

CONCEPT AND CONSENSUS
–Alevi Initiative and Workshops–

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The Turkish government initiated a series of attempts to be directly informed about the main problems of Alevi and to take a step towards the solution of these problems from February, 2009 on. The most important one of those attempts was undoubtedly the workshops that were held under the title of “Initiative”. In the workshops, 400 people in total gathered in seven sessions giving more attention to the discursal representation of the participants.

In these events known as the Alevi workshops, the participants’ approaches from a diversity of sources were focused on, and also carried out remarkable discussions on the reality of the well-known problems. In this context, how to overcome the ambiguity of the borderlines of the problem was negotiated, and what the present condition holds as the obstacles and opportunities to overcome the problems in question was also discussed.

In this essay the Alevi initiation and workshops were intended to be analyzed at the concept level. Thus the first stage results, which were completed after the seventh workshop and will be shared with the public in a final report that will be prepared, will in a way present data that can be regarded as crucial in terms of reflecting the aspects of the preparation phase of the problem. The planning to access these data with which concept is the basic subject matter of this essay.

For the very first time in Turkish history, the sociopolitical problems of the Alevi community are being treated at the governmental level. The Alevi Initiative, the name given to the various attempts and a series of workshops to reconcile the fundamental social issues of the Alevi community in Turkey, demonstrates progress in the government's position toward this religious community.

The Alevi community are a group of people whose beliefs and traditions are generally regarded as part of the larger Islamic tradition. However, Alevi customs and beliefs are notably different from other Imām 'Alī-based traditions. Hence, although 'Alī is a central figure in their belief system, this commonality does not necessarily align them with other similar groups like Shī'īs, Ismā'īlīs, or Nuşayrīs. On the contrary, despite many similarities with the above-mentioned sects, the traditions of Anatolian Alevi community are distinct enough to warrant a separate evaluation of the belief structure of this community.

Historically, Alevi community have been associated with deprivation and exclusion because their religious views, customs and traditions are not well-known not only to the Turkish public but to the larger world community at large. Therefore, Alevi community have often been the recipients of undeserved cultural stereotypes and negative public sentiments. At times, non-Alevi community have accused Alevi community, for instance, of heresy, heterodoxy, rebellion, betrayal, and immorality –all intangible charges that seems to have no valid ground.

The very issue of the origin of the Anatolian Alevi community is a subject-matter in itself to be discussed. What is significant at this point, however, is that because the early encounter of Turks with Islam was mostly through the so-called 'Alī-influenced groups, Alevi communities have become synonymous with public piety, reflected in the figures of Aḥmad Yasawī and İḥājī Baktāsh-i Walī. Despite this historical fact, the Alevi community has been trying to carve a secure place for themselves within the Sunnī world with little success.

Let us not forget that, evaluations upon the Alevi history and culture are not independent from the age-old and already established values and criteria, which have certain strong religious and political connotations. In other words, contemporary views of the Alevi community are based upon dated, incomplete, and probably confusing perceptions of their religio-political history within the Saljūq and the Ottoman societies. The fact that Alevi community had an active role in many

revolts during the Saljūq and Ottoman eras has also overshadowed the socio-political background of these conflicts. Because of these historical misunderstandings, the contemporary Turkish view of Alevism is that of an ethno-political group, bent on opposition and the search for libertarian discourse, rather than a religious community.

As many researchers admit today, Alevi efforts to survive as both a religious and cultural and, maybe even a political community in Turkey have often been characterized by a policy of disdain and exclusion. Consequently, it was not until the mid-Republican era that it became possible to discuss how Alevis could become more visible in contemporary urban life. Historically Alevis have often settled in rural areas and in small urban areas; even when and if they settled in big cities they had to live in what may be called “peripheral urban centers”. Deprived of any religious, cultural, and intellectual connection with Īrān today, the sophisticated historic beliefs and rituals of Alevis have been brought up for discussion, once again, under the pressure of problems that appear in the course of modernization.

It is so striking that Alevis’ current appearance in society enables them to be considered as an order, a sect, or even a religion. Therefore, analyzing their religious, political, and cultural demands is problematical because it is difficult to estimate and to determine which Alevi position is *the* Alevi position and which source is *the* source of such demands. Their general approach is to demand that the *Cemevi* be accepted as a house of worship, which shows that their demands are intentionally or unintentionally inclined toward a religious status.

However, because of the eclectic and syncretic nature of Alevi beliefs, academics argue that such a religious designation will be difficult to formulate. The beliefs inherited from both Shī‘ī-Ismlā‘ī theology and non-Islamic traditions in Alevism which developed from a surprising integration of local and regional beliefs have now taken shape of a genuine, though complex and indistinct entity. As a result, it is difficult to describe or define what Alevism really is. It is even more difficult today to decide whether Alevism is a religion, a sect, or a culture. This indefinable nature of Alevism leads to endless discussions. Until recently, Alevism was primarily described through negative relationships and political showdowns brought about by modern urbanization and life. However, there arose a need in public at large and among the Alevi community itself to define themselves as either

a social movement, religious sect, or even as a separate religion different from Islam.

Alevis contend that Sunnīs not only exclude them but also mislead the public regarding Alevi beliefs and practices. It can be argued, on the other hand, that Alevis are not consistent in their efforts to dispel these ideas and explain their community's beliefs. The uncertainty with respect to the description of Alevism continues, frustrating both Alevi and Sunnī researchers alike.

After the foundation of the Turkish Republic, the Alevi community found easy channels through which to express their growing complaints and religio-political demands. Nevertheless, it is not quite possible that this catalogue of complaints whose historical roots could never be ignored was extensively expressed by the Alevis during the early Republican era. In the New Republic, which espouses an increasingly radical conception of secularism, no organization was allowed to conduct a religious activity except the Directorate of Religious Affairs. Furthermore, the Republic rejected the legality of mystical, heretical, and şūfī organizations of all sorts. The Republic did not welcome any oral or legendary traditions, which, according to the founding fathers, were nothing but superstition, Alevism included. Accordingly, with the Code of Tekkes and Zāwīyas banning all such institutions, the channels of access to public daily life for Alevism were destroyed and consequently they have been subject to significant problems of legality. Despite all impediments, Alevis built strong relationships with the leading figures of the new regime, most notably Mustafa Kemal Atatürk. Through these relationships, the Alevis hoped to change the negative sentiments about them still lingering from the Ottoman period.

In the 1950s, the Alevi sought official state recognition but had to wait until the 1990s to achieve it. According to the Kemalist curriculum, the Alevi had to live within the stated confines of the secular nation state, just as the Sunnīs were required to do –something that the Sunnīs and Alevis were equally unhappy about. Although there is no evidence that either group received special consideration, the common Alevi opinion was that the government favored the Sunnīs when it came to integration; and the Sunnīs believed that the Alevis had a confidential, supportive partner in the government. This mutual distrust has created many complex problems.

Although Alevi continue to live in rural Anatolia, segregated and disconnected from city centers under the pressure of social isolation, they have a clearly-defined strategy setting its hopes on the secularist agenda of the new regime. For example, the Alevi believe that state restriction of the activities of Sunnī organizations has crucial importance for their security. In this context, it has become impossible for Alevi, who maintain themselves in traditional rural regions and modern urban areas by a typical ghettoizing approach, to sustain this process of disintegration during modernization period.

Encounters between the Alevi and other religio-political groups within this context created areas of tension and stress that contributed to the already existing mistrust on both sides. Moreover, Alevi-involved criminal cases and riots during the late 1970s likely prevented Alevi from establishing social, religious, and political relations with other religious communities. As a result, social apathy in the cities with large Alevi populations, such as Çorum, Maraş, and Sivas, has only intensified. As the polarization became acute, the Alevi community has been inclined to establish their identity on this segregation. The much-discussed Gazi events of the 1990s, and more recently the Madımak Events (Sivas Massacre) in 1993, during which 37 people, most of whom were Alevi, (including 17 Sunnī) were burned or smothered to death, have made the current environment even more volatile.

Modern Alevi are experiencing an identity crisis, seeking to answer the basic questions about their ethno-religious identity. However, differences within the community in nearly every area –from theology to rituals, from political organization to the design of their catalogues of demands– cause significant problems in forming a unified group identity. The problem is exacerbated by a mutual misunderstanding with the state. Whereas the state sees the Alevi community as a security symptom or threat, the Alevi regard the state as a hegemonic Sunnī structure that is not upholding its secular policies. Alevi suspicion of the state and the growing tension that this causes have long been in the agenda of the government. How could be produced a permanent discourse which will hereafter be effective for a reliable and trusted negotiation environment? Until now, the only engagement between the Alevi and the state has been in the form of economic support of community-based organizations. However, it has been realized that the facilities provided to some organizations

and foundations or the relations which do not go beyond the political engagements have not contributed to the solution of problem.

Beginning in 2009, the Turkish government renewed its effort to bring together underrepresented and mistreated communities, including the Alevis, with the aim of developing a discourse in the area of religious rights and freedom, as it is included in its political program. For the first time, meetings with the Alevis did not focus on any fear for the community's security. The desire to extend the scope of human rights, and state protection of the freedom of belief and thought has required to deal with the Alevi community and their severe problems. This effort was not based on the past, ineffective interactions between the Alevi and the government. Any approach couched in these terms would be pointless and even harmful for the Alevi community. Instead, Alevi organizations, representing all sides of the political spectrum, struggled to understand the current government's new position and publicly expressed their suspicions.

In this effort, the Turkish government felt a need to take a step to understand the Alevis leaving aside the historical perception toward them, and immediately shared this with the public at large. The government had a great deal of work to do, including agreeing upon a definition of Alevism and what the government should do for the community.

With this in mind, the Alevi Initiative was launched in 2009. Numerous workshops were scheduled by Ministry of State in order to determine the steps to be taken. The main objective of the workshops was to bring the Alevis and the government together and to provide a forum in which positive, deliberate steps could be taken to address the problems of Alevis in Turkish society. The need for negotiation and empathy required extraordinary attention. What is expected from all sides was to communicate with, listen to and understand each other.

The workshops, the preliminary step of the Alevi Initiative, attracted a great deal of public interest and were followed by interested people with great curiosity and attention due to their unprecedented and unusual nature. As designed prerequisite for the Initiative, they were intended to clarify the present problems of the Alevi community. Accordingly, appropriate representatives of the community were sought in order to accurately reflect public opinion, and, above all, the true needs and sentiments of Alevi society. It was imperative that

all parties be heard, and steps were taken to provide an arena for all Alevis and others, in general, to participate in these conversations. In order to invite not only Alevis but also all the society to an equitable negotiation, it was a need, first of all, to share mutual responsibility and develop a practical discourse against exclusion and discrimination. The aim of the official and non-official meetings was to ensure the whole society to comprehend, and even to feel deeply the problems of the Alevis, and consequently to contribute to the solution. Members of the Alevi community, academics, and representatives from both non-governmental organizations and political institutions, and the media were all invited to participate in the workshops, based on their different discourses.

Alevi public opinion contributed greatly to the peaceful functioning of these workshops. Throughout this meticulous process, Alevis contributed to the Initiative not only within the workshops, but also in their daily lives, whenever the occasion arose. The Initiative workshops revealed that Turkish society, despite years of effort to social unity, knows very little about Alevi beliefs and lifestyle. Alevis continue to repeat their demands for democracy and human rights because they argue that these are designed for “the highest good”, even though there is no consensus within the Alevi community as to how and to what extent these demands could be met. Today everyone admits that the Alevis, as a community, have suffered great adversity in the past but have survived, despite near-constant pressures against their beliefs and lifestyle. Such historically complex relationships must be treated with the utmost sensitivity.

At this point, the most important effort was to determine the actual parameters of the problems and to set clear procedures in order to address the question in the first place and eventually to get the process moving. Both of these topics were undertaken by workshop participants. The stated objective of the Initiative workshops was to change public perception of the Alevi community by replacing outdated prejudices and segregation strategies with a new functional concept compatible with their perception of self. Because Alevis have long believed that they were not regarded as part of the Turkish society, seeing themselves, rather, as tertiary, this effort must not ignore their own benefits. Accordingly, the workshops were intended to remove the sanctions that impair the equality in an irreversible way. Such an intention and determination eventually will bring forward the usual nature of government-citizen relationship, forcing the elites of

the state to be ready to discuss the type of institutionalized secularism that has proven to be oppressive.

The disorganization of the Alevi leadership structure, and their seemingly endless number of demands, were not taken as an obstacle to the realization of the Initiative. Such a variety of opinions and ideas is natural in a group of their size and only reflects the dynamism of the group. Moreover, this diversity is expected to pave the way for the new actors who dare to deal with thorny modern issues, notably theological ones.

Tackling the problem resolutely will disprove the validity of negligences and ignorances in the eyes of the society, as well as will prevent abuse of the issue. The fact that efforts of some exceptional rogue actors, bent on disrupting this process, has not gone unnoticed. However, the government is confident that such manipulative and provocative attempts can be derailed by including the variety of voices within the society in its governance. In this process, goodwill, patience, and determination are the main virtues that should not be sacrificed. The main issue here is how the Alevis are seen in the eyes of other social and religious groups, and what awaits them considered their image that has long been identified with depressed feelings, hostility and exclusion, even though they created a notable interest in the public with their demands.

Today, despite many studies on Alevi demands of all sorts, there has been no notable interest in how these demands resonate with the Turkish public. Alevis' efforts to transform their presence to an identity are quite new and these efforts have mostly been formed by internal disputes and conflicts. The reaction to this situation by the state, the Sunnī community, the media, and nongovernmental organizations has been both an important source and part of the problem.

The identity problem of the Alevi community is a multifaceted and complex one. As an oral cultural code, they have been passionately involved in the modernization process, and, as a result, have lost or damaged most of their traditional beliefs and rituals. Alevism has long been defined as a syncretic and eclectic belief system; their being in touch with new forms and ideas should not be a surprise. The structure of Alevism is highly adaptable and can continuously adapt to cultural needs of the time. However, the disputes arisen from new quests and tendencies have damaged the historical symbols, images and principles of Alevism.

Currently, neither Alevi perceptions of the Sunnīs nor Sunnī opinions of the Alevis are acceptable by either party –opinions and perceptions that are still deeply rooted in old prejudices and misconceptions. Sunnī belief that Alevism is not only an ‘Alī-centric form of belief system, despite evidence otherwise, has been thoroughly internalized. On the other hand, Alevis see the Sunnīs as descendants of Yazīd, who massacred Ḥusayn b. ‘Alī in Karbalā’. Even though these opinions are not supported with historical data, current sentiments between these two groups are undeniably affected by them. The relationship between Alevi and Sunnī communities remains at a critical threshold, stuck in the political and theological disputes that defined their relationship a few centuries ago.

Alevis levy claims of usurpation, cruelty, and discrimination, while Sunnīs blame Alevis of betrayal, deviance, and ignorance. Although such abstractly-held ideas are expected to be not as strong as they were in the past, neglecting them has been a significant impediment to progress.

The national Turkish policy of secularism has recognized Sunnī Islam as main reference frame for the primary, acceptable religious tradition, though it has not refrained from presenting the Alevis as the unique guarantee of Turkish secularism. Nevertheless, the state has never been inclined to see Alevism as a separate religious community that is different from Sunnī Islam. The usual attitude was to make Alevism subject to hegemonic network and influence of Sunnī Islam, and to put down comments that deem Alevism as a heterodox element within the governmental expression.

Today, the academic world is deeply interested in the nature of Alevism. Although the many opinions of researchers regarding Alevi origins, beliefs, and ritual practices create different images of Alevism, all of them contribute greatly in the effort to establish a consolidated Alevi identity. Alevis themselves discuss the maintenance of their beliefs, principles, and practices in two basic ways: in terms of conservative and radical Alevism. Conservative Alevism emphasizes the necessity of the loyal and faithful preservation of traditional heritage, whereas radical Alevism seeks to form a new and characteristic identity. Nevertheless, many Alevis emphasize loyalty, as well as enthusiasm to national unity, like the Sunnī public, despite their troubled relationship with the state. Many Alevis, who consider the government as a source of trouble, want the current situation to be rear-

ranged, rather than transforming this conviction into a radical opposition. Even though the opposing rhetoric seems to have blended surprisingly with both forms of Alevism, it can be argued that it was introduced into daily life by leftist Alevis.

The unequal treatment of the Alevi has resulted in feelings of anxiety about cultural exclusion and contempt. Indeed, it is clear that annoyances, deprivations, and unjust treatment have, for centuries, created a unique Alevi culture that can take easily any shape and form in a given context. Today, Alevis estimate that they can get through the present blockade as long as they stake a claim on their current demands. Many suggestions such as seeking legal status for *Cemevis*, calling for a review of the status of Directorate of Religious Affairs in accordance with sound norms of secularism, and the consolidation of the lost or rejected status of their spiritual leaders, *Dedes*, are intended to reinforce their security areas.

Whenever Alevism is treated as a problem, it is necessary to treat it by considering the state (Directorate of Religious Affairs), Sunnī public, and popular media. In this sense, the position of Alevis in the eyes of governmental mechanism has scarcely been treated and analyzed. The government, the Directorate of Religious Affairs, the Sunnī public, and the Turkish media create a great variety of opinions and approaches that never coincide with one another. Omitting the variety of opinions and approaches to the problem will only blind our perspective of the real problems. Hence, it is necessary to see what the Alevi perception is and what it corresponds to within Turkish society.

The government workshops held as part of the Alevi Initiative, revealed that a combination of public ignorance and a lack of governmental attention has nourished distrust and misunderstanding by both the state and the Alevi community. The results of seven workshops have been compiled, and the government has shared the resulting report. Now, related discussions continue among the Turkish public. It is hoped that the final report will provide a roadmap for the development of a political good will and possible solutions to Alevi problem that incorporate opinions and information gleaned from the workshops as well as other public opinions and suggestions emerged from these useful conversations.