The growing Sunni-Alevi divide in Turkey

In August 2014, Turkish voters chose Recep Tayyip Erdoğan as the country’s first popularly elected President with a clear majority, thus consolidating the Justice and Development Party’s (AKP) position in power. For Turkey’s Alevi population who fear for their position as a religious minority within a Sunni majoritarian state, this was a bleak development. Adding to their concerns are the reverberations of the sectarian war in Syria where Turkey has, since the outbreak of the war, supported Sunni Islamic groups fighting the Assad regime. Although Turkey’s Alevis and Syria’s Alawites differ, Alevi are concerned that the AKP’s policy in Syria would strengthen the Sunni regional position.

Following the Arab Uprisings, Turkey has often been presented as a regional model, despite the AKP’s increasing authoritarianism in recent years. However, Turkey’s ability to project soft power through its identity as a Muslim democracy has focused exclusively on the country’s Sunni identity when in fact fallout from the sectarian conflicts in Iraq and the Syrian civil war, have reignited Turkey’s own unresolved Kurdish issue as well as raising the spectre of Alevi discontent.

This was most apparent in 2013 during the Gezi Park demonstrations which made apparent a deeply polarized society. While the groups protesting at Gezi were diverse, one noteworthy feature was the large number of Turkish Alevi present. Of the protestors who died in Taksim/Gezi, almost all were Alevi citizens. The past five years has seen a politicization of the Alevi question in Turkey under the dominant Sunni AKP finding its expression in the protests that erupted in Istanbul’s Gezi Park in May 2013.

Pinar Tank, Peace Research Institute Oslo (PRIO)
This policy brief examines the Alevi-Sunni divide in Turkey and the consequences of the AKP’s foreign policy in Syria on Turkey’s own sectarian faultlines.

The Ambiguity of Alevi identity in Turkey

The Alevi population in Turkey is thought to be around 10-15% of the overall population although precise figures are difficult to ascertain. Elise Massicard posits that the number of Alevis are “invisible and unquantifiable” due to their fragmentation as a political group - a consequence of “the political atmosphere” from which the movement emerged and in which it has grown, rather than an inherent part of Alevi identity. However, other scholars note the fundamentally heterogeneous nature of Turkish Alevism - the lack of intra-communal religious rites and not least, a central written text - which makes identity consolidation difficult.

Politically, from the 16th century onward, Alevis have challenged the prevailing Hanefi Sunni version of Ottoman Islam. Turkish Alevism is a syncretistic, flexible and tolerant version of popular Islam, combining Shiite Islamic, Turkic, Christian and other local religious and cultural influences. The insistence on a distinct Alevi identity challenged dominant Sunni Hanefi orthodoxy, with the result that Alevis were considered gâvur - non-believers to Islam. Therefore, the Alevi faith was at worst, regarded as apostasy from Islamic faith and heresy. At the very least, it was seen as a misunderstanding to be rectified through unconditional Alevi integration into Sunni Islam. This latter perception is mirrored in today’s discussions of Alevism by Sunni elite.

Alevis were supporters of the Kemalist reformers during the establishment of the Turkish republic, favoring Atatürk’s secular vision to the Islamic theocracy advocated by Sultan Abdülhamid and Ottoman Pan-Islamists towards the Ottoman empire. While Atatürk’s policies of laicism also targeted the Alevi faith by banning religious orders (tarikat) and associations, this was an acceptable trade off to reduce the dominance of Sunni Islam in the state. Worth noting, however, is that although Alevis are considered close to the Kemalist state, particularly in early Republican history, they have also been divided internally along opposing political lines based on ethnicity - a particular example being Kurdish Alevis for whom Kemalism is an anathema to their ethnic aspirations.

The Sunni state model under the AKP: Homogenisation of Islamic identity

Turkey’s secularity is enshrined constitutionally. However, state and religion are not strictly separated but rather the former controls and directs the latter. Although the Treaty of Lausanne (1923) recognizes (in theory) the rights of non-Muslim minorities, it does not accord those same rights to Muslim minorities such as the Alevi-Bektashi. Under the AKP, Turkey’s state identity has shifted from an emphasis on Kemalist secularism to majoritarian Sunnism.
Institutionally, the state controls religion through the Diyanet (Religious Affairs Directorate) which subsidizes the livelihoods of some 77,500 Sunni imams through tax revenues. The institution had a budget of 5.4 billion TL in 2014, more than the combined budgets of nine ministries and a staff which has doubled from 70,000 when the AKP came to power in 2002.⁸

The importance of Diyanet is emphasized in a quote by then President Abdullah Gül (2012) who was the first President in 33 years to visit the institution: “It is undoubtedly one of the most important duties of the Religious Affairs Directorate to teach our religion to our people in the most correct, clear and concise way and steer them away from superstition.”⁹

Despite compulsory taxation, Alevi demands for religious equality and recognition of their houses of worship, “cem evi”, as well as their calls for an end to compulsory religious culture/ethics classes with a Sunni bias, have been dismissed. President Erdoğan has stated that he does not see “cem evi as places of worship” for Muslims who should worship in mosques.¹⁰

The “othering” of Alevi identity within Turkish Islam has been reinforced by smaller symbolically potent acts such as AKP supporters’ jeering at the Alevi faith of the opposition candidate, Kemal Kılıçdaroğlu, at the 2011 elections or in the naming of the third Bosphorus bridge after the Ottoman Sultan Yavuz Sultan Selim (“Selim the Grim”) notorious for killing tens of thousands of Alevis. Finally following a bomb attack in Hatay on the Syrian border, Erdoğan’s reference to the victims as “53 Sunni citizens” and his linking of the bombing to the Gezi park protests a month later have all served to cast Alevis as the internal “Other”.¹¹

The AKP and the Alevi opening

Despite the above, Erdoğan was the first Turkish leader to issue an apology for the 1930s massacre of Alevis by the Turkish state, raising expectations for an improvement in state-Alevi relations. In response to Alevi demands, the AKP launched a process of reconciliation known as the Alevi opening in 2010. The Alevi opening consisted of a series of workshops organized by the state on the Alevi question. These were intended as forums for dialogue between the state, the general public and Alevi groups with the intention of airing grievances. However, the Alevi opening proved a disappointment due to the inability of the AKP to address core Alevi grievances. A few months later, the 30th Ablant platform meeting of Sunni and Alevi leaders/thinkers (organized by the Gulenist Journalist and Writer’s association) underlined the Alevis’ disappointment with the AKP’s initiative which did not address the key demands of equal citizenship rights and religious freedom.¹²

The “boomerang effect” of the AKP’s foreign policy in the Middle East

In a seminal article in 1988, Robert Putnam elaborated on the linkages between international relations and domestic politics, noting the “potential
reverberations of international pressures within the domestic arena”. This is empirically borne out in the Turkish case: The primacy of Sunni identity in the AKP’s regional foreign policy has also had consequences for Sunni-Alevi polarization domestically.

Whereas the Arab Uprisings dealt the final blow to former foreign minister Davutoğlu’s “zero problems with neighbours” policy, in its place the AKP has adopted an interventionist regional foreign policy with clear sectarian overtones. Among other things, the AKP’s interference in Iraqi affairs, support for Sunni militants in Syria, and President Erdoğan’s - over time, very personal - commitment to bringing down the Assad regime has led to accusations by regional leaders that Turkey is fueling conflict in Iraq, Syria and Lebanon. 13 Ironically, in a “boomerang effect”, Turkey’s pursuit of a sectarian foreign policy in the Middle East has served to increase polarization at home.

- At the government level, encourage greater democratization in line with the Copenhagen criteria to which Turkey remains committed;
- At the civil society level, support religious dialogue projects that facilitate peaceful channels for articulating Alevi demands.

1 The Gezi protests included secularist leftists, rightists, Alevis, environmentalists, human rights activists, anti-capitalist Muslims, and LGBT communities
6 Ibid.
7 In fact, it only recognizes the rights of Jewish, Armenian and Greek citizens without according them all the rights established in the Treaty of Lausanne.
9 World Bulletin (2012), “Gül first Turkish president to visit Diyanet in 33 years”, 3 February. See: http://www.worldbulletin.net/?aType=haber&ArticleID=85313

The New Middle East: Emerging Political and Ideological Trends (NewME)

A research project based at the University of Oslo, comprising researchers from PRIO and the UiO. There are several researchers on the project, each working on their own sub-projects within a common framework. The project started in 2011 and will be completed by the summer of 2016. The project is founded by the Norwegian Ministry of Foreign Affairs.