADERSHIP	20
6. CONCLUSION	21
APPENDIX: ALEVI IDENTITY-BASED CLAIMS	22

ABSTRACT

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 Alevis that have existed for centuries 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.

The JDP government has undertaken a series of steps to understand and respond to Alevi identity-based claims. Popularly known as the “Alevi opening” (Alevi açılımı), the initiative is a turning point in terms of the Turkish governments’ approach to problems of Alevi citizens in Turkey. The Alevi Opening is the first systematic effort to address Alevis’ identity-based contentions. This step is also part of the broader policy of “Democratic Opening,” which addresses the burning problems of various ethnic and religious groups (Kurds, Alevis, religious minorities, and the Romani people) in Turkey. The objective of “Democratic Opening” is to reconcile the Turkish state and the marginalized segments of Turkish society.

This brief provides an analytic background for understanding the governing JDP’s “Alevi opening” initiative, which was launched in the summer of 2007. The issues mentioned in the list of Alevi identity-based claims, obstacles to the fulfillment of these issues, and the methods and the processes of the ongoing Alevi Opening are elaborated. This analysis argues that only a holistic intervention can bring about a sustainable reconciliation process between the Alevis and the Turkish state establishment as well as between the Alevi and Sunni citizens. In order to provide a holistic analysis, political, legal, psychological, cultural dynamics of the Alevi issue are emphasized here. Intervention insights and policy recommendations are formulated, consistent with the analytic perspective.

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Since coming to power in 2002, the Justice and Development Party (JDP) government has introduced a number of reforms to democratize the political system in Turkey, which has faced resistance from political opposition as well as the bureaucratic establishment. After a second consecutive electoral victory in 2007, the JDP government has undertaken a series of steps to understand and respond to Alevi identity-based claims. Popularly known as the “Alevi opening” (Alevi açılımı), the initiative is a turning point in terms of the Turkish governments’ approach to problems of Alevi citizens in Turkey. The Alevi Opening is the first systematic effort to address Alevis’ identity-based contentions. This step is also part of the broader policy of “Democratic Opening,” which addresses the burning problems of various ethnic and religious groups (Kurds, Alevis, religious minorities, and the Romani people) in Turkey. The objective of “Democratic Opening” is to reconcile the Turkish state and the marginalized segments of Turkish society.

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1. CONTEXTUALIZING THE ISSUE

Alevis, one of the largest 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 the estimates range from 5 million to 25 million. Arguments about the population of Alevi citizens are part of identity politics; therefore, it is better to assume a population somewhere between those two figures. 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 contexts². Specific rituals and cultural practices 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 Alevis that have existed for centuries 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 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 Alevi identity and institutions and acknowledgement of grievances caused by the Turkish state. There is a wide range of disagreements among the urban Alevi groups about almost all aspects of social and political issues, including the very definition of Alevism itself, however, 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.

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According to the 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. Alevi identity, culture, and institutions were either denied recognition or assimilated into the majority Sunni identity during this era. Throughout the early years of the Turkish Republic, the 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. The Dersim episode of 1937-38⁴ was an exception, where tribalism and ethnic identity also played role in the rebellion.

1. I prefer analytically to use the concept of “communal group identity” to define Alevis 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” in *Leashing the Dogs of War: Conflict Management in a Divided World*, Chester A. Crocker et.al. (eds.), pp.131-160 (2007); “Why Minorities Rebel: A Global Analysis of Communal Mobilization and Conflict since 1945,” *International Political Science Review*, 14 (2), pp. 161-201 (1993).

2. Krisztina Kehl-Bodrogi, “Tarih Mitosu 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 Üzüm, -. 1997. *Günümüz Aleviliği*. İstanbul: Türkiye Diyanet Vakfı İSAM Yayınları; David Shankland. 2003. *The Alevis in Turkey: The emergence of a secular Islamic tradition* Routledge Curzon; Tord Olsson, E. Özdalga, and C. Raudvere (eds.). 1998. *Alevi identity: Cultural, religious and social perspectives*. Routledge Curzon.

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

The discourse of loyalty of the “Republican values” was based on the Alevi’s ability to embrace secular values and to abandon their traditional attachments. 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 the Republican Turkey either. There were legal and institutional barriers against the traditional Alevi institutions, there were also prevailing cultural biases against the Alevi at the social level. No specific effort has been spared to address the identity-based discontents of the 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 Today, the majority of the Alevi population lives in cities and is getting organized around new forms of institutions. This process of modernization and rapid urbanization has a tremendous impact on the meaning and implications of the Alevi identity. 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 get recognized and accepted as equal actors by the Turkish state as well as by the other social and political actors and groups in Turkey.

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, Alevi 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. Although the earlier Alevi movement was initiated during the 1960s, many Alevi in urban contexts were more active in left-wing political activism until the early 1980s. The September 12, 1980 coup curtailed ideological activism and the fall of the Berlin Wall further restricted the ideological struggle. These transformations paved the way for Alevi identity politics.

Within this new context, Alevi identity politics formulated certain demands. Starting from the late 1980’s, academic and popular literature on Alevism has often referred to as the “Alevi revival.” The “revival/transformation” has manifested itself in the forms of heightened group consciousness, greater ease to express their identity in the public sphere, increased public visibility, and making claims over 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 could not find any official support, consequently, Alevi citizens occasionally resorted to the ECHR (European Court of Human Rights) to publicize their concerns.⁶

The primary objective of the “Alevi Opening” by the current JDP government is to bridge the emotional and perceived barriers between the Alevi citizens and the Turkish state as well as between Alevi and Sunni citizens, thereby, creating an environment conducive to a deeper level of 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 Alevi. A verbal apology for the oppressions and direct violence that the Alevi 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

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*, 41(6), pp. 937-951 (2005) ; Necdet Subaşı, “Sırrı fâş eylemek: Alevi modernleşmesi,” İstanbul: Ufuk Çizgisi (2008); Nail Yılmaz, “Kentin Alevileri: Reşadiye İkitelli örneği,” Kitabevi: İstanbul (2005).

6. Two major cases where Alevi citizens resorted to ECHR 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 the Alevi citizens as the representative of state for the past victimhood that the ancestors of the 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

Alevi requests has been clearly voiced by Prime Minister Erdoğan and his cabinet ministers. The leaders of the Alevi community and Alevi associations have been recognized by the government. Currently, a set of legal reforms are being publicly discussed.

The “Alevi Opening” of the government is a belated yet sincere 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 demands directly to the 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 government⁸. Workshops also raised public consciousness and awareness of the Sunni citizens about the contentions of Alevi citizens.

2. THE JUSTICE AND DEVELOPMENT PARTY (JDP)-ALEVI RELATIONS AND THE ALEVI OPENING

The JDP-Alevi relations, which had for a long time been in a stalemate situation, have become much more dynamic with the AK Party’s second term in government, starting from July 22, 2007. The new approach by the JDP can be described as an Alevi engagement policy. High-ranking politicians and statesmen, including President Abdullah Gül, Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, and other cabinet members made many symbolic yet important gestures. The majority of Alevi leaders responded to this engagement positively, although there is still a wide range of skepticism within the Alevi community about the objectives and approaches of the “Alevi Opening.”⁹

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In terms of addressing an identity-based problem, this is a rare moment. Yet, the Alevi opening was not received as positively as one would expect by the Alevi citizens mainly because the policy is 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.¹⁰ A more striking finding, according to this report, was the response given to the question, “Is JDP’s Alevi opening a policy of Sunnification?” 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.”¹¹ Opinions of Alevi citizens about the recent opening reflect a deep mistrust towards the governing party.¹² The roots of this mistrust lie in historical experiences as well as the prevailing psychological and cultural barriers, which will be elaborated below.

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

9. “AKP’ye Alevi öfkesi,” *Radikal*, February 04, 2008; “Aleviler çalıştay için umutsuz,” *Milliyet*, June 7, 2009; “Aydınlardan Alevi çağırısı,” *Milliyet*, November 7, 2008.

10. *Alevi Raporu*, Stratejik Düşünce Enstitüsü, Ankara, November 2009, p. 50.

11. *Alevi Raporu*, Stratejik Düşünce Enstitüsü, Ankara, November 2009, p. 56.

12. Alevi Bektaşî Federation (ABF) defines JDP’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) on February 2008 to protest JDP’s Alevi opening, “AKP’ye Alevi öfkesi,” *Radikal*, February 4, 2008.

On the one hand, there had never been an inter-communal confrontation and violence between the Alevi and Sunni communities with the exception of the ideological polarization in the 1970s and 80s. On the other hand, prevalence of stereotypes, biases, and misinformation between the Alevis and Sunnis is still an obstacle to inter-communal integration. 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. In terms of the state (Ottoman and Turkish Republic)-Alevi relations, the opening process should be considered as a historical breakthrough. Alevi communal leaders and their identity-based demands are gradually being recognized by the government. The early steps of the governing JDP's Alevi engagement policy included nomination and election of MP's Reha Çamuroğlu and İbrahim Yiğit on the JDP ticket, who are known in public sphere for their Alevi identity. 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 in 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 same qibla, we should not put the blame of history on each other
Our path, our guides and our destinations are the same.¹³"

Besides the symbolic gestures and embracing speeches, a series of Alevi workshops were also set up. The Ministry of State initiated the 7-step Alevi workshop series.¹⁴ The Minister of State, Faruk Çelik, was present in all 7 workshops. The workshop series were intended to incorporate into the engagement process a multiplicity of related actors and stakeholders. The 7th workshop was a three-day evaluation and synthesis workshop, which took place in Kızılcahamam, Ankara on January, 28-30 2010.¹⁵ The final report of the workshops will be presented to Prime Minister Erdoğan and his ministers.

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.

With the ongoing Alevi initiative, official authorities directly engaged with the representatives of the Alevi community and the 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.

3. WHAT DO ALEVIS ASK FOR?

The motto of the November 9, 2008 Alevi meeting was "equal citizenship rights under the rule of law." "Democracy, rule of law, and the principle of laicism are the guarantees for the maintenance of Alevi identity. Therefore, they should be defended."¹⁶ However, democracy, secularism and human rights discourses are not the only available frameworks for formulating 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,

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

14. 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) Sydicates, 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.

15. "Alevi Çalıştayı'nda Sona Doğru," *TRThaber.com*, January 29, 2010, accessed on February 14, 2010.

16. "Ankara'da Alevi Bektaşî mitingi," *Sabah*, November 9, 2008.

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 *Diyanet İşleri Başkanlığı* (The Administration of Religious Affairs, from now on the *Diyanet*),¹⁷ various religious courses, and salaries for Alevi dedes,¹⁸ whereas the CEM (Cumhuriyetçi Eğitim ve Kültür Merkezi Vakfı/ Republican Education and Culture Center) Foundation 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 Foundation 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 of 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.

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The overall objectives of the Alevi identity struggle fall under four major categories that are closely related to each other:¹⁹ i) maintenance of the Alevi identity in modern, urban social contexts, ii) recognition of Alevi identity as an equal and legitimate element of Turkish 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.

The resource allocation related claims are portrayed as a reaction against the social and economic marginalization of Alevis. Many of the contemporary challenges that the Alevi community is facing are related to urbanization and modernization of the Alevi community. The issues such as status of *cemevis*, position of Alevi *dedes* within the Alevi community, use of modern media outlets, and institutional problems of Alevis all derive from 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.²⁰

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 accommodated easily as would be the case in rural contexts. Some of the major challenges that the Alevi communities are facing today, within the broader context, are related to the processes of Turkish modernization and secularization. In comparison to the traditional Sunni communities (*cemaat*) and other groups, which have managed to build their institutions and reorganize in modern urban contexts, 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.

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

18. *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.

19. For a full list of Alevi identity-based claims see Appendix

20. *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 Alevis 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.

Some particular demands can fall under more than one category; for example, 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 legal recognition of the Alevi identity. The request for 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 significant impact on the Alevi public memory. There are still ongoing discussions over whether those dark episodes were planned and instigated by a group within the state establishment, or “deep-state,” in order to polarize and manipulate Turkish society in the 1970s. For many years, the 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.²¹ According to the plans, the Alevi and various minority community leaders were to be assassinated in order to drag Turkey into chaos and social polarization.²² The objective of those plots was to create a social crisis ripe for a military coup.

Some of the major challenges that the Alevi communities are facing today, within the broader context, are related to the processes of Turkish modernization and secularization.

4. WHAT ARE THE OBSTACLES FOR A BROADER RECONCILIATION?

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 the Alevi citizens and the state and between the 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 the “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 Alevi identity.²³ There

21. *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.

22. “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.

23. In the 8th chapter of my doctoral dissertation, I tried to categorize the contending discourses on Alevi identity with reference to personal interviews as well as public narratives. See Talha Köse, “Re-Negotiating Alevi Identity.” Observations about different visions on Alevi identity presented here are briefly introduced with reference to my doctoral research. 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.” In, *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.

are people who believe and support the idea that “there can be Alevilik²⁴ without Ali (Alisiz Alevilik).²⁵ They consider the Ehl-i Beyt²⁶ 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.”²⁷

The Alevi citizens may have different meaning systems and different social and political objectives, along these self-definitions; yet, 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 from 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. Different Alevi understandings also make references to different aspects of Alevi value systems. Intra-group diversity and competition is also a significant challenge for addressing Alevi identity-based claims.

Besides these legal issues, there are much deeper psychological, normative, and political barriers for reaching a social and political reconciliation between the Alevi citizens and the state and between the Alevi and Sunni citizens.

4.1. Psychocultural Obstacles²⁸

The most challenging set of obstacles for dealing with the roots of Alevi-Sunni opposition in Turkey is 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 *cem*.²⁹ Commemoration of *Hacı Bektaş Veli*, founder of the *Bektaşî* order, *Pir 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.

A noteworthy recent example that clearly demonstrates the psychocultural sensitivities of the Alevis is the debate on RPP’s (Republican People’s Party) deputy Onur Öymen’s comments on the Dersim Rebellion of 1937-38.³⁰ While the details of the Kurdish Initiative were being discussed in the parliament on November 10th, 2009, the RPP deputy Onur Öymen made a comment, which led to outrage among Alevi citizens.³¹ Öymen portrayed the government’s

24. 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.

25. 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.

26. 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.

27. 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.

28. For a comprehensive analysis of psychocultural and emotional dimensions of the Alevi identity struggle, Talha Köse, “*Re-Negotiating Alevi identity: Values, emotions and contending visions on future*,” Unpublished doctoral dissertation, George Mason University, December 2009.

29. Alevi communal rituals.

30. According to official records, more than 13.000 people died during the bloody suppression of the Dersim Rebellion and more than 11.000 people were also exiled. “Resmi raporlarda Dersim katliamı: 13 bin kişi öldürüldü,” *Radikal*, November 19, 2009; Metin Pervin, “Dersim 1938 gerçeği,” *Sabah*, November 19, 2009

31. “Öymen’i protesto eden Aleviler, CHP’ye yürüdü,” *Zaman*, November 11, 2009. “Dersim İsyanı’ dalga dalga yayılıyor,” *haber7.com*. November 15, 2009, accessed online on 11.15.2009. “Dersim mitinginde CHP ve Öymen’e tepki,” *Sabah*, December 13, 2009.

bloody suppression of *Dersim* Rebellion as a successful example of fighting against terrorism.³² The Alevi associations and citizens in several cities, including İstanbul, Mersin, Tunceli, Adana, Diyarbakır, and Bursa organized protests against Öymen and the RPP.³³ The bloody suppression of *Dersim* Rebellion³⁴ is one of the unsettled emotional issues in Alevi public memory. As the responses by various Alevi associations and citizens to *Dersim* debate demonstrated, the collective traumas of the Alevi community may still trigger deeply emotional responses. In addition to these historical references, the ongoing practices of denial and cultural insults in the daily lives of many Alevis are a source of humiliation. These prejudices and humiliating experiences have become important turning points in the lives of many Alevi citizens.

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.³⁵ 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.³⁶

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

4.2. Social and Normative Obstacles

Popular discourses of politicians usually emphasize the “experience of Alevi-Sunni coexistence in Anatolia” or “experience of coexistence.” In contradiction to the popular belief that there was always a happy coexistence, the Alevis and Sunnis mostly lived in isolated places, especially in rural areas.³⁷ The urbanization 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.³⁸ However, the Alevi and Sunnis’ moral positioning of one another has been maintained with minor improvements.³⁹ These biases and stereotypes can be overcome in the long run by improving the social spaces that would enable inter-communal communication and interaction.

32. In response to the government’s use of the phrase “Let no more mothers cry” as part of the government’s efforts to end the PKK’s campaign of violence, Öymen said: “Didn’t mothers also cry at the time of the Sheikh Said Rebellion? Didn’t mothers also cry at the time of the *Dersim* Rebellion of 1937?” Oral Çalışlar, “1938’de Dersim’de 2009’da Meclis’te: CHP...,” *Radikal*, November 14, 2009.

33. “*Dersim* isyanı büyüyor,” *Hürriyet*, November 13, 2009; Ercan Topaç, Naim Kazandıoğlu “CHP’de Dersim depremi,” *Sabah*, November 24, 2009; “Öymen’i protesto eden Aleviler CHP’ye yürüdü,” *Zaman*, November 14, 2009.

34. The imposition of the central authority on the *Dersim* region was one of the important aims of the Republican regime. Historically, there had never been central control over the tribes of *Dersim*. The *Dersim* Rebellion of 1937 was an attempt by the government to impose a centralized authority in the region. The Rebellion was suppressed with extensive use of military power. According to official records (4th Public Directorate Records), 13.160 people died and more than 10.000 people were exiled as a consequence of the military operation to suppress the rebellion (Metin Pervin, “*Dersim* 1938 gerçeği,” *Sabah*, November 19, 2009).

35. Talha Köse, “*Re-Negotiating Alevi identity*.”

36. *Alevi Raporu*, Stratejik Düşünce Enstitüsü, Ankara, November 2009, p. 56.

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

38. For the impacts of urbanization on Alevi transformation, Shankland, Dressler defines the “traditional Alevism” as the pre-urbanization and pre-secularization phenomena (Dressler 2008, 295).

39. Toprak et al (2009)’s field research presents recent examples of marginalized groups during the JDP Party administration, Binnaz Toprak et al., *Türkiye’de farklı olmak: Din ve muhafazakarlık ekseninde ötekileştirilenler*, Metis Yayınları (2009). Alevis are 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.

At the social level, there are many barriers between the 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 (fe. Alevi, Sunni) as normal?" Only 29.8% of the participants responded affirmatively, whereas 20.1% partially agreed.⁴⁰ Despite rapid modernization, secularization, and urbanization of Turkish society, the social and cultural boundaries between the Alevi and Sunni identities are still resilient.

4.3. 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 and content of the compulsory religious courses in public schools, iii) restructuring the legal status and services of the *Diyanet*.

The status of the *cemevis* is the most important item in Alevi identity politics. The demands related to the *cemevis* include 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 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 religion⁴¹ 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*.

The status of the *cemevis* is the most important item in Alevi identity politics.

The law 677⁴² bans the places of worship other than mosques, such as shrines, dervish lodges, gathering places of sects and mystical movements (*tarikats*). The law is considered one of the most important pieces of legislation among Atatürk's reforms. The Alevi associations and foundations do not openly request the amendment to this law from the Republican era, but they expect the outcome that would pave the way to legalization of *cemevis*. This is somehow problematic because many Alevis oppose the idea of legalization of Sunni shrines, *tekkes* and *dergahs*. It is a highly risky subject for the governing JDP to amend Law 677. The JDP may end up facing a new closing case at the Constitutional Court on the basis of trying to "alter" the secular fundamentals of the Turkish Republic.⁴³

Prime Minister Erdoğan has signaled that there maybe some legal and institutional modifications in the status of *cemevis*⁴⁴ as part of the "Alevi engagement policy." Establishing a new "Alevi Directorate" under the Prime Minister's office and funding and regulating the *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

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

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

42. Commonly known as the "Tekke, Zaviye ve Türbelerin kapatılmasına dair kanun."

43. On March 14, 2008, The Chief Public Prosecutor of the Supreme Court of Appeals, Abdurrahman Yalçınkaya, formally asked the Constitutional Court to close the JDP 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 JDP 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 fall short of the qualified majority of seven out of eleven, which was necessary for banning the party altogether.

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

bring about *Diyanet's* control over *cemevis*. Another option is to give *Cemevi* status 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 the 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 content of compulsory religion courses.

Almost all Alevi foundations and associations are against the current form and the content of compulsory religion courses. There are ECHR and court decisions against various aspects of the content of these courses.⁴⁵ The Council of State's (*Danıştay*) March 2008 ruling also declared that religion courses cannot be obligatory in their current form.⁴⁶ Parallel to the earlier ECHR decision, the Council of State ruling objected to the content and curricula of compulsory religion courses. The Council stated that the current curricula focus solely on Sunni Islam; therefore, students should not be required to attend religion courses. The Council of State made arguments similar to those of the ECHR.⁴⁷ In the meantime, the President of *Diyanet*, Ali Bardakoğlu, criticized the Council of State's decision, arguing that the purpose of compulsory religion courses is not to raise devout Muslims.⁴⁸ The issue of compulsory religion courses is a matter of dispute among Sunni citizens as well.

There are three major criticisms against the compulsory religion courses; however, there are important nuances within those criticisms. The majority of Alevi citizens object to the very compulsory nature of the courses. Almost all Alevis criticize the content of the courses for being "biased" and "discriminatory." There is general conviction among Alevi citizens that the religion courses teach Sunni beliefs and religious practices. A considerable number of Alevis are firmly against the existence of religion classes in a modern, secular state. It is difficult to legally accommodate all different demands related to religious education. Changing the compulsory character of religion courses necessitates a constitutional amendment, therefore, the consent and support of the opposition parties is also a requirement. The JDP will not take such a risk unless the amendment is initiated with the consensus of the two opposition parties, which does not seem to be a possibility in the foreseeable future. It is relatively easier to modify the curricula of the religion courses, which would be possible without a constitutional amendment. In fact, the Ministry of Education has made several changes 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."⁴⁹ Some Alevis 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.⁵⁰ Others argue that the Alevis deserve tax exemptions since they do not

45. 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.

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

47. "Danıştay: Zorunlu din dersi hukuksuz" <http://arsiv.ntvmsnbc.com/news/437852.asp>, accessed February 2, 2010.

48. "Religion courses do not aim at bringing up devout individuals. They give information about religion and culture to children. Obligatory religion classes are essential for children as bringing up a generation with no knowledge of religion will cause serious problems," Bardakoğlu voices support for compulsory religious courses, *Today's Zaman*, March 07, 2008.

49. Personal interview with the Vice President of the Alevi Bektaşî Federation, October 04 2006. Personal interview with the President of ABF, July 25, 2006.

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

benefit from the services of the *Diyanet*. Hostility 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 *Diyanet*⁵¹ is one of the well-rooted institutions in Turkey, which 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 secularism in the early years of the Republican era. Today, it is predominantly an institution that provides essential religious services; abolition or incapacitation of *Diyanet* may gradually lead to strengthening of the religious communities and faith-based organizations in Turkey. Such a potential trend is considered as a potential threat against Turkish secularism by the secular state establishment.

There is strong support for the services of the *Diyanet* from the majority of Turkish society, and in that sense, 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 *Diyanet*. A possible abolition of the institution could lead to sectarian polarization between the Alevi and Sunni citizens. It is crucial to accommodate Alevi demands without alienating and offending the 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.⁵² It is difficult to change this perception in the short run. Establishment of the 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 the Alevi and Sunni citizens as well as the secular state establishment. It is, therefore, crucial to coordinate the public deliberation process and to limit polarizing discourses.

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Overall, legal obstacles to addressing Alevi identity-based claims such as the legal status of *cemevis*, compulsory religion courses, and the status of *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, that may help address demands by the Alevi citizens.

4.4. Political Obstacles

The “other” of Alevi identity in Turkey has traditionally been the combination of “conservative Sunni,” “right wing nationalist” and “pro-Islamist”⁵³ identities. These identity definitions in the political sphere constitute the support

51. For a critical perspective on the position of *Diyanet* for organizing state-society and state-religion relations in Turkey, Iştar 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*, 98 (2-3), pp. 159-396; “A Special Issue on the Presidency of Religious Affairs in Turkey: *DIYANET*,” Special Editor: Gazi Erdem (2008).

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

53. Alevis often associate “pro-Islamist” or “Political Islamist” with the former Welfare Party (*Refah Partisi*) and the conservative wing of the JDP. Some of the religious communities that are highly involved in politics are also included in this category.

bases of the two major center-right and right wing parties in the current Turkish parliament: the JDP and the NAP (MHP-National Action Party). Alevi identity-based claims can “legitimately” be addressed in the political sphere by incorporating the JDP and the NAP to the resolution process. Both political parties have made certain public statements about their willingness to engage with the Alevi community and to address the Alevi identity-based claims.

The leader of the NAP, Devlet Bahçeli, recently announced the details of his party’s new Alevi policy.⁵⁴ NAP’s sincere efforts on the Alevi issue would be immensely important for social and political reconciliation in Turkey, especially because the NAP and the party’s idealist (*ülkücü*) constituents were considered the arch enemy by the Alevis, during the ideological struggles of the 1970s.⁵⁵ There is traditionally a deep-rooted animosity between the NAP 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 JDP’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, TRT,
5. Representation and teaching of Alevi culture and beliefs in religion classes.⁵⁶

Because of both JDP’s and NAP’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 JDP 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 the Alevi citizens in the foreseeable future. There is also a possibility that the JDP may alienate their conservative Sunni constituents as a consequence of such a political move. These political limitations may render the governing JDP hesitant on taking more concrete steps to deal with the Alevi identity-based claims.

Because of both JDP’s and NAP’s recent public declarations, there is
a suitable ground for dealing with the legal obstacles.

Since the early 1960s, the RPP (CHP- Republican People’s Party) and the other left wing parties have enjoyed the loyal support of the Alevi citizens without providing any kind of solid improvements. The Alevi-Sunni as well as Secularist-Islamist tensions helps the consolidation of Alevi support for the RPP. The process of a broader social and political reconciliation may, thus, disturb the RPP since it may mean a change in the status quo, unless the RPP comes up with an alternative plan. Some of the activists of Alevi identity politics as well as certain factions benefiting from the maintenance of Alevi-Sunni and Secularist-Islamist conservative Sunni polarizations in Turkey are also unhappy about the new engagement policy. Legal and constitutional amendments may also be a risky move for the JDP administration, because the opposition parties in the parliament may likely take the amendments to the Constitutional Court to prevent the legislation.

JDP’s legislative moves about the Alevi requests and the entire process of “Alevi Opening” may not directly bring about political support by Alevi citizens. Therefore, when the 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

54. “MHP’den Alevi açılımı.” *Milliyet*, June 10, 2009.

55. Alevis were predominantly active in the left and ultra-left poles of Turkish politics during the 1970s.

56. MHP’den Alevi açılımı.” *Milliyet*, June 10, 2009

Opening is not direct political gain. Thus, some indirect gains may be necessary in order to counterbalance the political risks of the Alevi Opening for the governing party. Nevertheless, maintaining the Alevi Opening may strengthen the secular and pluralistic credentials of the governing party, which can be considered as an important incentive for the governing party. Given that the EU reforms seem to have been stalled,⁵⁷ the “Alevi Opening,” and the broader “Democratic Opening,” which encapsulates the Kurdish Opening as well will help strengthen the credentials of the JDP in its commitment to democratic values, pluralism, and secularism.

5. A PRACTICAL AGENDA FOR REFORMS

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 that are mentioned above. 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 the 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.

JDP’s legislative moves about the Alevi requests and the entire process of “Alevi Opening” may not directly bring about political support by Alevi citizens.

5.1. 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 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 the 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 to 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.

57. 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.

7. Making the *diaspora* Alevi a part of the engagement policy in Turkey. The 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 the European Alevi associations and the Alevi associations in Turkey.
8. The legal amendments can resonate with the constituency of governing JDP 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.

5.2. 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 in 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, Maraş). In addition to the Sivas Events of 1993, the period of ideological/sectarian violence during the 1970s have a traumatic legacy in the Alevi public memory. Memory of those events feed the victimhood psychology among the new generation of Alevi. Mistrust towards the state and the 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.

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

5.3. 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 “Yezid⁵⁸,” “dinci” (pejorative term used to denote ultra-conservative), or “gerici” (retrograde) alienates the Sunni citizens, community leaders, and politicians. It is important to condemn these pejorative terms as a sign of reconciliation.

58. Yazid is the second Umayyad caliph who is the “evil villain” according to Shiite/ Alevi narratives. He is considered as the culprit of Karbala Massacre (680 AD). The period of Yazid’s rule is thought of as a disaster for Muslims and his rule is still remembered by especially Shia Muslims. Alevi use “Yezid” to delegitimize especially conservative Sunnis.

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.

6. CONCLUSION

Addressing the Alevi demands is not just a matter of political pragmatism for the governing JDP 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 JDP 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 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 based on its contribution to the formation of channels of sustained dialogue and deliberation between the Alevis and the state, and between Alevi and Sunni citizens.

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 the Alevi citizens. As a result of the “Alevi Opening,” the 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. To conclude, maintaining the Alevi Opening process is vital for the interests of both the JDP administration and the leaders and institutional representatives of the Alevi community.

APPENDIX: ALEVI IDENTITY-BASED CLAIMS

- Legalization of the status of *cemevis* as places of worship (*ibadethane*).
- Abolition of compulsory religious courses.
- Abandonment of the policy of building mosques in Alevi villages.
- Abolition of the Administration of Religious Affairs (*Diyanet*) or allocation of a budget to *Cemevis*.
- Recommendation of *saz* (lute) as a musical instrument in secondary school curriculum.
- Handing over the administration and control of the historical *Bektaşî* shrines (*dergahs*) including the *Hacı Bektaş Dergah*, *Şahkulu Dergah* to *Alevi-Bektaşî* foundations and associations.
- Removal of religion column from the national ID cards.⁵⁹
- Broadcast of programs on Alevi culture and rituals at official TV and radio broadcasting company, TRT (Turkish Radio and Television).⁶⁰
- Positive discrimination for Alevi citizens in bureaucratic jobs.
- Free water, electricity, and land for *cemevis*.
- Financial compensation to *Alevi dedes*.
- Transforming the "*Madımak Hotel*" into a memorial for the remembrance of 37 people that died in the *Sivas Events* of July 2, 1993.
- Official acknowledgment and apologies from the representatives of the Turkish state for the "centuries long sufferings and victimization of Alevi."

59. Sinan Işık's request to change the religion on his identity card from 'İslam' to Alevi in 2004 was refused by the legal authorities. "Upon the application of Sinan Işık to change the indication of religion on his identity card from "İslam" to "Alevi", the European Court of Human Rights (ECHR) decreed that even the disclosure of religious belief on the ID constitutes a violation of freedom of belief.", bianet, <http://bianet.org/english/religion/119818-echr-religious-indication-on-ids-breaches-convention>, accessed in February 15, 2010. On February 2, 2010 ECHR ruled 6-1 that Turkey had violated Article 9 of the European Convention on Human Rights, which covers the right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion. The court had not commented whether Alevilik is a separate religion or a belief. Field for indication of religion may be left blank since June 2006, but ECHR did not find this satisfactory for the protection of religious freedom.

60. On 10th of *Muharram* (January) 2009, official broadcasting company TRT 1 broadcasted the prime time news from *Karacahmet Cemevi*. It was an important gesture because the PM Erdoğan was accused of demolishing *Karacahmet*. TRT 2 also started to broadcast programs on Karbala, Alevi culture, beliefs and rituals on the month of *Muharram*. There is already a remarkable progress in the coverage of Alevi culture and rituals in official broadcasting channels. (Daily Press: *Radikal, Hürriyet, Sabah, Zaman*) <http://www.cnnturk.com/2009/turkiye/01/07/basbakan.erdogan.alevi.iftarinda/507994.0/index.htm>

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 Alevis that have existed for centuries 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.

The JDP government has undertaken a series of steps to understand and respond to Alevi identity-based claims. Popularly known as the “Alevi opening” (Alevi açılımı), the initiative is a turning point in terms of the Turkish governments’ approach to problems of Alevi citizens in Turkey. The Alevi Opening is the first systematic effort to address Alevis’ identity-based contentions. This step is also part of the broader policy of “Democratic Opening,” which addresses the burning problems of various ethnic and religious groups (Kurds, Alevis, religious minorities, and the Romani people) in Turkey. The objective of “Democratic Opening” is to reconcile the Turkish state and the marginalized segments of Turkish society.

This brief provides an analytic background for understanding the governing JDP’s “Alevi opening” initiative, which was launched in the summer of 2007. The issues mentioned in the list of Alevi identity-based claims, obstacles to the fulfillment of these issues, and the methods and the processes of the ongoing Alevi Opening are elaborated. This analysis argues that only a holistic intervention can bring about a sustainable reconciliation process between the Alevis and the Turkish state establishment as well as between the Alevi and Sunni citizens. In order to provide a holistic analysis, political, legal, psychological, cultural dynamics of the Alevi issue are emphasized here. Intervention insights and policy recommendations are formulated, consistent with the analytic perspective.

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