*Journal of Liberty and International Affairs* | Vol. 4, No. 3, 2018 | eISSN 1857-9760
*Published online by the Institute for Research and European Studies at www.e-jlia.com*



© 2018 Mkrtich Karapetyan
This is an open access article distributed under the CC-BY 3.0 License.
Peer review method: Double-Blind
Date of acceptance: December 20, 2018
Date of publication: January 31, 2019
Original scientific article
UDC 327(560:569.1):355.426(569.1)
323:323.15(560)]:355.426(569.1)




# THE ALEVI / ALAWITE FACTOR IN TURKEY - SYRIA RELATIONS IN THE LIGHT OF THE SYRIAN CRISIS

Mkrtich Karapetyan
*Faculty of Political Science, University of Bucharest, Romania*
mnkarapetyan[at]yahoo.com

***Abstract:*** *The Syrian civil war exacerbated sectarian divisions between the Alawite-ruled Syrian government and Syria's Sunni population, straining also the relations between the Sunni majority and Alawite and Alevi minorities of the neighboring Turkey. The Alawites and Alevis of Turkey were predominantly supporting Syria's president Bashar al-Asad, while the Turkish government greatly supported the Sunni insurgents of Syria. The paper aims at examining how Alawites and Alevis have influenced the relations between Turkey and Syria in the light of the Syrian civil war, the reasons behind the sympathy of Alevis for the Syrian government and the implications that Turkey's Syria policy has had domestically. It finds that the Alevi / Alawite factor has had some restraining effects on Turkey's antagonistic policy towards Syria. In the introductory part, the article touches upon the differences and the similarities between Alevis and Alawites, then it analyzes the developments in regards Turkey's policy towards the Syrian crisis that were also reflected in Ankara's domestic policy vis-à-vis its Alevi and Alawite minorities.*

***Keywords:*** *Turkey - Syria relations; Alevis; Alawites; Syrian crisis; sectarian policies*

## INTRODUCTION

In order to understand the role that Alevis and Alawites play in the relations between Turkey and Syria and the impact they have on them, first of all, it is necessary to have an insight into their identities and the characteristics that differentiate them from the Sunni majority, as well as from each other. In English-language academic papers and in the media, there are two denominations that are being mainly used: Alawites or

Alawis and Alevis, in order to make a distinction between predominantly ethnically Arab Alawites, which are native to mainly Syria and Lebanon, and Turkish Alevis, ethnically Turkish and Kurdish, native mostly to Turkey's southern provinces. Nevertheless, it is quite disputable how accurate these denominations are, as the word itself is the same, both in Arabic and Turkish, and means "followers of Ali": both are called 'Alawi in Arabic and Alevi in Turkish. However, we chose to use the most commonplace denominations met most widely both in academic papers and in the media: *Alevis* and *Alawites*.

Alevis are a group of around 15 to 20 million people, living mostly in the south of Turkey. In spite of having roots in the early Islamic period, Alevis appeared as a separate group only centuries after the Prophet Muhammad. Until the 16th century they were known as *Kızılbaş* (red head), who had fought along the Safavids against Ottoman Turks, while the formers' defeat to Sultan Selim I, had significantly affected the further fate of the group, making them a subject of constant persecutions (Stewart 2007, 51). Alevism or Kızılbaşism was based on beliefs that were spread in Eastern Anatolia before the 16th century, but the formation of the main axis around which this religious current is developed was laid by the Safavids (Jigulskaya 2013).

Despite being under the Ottoman rule for several centuries the Alevis of Anatolia did not accept the Sunni Islam followed by the Ottomans. In modern days, along with many Alevis that identify themselves as ethnic Turks, around 20% of the Alevi population carries Kurdish ethnicity (Stewart, 2007, 51), like the Zaza Kurds, that predominantly live in the province of Dersim (Tunceli). Alevis have organized many rebellions against the Turkish state, the greatest of which was staged in 1937 in Dersim by Alevi Zaza population and was brutally defeated by the Turkish army (Kaya 2011, 116). The ethnic diversity of Alevis, added to their religious identity, has created more difficulties for the Turkish state, given the strong nationalism of many of these Kurdish Alevis. Anyawy, regardless of the fact that a significant number of Alevis are Kurdish, all of them use Turkish in the *cem*, or ritual prayer, and there is no clear divide or dissension among Alevis in regards their ethnic identity (Stewart 2007, 51). The Alevi population in general is strongly secularist, loyal to the secular tradition of the Turkish republic, and opposes the religious state institutions, that actively promote Sunni Islamic interests, while Sunnis are mainly considered to be more inclined to the unity of religion and politics (Kaya 2011, 147). Thus, it seems that ethnicity does not have a great impact on the relationship between Kurdish and Turkish Alevis, and even the Arab Alevis (Alawites) of Turkey. The major factors that unite them and indentify them are their religious affiliation and their secularist views. The Alevi religious doctrine is focused around the deification of Ali, the cousin and son-in-law of Prophet Muhammad. Similar to Shi'ites, Alevis reject the first three Sunni caliphs, Abu Bakr, Omar and Othman and accept the fourth one, Ali, believing that the latter's place was taken by them, and considering Ali and his sons, Hasan and Hussein, as the rightful line of succession.

(cc) BY

Alevism offers four paths to God, prioritizing the trinity of Allah, Muhammad and Ali (Stewart 2007, 52). Nonetheless Alevis should not be considered as Shi'ites, since they do not follow some of the five pillars of Islam, like the duty to make a *hajj* to Mecca, fasting during Ramadan etc. Moreover, Alevi scholars have limited familiarity with Qur'an and *hadiths* of traditional Islamic teaching. Alevis do not regularly attend mosques, but pray at cem houses, *cemevis*. Cem is the primary ritual of the worship ceremony during which they pray to Ali, recall the names of the first twelve imams, and mourn the martyrdom of Ali's sons, Hasan and Husein (Stewart 2007, 53).

Alevi cultural and religious traditions are significant with their gender equality in many respects, regardless of the existence of some distinct hierarchy. Men are considered dominant figures within Alevi society, as well as at the household, and women generally have to comply with their demands. Nevertheless, in comparison with mainstream Sunnis or Shi'ites, there is minimal physical separation of the sexes in daily life, and religious ceremonies. Men and women worship together at the *cemevis*, and take part in worship ceremonies, at the same time women may also have their own separate ceremonies, without the presence of men (Stewart 2007, 54).

Thus, there is a distinct Alevi identity, notwithstanding with the fact that some ethnically identify themselves as Kurds, others as Turks. The Alevi term in Turkey has also been appropriated to describe several ethnic groups with heterodox traditions living in the Anatolia region. Among them are also the Arabic-speaking "Alevis", living in southern Turkey, mostly in the Hatay province (the former Sanjak of Alexandretta), that was annexed to Turkey from Syria back in 1939. So, these are the Syrian Alawites, which are of Arabic ethnicity, and in Turkey are called *Arap Aleviler* (Arab Alevis).

Alawites mostly live in the north eastern arc of the Mediterranean coastline, between northern Lebanon, and the Cilician plain in modern-day Turkey. In Syria Alawites are approximately 3 million people, which are around 12-15 percent of the population (Goldsmith 2011, 35). Alawites and Alevis are not ethnically related, but they share a lot of cultural and religious similarities. Alawite doctrines date back to the 9th century A.D and were advocated by Ibn Nusayr, who is considered to be the founder of the Alawi religion (Pipes 1989). While according to Faksh, Alawites emerged as a religious sect in Syria in the 10th and 11th centuries that incorporated several Islamic, as well as non-Islamic doctrines (Faksh 1984, 135). The Alawite belief includes elements of Shi'i Islam, Christianity and paganism. The Alawites adopted several concepts from paganism, like the concept of a divine triad with its subsequent manifestations in the seven circles of world history, and the idea of transmigration of souls. For Alawites, God revealed Himself to the world seven times, each time incarnated in two figures, who, together with God composed the holy trinity (Faksh 1984, 135). Many Alawite rituals have been borrowed from Christianity, like the use of wine in rituals and the celebration of Christmas (Faksh 1984, 136).

(cc) BY

In regards the idea of Alawism being a mix of different Islamic and non-Islamic beliefs, Springett points out to influences on the Alawite or Nusairi religion from Zoroaster and the Magians. One of the proofs of the influence of Zoroaster and the Magians on the religion of Alawites might be traced in the attribution of light as the symbol of Deity (Springett, 142). Alawites, also known as Nusayris, after Ibn Nusayr, similar to Alevis were denounced by the majority Sunnis for their "religious heresy", and both suffered heavily under the Ottoman rule for over 4 centuries (Stewart 2007, 52).

Daniel Pipes argues, that by most standards Alawites should not be considered Muslims, since they reject Islam's main tenets, and while the Muslim proclamation is, "there is no deity but God and Muhammad is his prophet", Alawites assert that "there is no deity but 'Ali, no veil but Muhammad, and no bab but Salman" (Pipes 1989). The controversy over Alawites' Muslim or non-Muslim identity has been debated for hundreds of years, and there have been various opinions on that issue, but it is not an objective for this paper. Nonetheless, it seems necessary to mention that since 1930s a number of Sunni and Shi'ite clerics have issued *fatwas* declaring Alawites as Muslims, and after Hafez al-Asad became president in Syria, Imam Musa al-Sadr, a prominent Shi'ite cleric issued a similar fatwa in 1973 in support of Hafez al-Asad, whose legitimacy was being challenged by some Sunnis that claimed he did not comply to the clause in the Syrian Constitution which asserted that the President of Syrian Arab Republic should be a Muslim (Kramer 1987, 243). This seemed to close the topic at the time and Alawites have ever since been largely viewed as a branch of Twelver Shi'ites.

Thus, it can be stated that Alevis and Alawites or Alawis, do have a number of differences, along with scores of similarities. Nonetheless, the existent differences do not lead to any animosity between them, be it between Syrian Arab Alawites and Alevis, in general, or between Kurdish and Turkish Alevis. This could be attributed to the overall liberal nature of both currents and the lack of deep religiousness, which, on the opposite, can be observed among Sunnis, for instance, or other Shi'ites. The similar denominations of these groups, meaning followers of Ali, also imply solidarity among them in terms of regular people.

## THE SYRIAN CRISIS AND THE SOLIDARITY BETWEEN TURKEY'S ALEVIS AND SYRIA'S ALAWITES

The beginning of the Syrian uprising since March 2011, following the so-called "Arab Spring" revolutions in Tunisia, Egypt and Libya, gradually increased the sectarian tensions in Syria, spreading also to the rest of the region. The protests in the country with a Sunni majority of around 70 percent against president Bashar al-Asad, a representative of the Alawite minority of around 12 percent, naturally did take on sectarian overtures, which were also reflected in neighboring Turkey, where around 20 percent of the population identify themselves as Alevis, though unlike Syria, Turkey is

(cc) BY

led by the representatives of the Sunni majority. After a short period of hesitation the Turkish government started avowedly supporting the Syrian rebels fighting against the Alawite president, and directed fierce criticism against the latter, showing solidarity with Syria's Sunni majority, thus putting an end to a decade long Turkish-Syrian rapprochement. The danger of a Sunni takeover of the country, after the rebels had a number of victories against the Syrian army in different locations, and especially after the advent of ISIS into the Syrian scene, increased the Alawite fears of extermination under a possible Sunni rule.

Erdoğan and other Turkish officials stated many times since the outbreak of insurgency that Ankara considers the Syrian issue as a domestic issue for Turkey (BIRGÜN 2011), mostly pointing out to the long border and the established close ties between the two states. Ankara's perception of the events in Syria as a "domestic issue" was based on two main factors: the geographical factor, considering the common border of over 800 kilometers, and the demographic one, considering the existent sectarian diversity in both countries, with a similar formation, but different sizes: the existence of a Sunni majority and an Alevi / Alawite minority on one hand, and a Kurdish factor on the other (Ash-Sharq al-Awsat 2011).

Overall, Ankara had two main interests in post-2011 Syria: to ensure that the Asad regime is replaced by a Sunni Islamist power and to forestall the apparition of a Kurdish autonomous entity in the north of Syria (Okyay 2017, 834). And in meeting both these ends, Ankara had to take into consideration also the Alevi factor, which could be an obstacle for both, since the majority of Alevis would certainly oppose the policy aimed at installing a Sunni Islamist regime in Syria, while a part of them, at least the ones who identify themselves as ethnically Kurdish, would oppose hostilities against their Kurdish brethren in Syria. Turkey's bias in favor of Sunnis was demonstrated in AKP's (the Justice and Development Party) domestic policy since the early period of the Syrian conflict. Since 2011 the AKP leaders accused the opposition CHP (Republican People's Party) leader Kemal Kilicdaroglu in supporting the Syrian government, represented by Syrian Alawite Bashar al-Asad, thus, unwittingly alleging sectarian solidarity between Turkish Alevis and Syrian Alawites. Prime Minister Erdoğan directly accused Kilicdaroglu and the CHP in being Alevis, and therefore Alawites. The Turkish PM had even announced that one should not "forget that a person's religion is the religion of his friend. Tell me who your friend is and I'll tell you who you are" (Shwartz 2012).

Anyway, the shift in Turkey's stance towards the Asad government did not happen so abruptly and was officially demonstrated only after June 12 parliamentary elections. Since March, during the first couple of months of the "Syrian Spring", Turkey's official stance was one of a friend both to the Syrian authorities, with Bashar al-Asad at its head, and the Syrian people. Ankara was emphasizing the friendship between the two states along with the calls for implementing reforms (Reuters 2011).

(cc) BY

This, besides being a somewhat neutral policy of waiting for more developments with a view to be able to decide which side to support eventually, can also be regarded as a way for AKP of not losing prestige and potential voters, particularly among the Alawite and Alevi minorities of the country, before the nearing June 12 parliamentary elections. Ankara's explicit support for the Sunni rebels, fighting against Syria's Alawite president would certainly result in losing many votes. So the AKP refrained from taking a radical stance towards the Syrian conflict before the elections.

Weeks after the elections, where the AKP won around 50 % of the vote and 327 seats (out of 550) in Turkey's parliament (Esen and Ciddi, 2011), Ankara's posture towards Damascus greatly changed. Turkey started pursuing more active policy for reaching the overthrow of Asad, facilitating the Syrian opposition's activities within Turkey, as well as supplying arms to the Syrian insurgents (Karaveli 2012). Thus, Turkey appeared in a confrontation with the Alawite regime in Syria, embracing the Sunni cause in the neighboring country and beyond. Ankara adopted an interventionist regional policy, with sectarian overtones, which, besides the support to the Syrian Sunni rebels, manifested in developing links with Sunni elites in Iraq, and supporting the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood (Tank 2014, 11). Many analysts noted that Turkey started using sectarian language more and more, playing the role of "the Sunni elder brother" in the region (Gettleman 2012). The deterioration of Turkish-Syrian relations in the context of these developments signaled the final failure of the "zero problems with neighbors" policy, as the rapprochement with Damascus had been its main achievement. If in 2008 Ankara was praised for its potential of speaking to all regional powers from Iran to Israel, thanks also to its relations with Damascus, it "now aligned predominantly with conservative Sunni Muslim partners such as Qatar and Saudi Arabia, and is being increasingly seen as a partisan actor" (ICG 2013).

In the process of implementing its Sunni-oriented policy Ankara did little to meet the Alevi and Alawite concerns in that regards. As Karaveli argues, the Erdoğan government, "while sponsoring the Sunni cause" in Syria, "made no attempt to show sympathy for the fears of the country's Alawite, Christian and Kurdish minorities" (Karaveli 2013).

Nonetheless, the AKP took some steps, seemingly aimed at calming the Alevi sentiments within the country against the government, but apparently also directed at decreasing the popularity of the CHP among them, thus trying to "kill two birds with one stone". In November 2011, Ankara for the first time publicly apologized for the Dersim massacres (Hurriyet, 24 Nov 2011). The announcement, made by Erdoğan, on the one hand aimed at appeasing Turkish Alevis, displeased with the government's assistance to the insurrection against the Alawite al-Asad, while on the other hand, it sought to discredit the CHP, as Erdoğan reminded in his speech that the latter ruled Turkey during the period of massacres in Dersim, saying, "if someone is to apologize for and face up to this tragedy, it is not the AKP and the AKP government but the CHP, the author of

(cc) BY

this bloody episode, as well as the CHP deputies and the CHP chairman who hails from Tunceli [Dersim]" (Hurriyet 24 Nov 2011). So this neither seemed to be an apology that could be accepted by Alevis, nor could it dispel their fears or distrust towards the government. The CHP leader Kilicdaroglu, a Kurdish Alevi, was being targetted, as he had condemned Erdoğan's anti-Asad stance in several occasions, describing it as "an interference in the internal affairs of a neighboring state that could cost Turkey dearly" (Sidki, 29). During an Alevi gathering in Istanbul in 2012, the main issue that was discussed by the participants was the threat posed to Syria's Alawite minority. A Turkish Alevi leader noted that "some groups fighting Assad's regime were identifying with historical Sunni figures who fought the formerly repressed Alawite minority" (DW 22 March 2012), considering this as a clear sign of their intentions towards Alevis and fearing that their success would lead to massacres of Alawites, and they would be expelled from the country. The CHP, similar to Damascus, viewed the insurgence in Syria, as an "imperial conspiracy" against a government that was one of the principal supporters and advocates of the Palestinian resistance. The Turkish opposition party insisted that the conspiracy aimed at dividing Syria "into sectarian and ethnic clashes", which could have its implications also in Turkey (Sidki, 30).

In the context of the discussions over a possible military confrontation between Turkey and Syria, Cagaptay suggests that a Turkish military intervention in Syria could be viewed by Turkish Alevis as a "Sunni attack" against "fellow Alevis" (Cagaptay 2012). So, the Turkish public support for active Turkish intervention in Syria was fairly limited. Anyway, though several incidents of direct military clashes between Turkish and Syrian forces have occurred, the first one being the downing of a Turkish in June 2012 (Karaveli 2012), they never grew into a full-scale war between Turkey and Syria, as some predicted. After Turkey had cut all ties with Damascus and gave up negotiations, the CHP continued keeping in touch with al-Asad. They sent a delegation to Syria, that visited Damascus, Hama and Latakia to observe the conditions there, and at the end it stated the party's opposition to foreign intervention in Syria's domestic affairs.

In March 2013 the CHP deputies visited Bashar al-Asad in Damascus, reinstating their rejection of foreign interference in Syria (Cagaptay 2013). The sense of solidarity between Alawites and Alevis was translated into sympathy for Asad. Eichler quotes the words of an Alawite resident of Antakya, "after the events in Syria, most of the Alevi people in Turkey have supported Assad as he is Alevi or Alawite, and they believe they are under threat. Actually, they are not interested in Assad's personality or what he has done" (Eichler 2014). This seems to summarize the reasons behind popular Alevi sympathy for the Syrian regime and shows that Ankara's policy in regards the Syrian crisis, as well as its domestic policy towards the Alevi and Alawite minorities, especially during the Syrian crisis, consolidated the ties between Alevis in Turkey and Alawites in Syria, further boosting the existing sympathy and solidarity between them. Ankara did make some attempts to break the solidarity between Alevis and Syrian Alawites, but

(cc) BY

they had either the opposite effect or none at all. During this period several articles could be found in Turkish newspapers speaking about the differences between Alevis and Syrian Alawites or Nusayris, mostly pointing out to the variations in their religious beliefs and practices (Ensonhaber 2012; T24 2012; Akyol 2012). Most of such publications were merely propaganda and this narrative can mainly be viewed as an attempt of convincing or showing to Turkey's Alevis that they and Arab Alevis (Alawites) are not the same, and to some extent neutralize their support for and solidarity with Syrian Alawites, in general, and the Alawite government of Bashar al-Asad, in particular.

These kinds of attempts had no serious results, mainly because the solidarity between Alevis and Alawites is not based only on the religious similarity, rather the closeness of their ideological beliefs. This is confirmed by the statement of a former head of Turkey's Alevi Institute, Cengiz Güleç, made in an interview to the Turkish Aksam newspaper in September 2012, saying that the Alevis' sympathy for Asad was not just stemming from religious considerations, but also, and more than that, from ideological insights. According to Güleç, most of the Alevis are close to the leftist ideology, while the Ba'as regime in Syria is also leftist, and is the strongest resistance power in the Palestinian issue (Aksam 2012). Turkey's policy in regards the Syrian conflict was most negatively accepted in the province of Hatay (the former Sanjak of Alexandretta), which is very sensitive with its ethnic and religious diversity, being populated by the largest proportion of Arabs, especially Arab Alawites, along with Sunni Arabs, Arab Christians, Kurds, Circassians and Armenians. The overwhelming majority of Hatay Alawites are secular and in opposition to the Islamist AKP and generally support the CHP, and as Ankara started supporting Syria's opposition and armed rebels, the anti-AKP sentiments further increased among them. Turkish Alevis, also being secular and supportive of the CHP, would, as Cagaptay argues, follow the Arab Alawites of Hatay in case of more rigorous protests against Ankara's policy towards Damascus (Cagaptay 2013).

Since 2011 several demonstrations had been organized in Hatay mainly by Alawites, but also with the support of some other minorities. Local Alawite groups, like "Platform against imperialistic interference in Syria", organized a number of pro-Asad rallies during this period, the largest of which was held in September 2012, where around 10 thousand people took the streets (Cagaptay 2013). In February 2012 a few thousands protested in Antakya in favor of the Asad government in Syria and against the US and Turkish intervention. Many Alawites expressed their anger with Ankara's policy towards Damascus, as well as the government's treatment of the Alawite minority. However, as an observer notes, they were not so supportive of the Asad government, as they were worried about the silence on the murders committed by the "opposition forces" in Syria, and the AKP was perceived as collaborator of the US and the protector of the Muslim Brotherhood (Cicektakan 2012).

(cc) BY

These pro-Asad sentiments and solidarity in the southern parts of Turkey, triggered also by the AKP's pro-Sunni rhetoric, brought up additional difficulties for Ankara in implementing their Syrian policy. As Ankara had already crossed the point of return in its relations with Damascus, it wanted to reach the ousting of Asad and facilitate the installment of a Sunni government in Syria, even by the way of direct military intervention. Nevertheless, there were many obstacles for Turkey in doing that, among which was also the Alevi / Alawite factor. As Cagaptay argues, it made Turkey think twice before intervening in Syria, since the rising sectarian tensions could bring the fighting into its own territory (Cagaptay 2013).

## THE SECTARIAN TENDENCIES IN ANKARA'S SYRIA POLICY AND ITS DOMESTIC REPERCUSSIONS FOR TURKEY

Turkey's Sunni-oriented stance and rhetoric towards the conflict in Syria had caused sectarian tensions within the country increasing the sense of vulnerability among Alevis and Alawites, thus feeding more social tensions. Ankara's policy of allowing the Syrian armed rebels to use Turkish territories as a foothold for fighting the Syrian authorities had left Turkey's border regions in danger of attacks. This fact was emphasized in May 2013 when a car-bomb explosion occurred in Reyhanli in Hatay, killing 53 people (Eichler 2014). The Turkish officials attributed the responsibility of the explosion to the Syrian intelligence and a secret Turkish Alevi organization, while Erdoğan accused Alevis of collaborating with Syrian intelligence in carrying out the attacks (Barél 2013). Furthermore, when speaking about the attacks, and referring to fatalities, Erdoğan said "our Sunni citizens" (Çandar 2016), thus publicly announcing a special attitude and care for Sunnis, to the detriment of Alevis. Following the Reyhanli explosion and several other cross border mortar shelling cases and bomb attacks, Turkish authorities declared the launching of different projects aimed at enhancing the border security, including the erection of walls at several points of the border (Okyay 2017, 839). These projects started being implemented in October 2013, and by 2014, Ankara had built 13 kilometres of walls, dug around 300 kilometres of ditches, and installed 160 kilometres of barbed wire along its Syrian border and by 2015, half of the 40.000 military personnel guarding Turkey's borders were deployed at the Syrian border (Okyay 2017, 839).

These steps came as countermeasures for Turkey's earlier policy of relaxing border controls aimed at facilitating the entrance of Syrian refugees to Turkey, which had also contributed to Alevi and Alawite concerns. Since the beginning of the unrest in Syria in March 2011, Ankara had adopted a policy of nearly unconditional opening of the borders to people fleeing Syria, calling it the "open door policy". This was mainly aimed at emphasizing "on human rights, democracy and humanitarian sensitivities" in Turkey's regional policy, while more pragmatically delegitimizing the regime of Bashar al-Asad

(cc) BY

by "substantiating Ankara's claims about atrocities committed by it" (Okyay 2017, 837-838). Turkey's open border policy in the Hatay province resulted in the arrival of large numbers of Sunni Arab refugees, destabilizing the demographic and sociological balance of the region. This, along with the free circulation of armed rebels in border areas caused an increase in the Alawites', as well as other non-Sunni or non-Muslim communities' perceptions of insecurity. This policy was interpreted by Alawites as part of Ankara's project of "Sunnification of the region" (Okyay 2017, 838), a view that was largely shared also by the Turkish Alevi community and other secular elements of the Turkish society (Hinnebusch 2015, 20). Several refugee camps and surrounding areas were often used by Syrian opposition fighters as sanctuaries for meeting with families, receiving medical treatment, and purchasing supplies (ICG 2013). This was also exacerbating the "sensitive ethnic and sectarian balances, particularly in Hatay province". Tensions were noticed between Hatay Alawites and Sunni refugees from Syria, who were viewed by some Hatay Alawites not merely as refugees, but fighters who had killed or endangered their families and brethren in Syria. Complaints were reported from some Alawite businessmen and public officials that they had been threatened and in some cases blacklisted or intimidated by Sunni refugees (Cagaptay 2013). Many Alawites and Alevis blamed the Turkish government for intentionally placing refugee camps near their localities, thus trying to kick them out of their historic strongholds by replacing them with Sunni Syrian refugees (Nawa 2017). The sense among the Hatay population that AKP was playing the sectarian card and deepening religious and ethnic divisions was reinforced by the introduction of a law in December 2012 (Resmi Gazete 2012), that would reorganize provincial boundaries and separate Antakya along sectarian lines. It was implemented in 2014, and all Alawite districts were gathered under a new name, neighborhood of Defne, while the majority Sunni quarters became Antakya. The residents of the city started calling this new demarcation line "the Berlin Wall" (Letsch 2013).

Ankara also took some steps to reassert the "Turkishness" of Hatay, by printing textbooks for Syrian child refugees that showed it to be a province of Turkey, unlike those in Syria that had been including the region within Syria, despite the fact that it de facto belongs to Turkey (Abdulrahim 2013).

These developments connected to the Syrian conflict, were also contributing to the anti-government sentiments among not only Hatay Alawites, but also Alevis of other regions. In 2014, Erdoğan's election as Turkey's first popularly elected president that consolidated the AKP's position in power, and later on, the constitutional amendment of 2017, that abolished the office of the Prime Minister, making Turkey a presidential republic, further increased the fears of Alevis for their position as a religious minority within a predominantly Sunni state (Tank 2014, 4). Alevis have for years demonstrated against the discrimination against them, connected to various occasions.

(cc) BY

One of the main issues for Alevis has been the community's official recognition as a religious minority, something that Ankara has been refusing to do up to the present. The Alevi community demands from the Turkish state to support Alevi religious services, for example, to recognize their religious leaders as such and recruit them as civil servants. Alevis also seek official recognition of their places of worship, cemevis, demanding state subsidies for the religion. After getting rejects by Turkish courts for these demands, the Alevi community has even applied to the European Court of Human rights, which announced its verdict in April 2016, ruling that the Alevis faced discrimination by the state, and were denied the right to freedom of religion (Hallam 2016).

Alevis seek the recognition of cemevis inasmuch as it will make the Diyanet (Directorate of Religious Affairs) provide financial means for building Alevi cemevis. Nevertheless, the financial means have not been the main issue, rather Ankara's unwillingness or refusal to allow building cemevis. In several occasions when Alevis have been able to construct cemevis, the Turkish authorities have built Sunni mosques nearby. In September 2013, the ground-laying ceremony of building a Sunni mosque and an Alevi cemevi side-by-side was celebrated in Tuzlucayir , a suburb of Ankara, that raised protests among Alevis, which even led to clashes between protesters and the police. It is noteworthy that this suburb is around 80 % populated by Alevis, and the AKP had received less than 10% of the vote here in 2011 parliamentary elections (Tremblay 2013). It is obvious that by building Sunni mosques in such localities, Ankara has been trying to increase the Sunni influence there.

In 2015 an Alevi cemevi was turned into a Sunni mosque in Osmancik, in northern part of Anatolia. Obviously, even if the Turkish state tolerates Alevism as a cultural identity, only Sunni mosques are recognized as places of Islamic worship. Erdoğan is quoted saying that cemevis are not places of worship, rather "a centre for cultural activities", and that "Muslims should only have one place of worship". There are also instances when the Diyanet builds mosques in Alevi towns which they do not need, and accredits Sunni imams (Kingsley, 2017). Moreover, Ankara continuously increases the number of religious schools, that concentrate on the teaching of Sunni doctrine, while in several places there are no secular schools at all (Kingsley 2017). These and several other similar steps have increased the Alevis' fear of assimilation.

In such context, the gradual increase of the numbers of Syrian refugees in Turkey that are now estimated at around 3.5 million (UNHSR 2018), the absolute majority of which are Sunnis, further deepened the sectarian division between Sunnis and Alevis. In 2016, for instance, the Alevi population around the southern Turkish town of Kahramanmaraş demonstrated against the construction of a refugee camp outside the city because of their distrust towards the Sunni refugees and the fear of sectarian tensions. The Economist quotes a Turkish human rights activist, saying that Alevis think "the refugees are jihadists, and the refugees think the villagers are Assad supporters"

(cc) BY

(The Economist 2017). The refugee crisis in Turkey has created a general public resentment against the Syrian refugees, who are blamed for the country's economic difficulties, and the opposition parties, like the CHP, used these sentiments against Erdoğan during the campaign for the presidential and parliamentary elections of 24 June 2018 (Beevor 2018).

Turkey's controversial stance towards ISIS, and its activities in Syria, has been another factor in the Sunni-Alevi divide. Ankara refused to open the Incirlik airbase for the coalition forces that were bombing ISIS, because, as Kadri Gursel states, "AKP ideologoues see ISIS as a Sunni actor and thus attribute the group a certain rationale" (Gursel 2015). Although, after around two months of hesitation, Turkey agreed to allow the US launch air strikes against ISIS from the Incirlik airbase (Reuters, 2015), it did not change the Alevi perception of the AKP's pro-Sunni nature. When in August 2016 Ankara finally decided to send troops to fight against ISIS, Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, the self-proclaimed caliph of the Islamic State, manifestly threatened Ankara, declaring jihad against Turkey. Over the years of 2015 and 2016 ISIS bombings killed hundreds of people in Turkey, from different religions and ethnicities (Nawa 2017). Alevis felt most endangered inasmuch as along with sectarian differences between them and Sunnis, they live close to Turkey's borders which were under direct threat of ISIS. Several incidents of Alevis being a direct target of different ISIS operations and attempted strikes, were uncovered by Turkish police during 2016 (Nawa 2017).

Alevis were also one of the main targets during and after the coup attempt against Erdoğan on 15 July 2016. On the night of the failed coup d'état, fights broke out in the Gezi neighborhood between AKP supporters and Alevis that were not willing to join the demonstrations in support of Erdoğan, and therefore were denounced as traitors. The government started a crackdown against Alevis and many were arrested for allegedly cooperating with what Ankara calls the "Fethullah Terrorist Organization" (FETO), naming it after the exiled Islamic cleric Fethullah Gülen, who was accused by Erdoğan for being behind the failed coup (Bulut 2018).

Thus, despite the fact that the Sunni Islam has always been predominant in Turkey, during the AKP rule the country's state identity has been gradually altered, distancing from Kemalist secularism towards an extra emphasis on majoritarian Sunnism (Tank 2014, 4), which became more obvious by Ankara's policy towards Damascus, particularly during the initial phase of the Syrian crisis.

(cc) BY

## CONCLUSION

Drawing conclusions based on this research it can be stated that Alevis and Alawites are two distinct religious groups, who, along several differences, share a number of similarities, that turn out to be the decisive factors in their mutual sympathy and solidarity. Their almost identical concurrent denominations, in spite of their different origins, their religious similarity and the similar differences they have with mainstream Sunni Islam, along with their secular ideologies and the lack of religious fundamentalism among them seem to be the key uniting characteristics between them.

The deterioration of the relations between Turkey and Syria in the aftermath of the advance of the "Arab Spring" to Syria, and Turkey's sectarian approach and policy towards the Syrian conflict reinforced the existing solidarity between Alevis and Alawites. Ankara's stance against the government in Syria, ruled by Arab Alevis or Alawites, and its logistical, financial as well as military support to jihadist Sunni forces to topple the Damascus regime, meant the almost irreversible breaking off of Turkish-Syrian partnership of over a decade. Turkey's intentions to overthrow Bashar al-Asad and install a Sunni regime in Damascus were opposed by its Alevi and Alawite minorities, a fact, that created difficulties for Ankara's new Syria policy. In this regards, we suggest, that, if Ankara had had public support among Alevis for its stance from the developments in Syria, it might have intervened militarily in Syria in an early period of the conflict, seeking to overthrow the Asad government. But, as we saw, at least the majority of its Alevi and Alawite population were against any military intervention in Syria, and such a step by Ankara might have had unwanted developments for Turkey. Thus, the Alevi / Alawite factor, of course among other geopolitical considerations, had some preventive or mitigatory effects on Turkey's antagonistic plans in Syria. It also has the potential of being a stabilizing factor in Turkish-Syrian relations in the future, if Ankara ceases to pursue a sectarian policy in the region and within the country, considering the Alevis' inclination of having good relations with Syria. Nevertheless, Erdoğan's Syria policy, with its sectarian overtones, had some negative repercussions for Turkey domestically. The primacy of Sunni identity in the AKP's regional foreign policy, and especially its Syria policy, resulted in the growth of the Sunni-Alevi polarization within Turkey. It increased the tensions between Sunnis and Alevis, further emphasizing the distrust and fears of its Alevi, as well as Alawite minorities, towards Erdoğan's Islamist government.

(cc) BY

## REFERENCES

1. *Alevi Turks concerned for Alawi 'cousins' in Syria*, Deutsche Welle, 22 March 2012. http://p.dw.com/p/14OSU
2. *Alevilerin Suriye tavrı inançsal ve ideolojik*, Aksam, 9 September 2012. http://www.aksam.com.tr/roportaj/alevilerin-suriye-tavri-inancsal-ve-ideolojik--137836h/haber-137836
3. Arap Aleviligi Nusayrilik Anadolu Aleviligin nesidir, T24, 6 September 2012. http://t24.com.tr/haber/arap-aleviligi-nusayrilik-anadolu-aleviliginin-nesidir212539
4. Asli S. Okyay, *Turkey's Post-2011 Approach To Its Syrian Border And Its Implications For Domestic Politics*, International Affairs 93: 4, 2017, 829–846.
5. Bakr Sidki, *The Syrian Revolution and the Role of Turkey*, Heinrich Böll Stiftung: Middle East, 3 March 2013.
6. Berk Esen and Sinan Ciddi, *Turkey's 2011 Elections: An Emerging Dominant Party System?*, Rubin Center, October 27, 2011. http://www.rubincenter.org/2011/10/turkey%E2%80%99s-2011-elections-an-emerging-dominant-party-system/
7. Bernard H. Springett, *Secret Sects of Syria and the Lebanon: A Consideration of their Origin, Creeds and Religious Ceremonies, and their Connection with and Influence upon Modern Freemasonry*, The Gresham Press, London, 1922.
8. *Blurring the Borders: Syrian Spillover Risks for Turkey*, REPORT № 225/Middle East and North Africa, International Crisis Group, 30 April 2013.
9. Cengiz Çandar, *Erdogan's misguided Alevi Strategy*, Al-Monitor, 26 May 2016.
10. *Cengiz Güleç: Alevilik ve Nusayrilik arasındaki farklar*, En Son Haber, 10 September 2012. http://www.ensonhaber.com/cengiz-gulec-alevilik-ve-nusayrilik-arasindaki-farklar-2012-09-10.html
11. Constanze Letsch, *Syrian conflict brings sectarian tensions to Turkey's tolerant Hatay province*, The Guardian, 3 September 2013. https://www.theguardian.com/world/2013/sep/03/syria-crisis-threatens-turkish-tolerance
12. Daniel Pipes, The Alawi Capture of Power in Syria, Middle Eastern Studies, 1989. http://www.danielpipes.org/191/the-alawi-capture-of-power-in-syria
13. Eleanor Beevor, *Erdogan is Cooling Towards Syrians in Turkey as Elections Loom*, Al Bawaba, 22 May 2018. https://www.albawaba.com/news/erdogan-cooling-towards-syrians-turkey-elections-loom-1135060
14. *Erdoğan: Suriye bizim iç meselemiz*, Birgün Gazetesi, 8 August 2011. https://www.birgun.net/haber-detay/erdogan-suriye-bizim-ic-meselemiz-59465.html

(cc) BY

15. Fariba Nawa, *Turkey and the Alevis: Letter from Istanbul*, Foreign Affairs, 5 January 2017. https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/turkey/2017-01-05/turkey-and-alevis
16. *First official apology for killings in Dersim*, Hurriyet Daily News, Ankara, 24 November 2011. http://www.hurriyetdailynews.com/first-official-apology-for-killings-in-dersim-7663
17. Halil M. Karaveli, *Turkey, the Unhelpful Ally*, The New York Times, 27 February 2013. https://www.nytimes.com/2013/02/27/opinion/turkey-the-unhelpful-ally.html
18. Halili M. Karaveli, *Why Does Turkey Want Regime Change in Syria?*, The National Interest, 23 July 2012. http://nationalinterest.org/commentary/why-does-turkey-want-regime-change-syria-7227
19. Jeffrey Gettleman, *As Syria War Roils, Unrest Among Sects Hits Turkey*, The New York Times, 4 August 2012. https://www.nytimes.com/2012/08/05/world/middleeast/turkish-alawites-fear-spillover-of-violence-from-syria.html?mcubz=0
20. Kadri Gursel, *Where is Turkey´s place in strategy against IS*, Al-Monitor online, 15 March. http://www.almonitor.com/pulse/originals/2015/03/turkey-islamic-state-place-strategy.html
21. Law no. 6360, Resmî Gazete, 6 December 2012. http://www.resmigazete.gov.tr/eskiler/2012/12/20121206-1.htm
22. Leon Goldsmith, *Syria's Alawites and the Politics of Sectarian Insecurity: A Khaldunian Perspective*, Ortadoğu Etütleri, Volume 3, No 1, July 2011, pp.33-60.
23. Mahmud Faksh, *The Alawi community of Syria: A New Dominant Political Force*, Vol. 20, No. 2, April 1984, pp. 133-153.
24. Mark Hallam, *Turkey discriminates against Alevi faith*, ECHR rules, Deutsche Welle, 26 April 2016. http://www.dw.com/en/turkey-discriminates-against-alevi-faith-echr-rules/a-19214883
25. Martin Kramer, *Syria's Alawis and Shi'ism in Shi'ism, Resistance, and Revolution*, ed. Martin Kramer, Westview Press, Boulder, Colorado, 1987, pp. 237-54.
26. Mehmed S. Kaya, *The Zaza Kurds of Turkey: A Middle Eastern Minority in a Globalised Society*, I.B. Tauris, London, 2011.
27. Michael Stewart, *Modernity and the Alevis of Turkey: Identity, Challenges and Change*, Journal of International Relations, Volume 9, Spring 2007.
28. Nazim Can Cicektakan, *Turkey and Syria: The Alawite dimension*, Foreign Policy Association, 18 March 2012. https://foreignpolicyblogs.com/2012/03/18/turkey-syria-alawite-dimension/
29. Patrick Kingsley, *Turkey's Alevis, a Muslim Minority, Fear a Policy of Denying Their Existence*, The New York Times, 22 July 2017.

(cc) BY

https://www.nytimes.com/2017/07/22/world/europe/alevi-minority-turkey-recep-tayyip-erdogan.html
30. Pinar Tank, *The Domestic Repercussions of Turkey's Syria Policy*, Policy Brief 2014, University of Oslo.
31. Pinar Tremblay, *Turkish Alevis Refuse 'Sunnification'*, Al-Monitor, 13 September 2013. http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2013/09/turkey-shiites-alevis-sunnification-gulen-mosque-cemevi.html
32. Raja Abdulrahim, *Syrian opposition begins rewriting history in textbooks*, Los Angeles Times, 16 April 2013. http://articles.latimes.com/2013/apr/16/world/la-fg-syria-textbooks-20130416
33. Raymond Hinnebusch, *Back to enmity: Turkey-Syria Relations Since the Syrian Uprising*, Orient, Journal of German Orient Institute , vol 56 , no. 1, 2015, pp. 14-22.
34. Soner Cagaptay, *Are Syrian Alawites and Turkish Alevis the same?*, CNN, 17 April 2012. http://globalpublicsquare.blogs.cnn.com/2012/04/17/are-syrian-alawites-and-turkish-alevis-the-same/
35. Soner Cagaptay, *Syria's War Could Inflame Turkey's Hatay Province*, Policywatch 2063, The Washington Institute, 4 April 2013. http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/syrias-war-could-inflame-turkeys-hatay-province
36. Stephen Schwartz , *Erdogan, Iran, Syrian Alawites, and Turkish Alevis*, The Weekly Standard, 29 March 2012. http://www.shiawatch.com/public/uploads/files/Misc_WeeklyStandard_Mar292012.pdf
37. Taha Akyol, *Aleviler ve Nusayriler*, Hurriyet, 31 March 2012. http://www.hurriyet.com.tr/aleviler-ve-nusayriler-20243113
38. *The new neighbors: Turkey is taking care of refugees, but failing to integrate them*, The Economist, 29 June 2017. https://www.economist.com/europe/2017/06/29/turkey-is-taking-care-of-refugees-but-failing-to-integrate-them
39. *Turkey lets U.S. strike Islamic State from Incirlik base: U.S.*, Reuters, 23 July 2015. https://www.reuters.com/article/us-mideast-crisis-usa-airbase/turkey-lets-u-s-strike-islamic-state-from-incirlik-base-u-s-idUSKCN0PX2B520150723
40. *Turkish PM urges Assad to announce reforms soon*, Reuters, 28 March 2011. https://af.reuters.com/article/libyaNews/idAFLDE72R0RX20110328
41. UNHCR Syria Regional Refugee Response. Retrieved 14 April 2018. https://data2.unhcr.org/en/situations/syria/location/113
42. Uzay Bulut, *Persecution of Alevis in Turkey: Threats, Arbitrary Arrests*, 18 January 2018, Gatestone Institute. https://www.gatestoneinstitute.org/11744/turkey-alevis-persecution

43. William Eichler, *Turkey's Arab Alawites and the Syrian conflict*, NAWA (North Africa West Asia), 4 November 2014. https://www.opendemocracy.net/north-africa-west-asia/william-eichler/turkey%E2%80%99s-arab-alawites-and-syrian-conflict
44. Zvi Barél, *Turkey's Alevis hope Erdoğan will soften his stance - as he has pledged*, Haaretz, 28 November. 2013. http://www.haaretz.com/news/middle-east/.premium-1.560780
45. Darya Jigulskaya, *Turetskiy alevizm: religioznaya identifikatsia*, In Russian, [Turkish Alevism: religious identification, Bulletion of MGIMO, № 5 (32) 2013. https://cyberleninka.ru/article/v/turetskiy-alevizm-religioznaya-identifikatsiya
46. *Turkiya wa Suriyya: nihayatu ash-shahr al-'asal*, In Arabic, [Turkey and Syria: The end of the Honeymoon], Ash-Sharq al-Awsat, 27 May 2011. http://archive.aawsat.com/details.asp?section=45&article=623624&issueno=11868#. WsVcoS5ublV