The Domestic Repercussions of Turkey’s Syria Policy

Introduction

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. The past two periods of AKP rule have given rise to a form of majoritarian democracy in which minorities experience a diminishing space for the articulation of their political demands. Adding to Alevi concerns are the reverberations of the sectarian war in Syria where Turkey has, since the outbreak of the war, supported the armed Sunni resistance fighting the Assad regime. Although Turkey’s Alevis, the country’s Alawites and Syria’s Alawites differ, the former two groups are concerned that the AKP’s policy in Syria strengthens the Sunni regional position.

Following the Arab Uprisings, Turkey was often presented as a regional model, despite the AKP’s increasing authoritarianism over time. In a region destabilised by sectarian strife, Turkey’s value as a model should be predicated upon its ability to resolve its own ethnic and sectarian difference. However, Turkey’s ability to project soft power through its identity as a Muslim democracy has focused almost exclusively on the country’s Sunni identity even as the 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 mobilised some three million people across Turkey. They illustrated the extent to which the country was, in fact, a deeply polarized society. While the groups protesting at Gezi were diverse, one noteworthy feature was the large number of Turkish Alevis present. Of the protestors who died in the Gezi protests and their aftermath, all were Alevi citizens (and some were children).

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2 The Gezi protests included secularist leftists, rightists, Alevis, environmentalists, human rights activists, anti-capitalist Muslims, and LGBT communities
The past five years has seen a politicization of the Alevi question (and growing religious conservatism) in Turkey under the dominant Sunni AKP finding its expression in the protests that erupted in Istanbul’s Gezi Park in May 2013.

This policy report examines the Alevi-Sunni divide in Turkey and the consequences of the AKP’s foreign policy in Syria on Turkey’s own sectarian fault lines.

The Ambiguity of Alevi Identity in Turkey

In 2013, the Alevi population in Turkey was 10-15% of the overall population of 77 million although precise figures are difficult to ascertain. Elise Massicard, a prominent scholar of the Alevism, 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. Hakan Yavuz attributes the diversity of Alevi traditions to the nomadic nature of early Alevis. The majority of Alevis are of Kizilbash or Bektashi origin. The two adhere to the same system of beliefs but with significant differences in organization. Bektashis originated from sedentary tribes who, having given up their nomadic lifestyle, were more easily controlled by the Ottoman state while Kizilbash Alevis maintained a semi-nomadic lifestyle and resisted state control. In short, Kizilbash Alevis are traditionally largely rural and identity is determined by parentage while Bektashis are predominantly urban, and formally claim that membership is open to any Muslim. A second important distinction is the historical cooperation between the Kizilbash and the Safavid Empire in the 16th century, which cast a shadow over Alevi allegiance to the Ottoman Empire leading to periods of persecution. This argument was later used to justify perceptions of Alevis as a fifth column within the modern republic.

Descent and family lineage are fundamental to the Alevi religious community with ethnicity playing a key role. In a 2003 census, the Alevi population estimated to be around 10-12 million (of Turkey’s total population of 64 million) was divided along ethnic lines: Turkish, 8-9 million; Kurdish 2-3 million; and Zaza Alevi-Dersimli, 1 million. In addition to ethnicity, regional and class cleavages are challenges to identity consolidation.

10 Ibid.
Politically, from the 16th century onward, Alevis have countered 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 regarded either as apostasy from Islamic faith and heresy or at the very least, it was seen as a misconception to be remedied through Alevi integration into Sunni Islam. This latter perception is mirrored in today’s discussions of Alevism by Sunni elite.

Alevi 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. Despite this, Ulusoy points out that the Kemalist project of secularism recognized the need to mobilise religion in the service of nation-building as well as its uses for “controlling the masses”. He states: “Kemalists considered that the religious opposition against the secularizing reforms came from the Sufi- that is, the non-mainstream, unofficial Islamic orders – rather than the official ulema”. The reason was because the Sufi orders were deeply embedded in society and regarded as reactionary by the state whereas the ulema could be incorporated into the regime through the Directorate of Religious Affairs. The Kemalist project of laicism was in opposition to the dominant Sunni version of Islam in Turkey through its desire to exclude religion from governance while placing it under state control. Berkes further adds that the Kemalist approach was equally about the Turkification of Islam for religious enlightenment (including a translation of the Koran into Turkish so that the text would be comprehensible to Turkish citizens).

Thus, Atatürk’s policies of laicism in fact targeted the Alevi faith by banning religious orders (tarikat) and associations. This was in line with the Kemalist belief in rejecting traditional culture to make way for “modern” definitions of national identity and citizenship. However, for the Alevi, this was an acceptable trade off to reduce the dominance of Sunni Islam in the state. In the words of Gregoriadis “A strictly secular Turkey equally repressive for the public manifestation of all religions and faiths was deemed preferable to preferential treatment of Sunni Islam against Alevism,” even though state controlled Sunni Islam was in fact given preferential treatment through the Directorate of Religious Affairs.

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12 Ibid.
14 Ibid.
16 Ulusoy (2013) op. cit.
17 Gregoriadis (2004), op. cit.
Finally, the question of ethnicity within the Alevi minority is a significant factor when considering relations to the Kemalist state. Although Alevis are considered supporters of Kemalism, particularly in early Republican history, as a group they have also been divided along opposing political lines based on ethnicity - a particular example being Kurdish Alevis for whom Kemalism is an anathema to their ethnic aspirations.

Abstract

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

As explained above, although Turkey’s secularity is enshrined constitutionally, state and religion are not strictly separated but rather the former controls and directs the latter. Although the Treaty of Lausanne (1923), the international treaty establishing the modern Turkish republic, recognizes (in theory) the rights of non-Muslim minorities, it does not accord those same rights to Muslim minorities such as the Alevi-Bektashi. While, the Sunni strain of Islam has always been predominant in Turkey, 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. According to the Diyanet’s own mandate, the institution pledges: “To carry out work on Islamic belief, worship and ethics, enlighten society on religion and administer places of worship (Article 1, Law No.633) in line with the principle of secularism, by staying out of all political views and thinking and aspiring to national solidarity and integration (Article 136 in the Constitution).” This being the case, while the Diyanet was until 2010 a semi-autonomous body, after its placement under the government, it has become vulnerable to political manipulation.

The importance of the Diyanet is reflected in its budget. In 2014, the institution had a budget of 5.4 billion TL more than the combined budgets of nine ministries and a staff which has doubled from 70 000 after 2002 when the AKP came to power. With an increase of 18% from the previous year (2013), the budget stood at almost 2.6 billion USD. Its centrality as a homogenizing institution 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”.

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18 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.
While one of the points in the Diyanet’s mandate is its commitment “to offer services according to the principles of citizenship without distinction of sect, understanding and practice regarding religion”, the Alevi accuse the Diyanet of ignoring their needs. In fact, despite compulsory taxation, Alevi demands for religious equality and recognition of their houses of worship, “cemevi”, as well as their calls for an end to compulsory religious culture/ethics classes with a Sunni bias, were dismissed until recently. This is in contrast with churches and synagogues - recognised by the state as houses of worship. President Erdoğan simply stated that he does not see “cemevi as places of worship” for Muslims who should worship in mosques. Rather cemevis are regarded by the majority Sunni population as cultural centres.

However, a ruling by the European Court of Human Rights on 2 December 2014 stated that Turkey’s state policies on cemevis discriminate against the Alevi community. More precisely, the ruling was based on the Cem Foundation’s 2010 lawsuit against the Turkish state for its refusal to cover the electricity costs for cemevi from the budget of the Diyanet as is the case for mosques, churches and synagogues. The ruling stated that this was a violation of the European court’s Article 14, the prohibition of discrimination, as well as Article 9, the right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion. The response from the chairman of the parliament’s justice commission, AK Party MP Ahmet Iyimaya has been positive - an acceptance of the ruling and a promise to take due course of action. However, while the symbolic nature of the ruling makes it a step closer to Alevi goals, it still does not indicate recognition of the cemevi as equal to the mosque. It is also a change made through external pressure rather than internal reform. Cengiz Hortoglu, the chairman of the Anatolia Alevi Bektashi Federation further adds: "The ECHR judgment is good news. However, Alevis, who are an ancient part of this nation, wished their rights were given by Turkey's democracy, rather than Europe."

Abstract

Religious education under the AKP

In the early days of the republic, from 1927 until 1949, all religious teaching was excluded from the curriculum of primary, secondary and high schools with the reasoning that non-Muslims also live in Turkey. However, with the advent of multi-party democracy in 1959, meeting the religious needs of the population became part of the political agenda and religious courses were available from high school onwards (though with the option to opt out). While Christians and Jews (who are recognized as religious minorities) do not have to attend compulsory Islamic classes, atheists, agnostics and Alevi do not fall into this category and therefore are assimilated under the Sunni umbrella.

References

25 More precisely, the ruling was based on the Cem Foundation’s 2010 lawsuit against the Turkish state for its refusal to cover the electricity costs for cemevi from the budget of the Diyanet as is the case for mosques. The ruling stated that this was a clear violation of the European court's Article 14, the prohibition of discrimination, as well as Article 9, the right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion. Hurriyet Daily News (2014) “Turkey discriminates against Alevi over worship places, Euro court says in landmark ruling”, 2 December. Internet: http://www.hurriyetdailynews.com/turkey-discriminates-against-alevis-over-worship-places-euro-court-says-in-landmark-ruling.aspx?pageID=238&nID=75102&NewsCatID=339
Religion classes in state schools have gradually become compulsory for younger and younger students. They now begin in the 4th grade of primary school and continue through to high school so that upon completion of education in a state school, a student has undergone eight continuous years of religious education. In December 2014, the National Education Council, the highest advisory body to the Ministry of Education, suggested the start of religion teaching for students in nursery schools which elicited nationwide protests by Alevis.

Beyond compulsory religious education classes in state schools, there has also been a rise in pupils attending state run religious secondary schools, called Imam Hatip (imam training) schools, raising fears among liberals, secularists and Alevis that the values of conservative Sunni Islam will continue to dominate in the future. This was also a concern of the Turkish military who, while mobilizing religion after 1980 as a bulwark against ideologies of the left, in the 1997 “soft coup” perceived the secular order to be under threat, leading them to ban Imam Hatip schools. Once the AKP consolidated their position in power following three election victories, these schools were reopened (in 2012) and in November 2014, Erdoğan noted with pride that during the AKP’s time in power, the number of children enrolled in Imam Hatip schools had risen from 63,000 (in 2002-2003) to 983,000. As of February 2015, 1 million children were attending Imam Hatip schools.

Following Alevi complaints, the European Court of Human Rights in Strasbourg ruled in September 2014 against Turkey for forcing religious education on students stating that the education system was “still inadequately equipped to ensure respect for parents’ convictions” and violated the “right to education.” However, Erdoğan has criticized the decision stating that mandatory classes in other disciplines such as physics or chemistry are not open to debate so religion should not be either.

27 Half of the course is on Islam with the rest introducing other religions as well as concepts such as humanism, secularism and ethics. Wikipedia, “Education in Turkey”, http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Education_in_Turkey#Religious_education


29 By contrast, the military constitutionally secured the teaching of religion in secondary schools naming the course “The Culture of Religion and Knowledge of Ethics.”

30 http://www.ft.com/intl/cms/s/0/2c4c4d06-7fab-11e4-adff-00144feabd0c.html


33 Erdoğan’s words following the ruling: “This is an incorrect ruling and there is no similar example in the West....The mandatory physics classes, the mandatory chemistry classes are not sources of debate anywhere around the world. But everybody talks about the religious courses.” (Ibid).
high schools into Imam Hatip institutions. This has meant that some students are forced to enroll in religious education for lack of public schooling options. Kamuran Karaca, the president of Egitim Sen states: “This is a political project for creating a religious generation. They are forcing students to learn Arabic, the Quran and its interpretation in Sunni Islam.”

These moves worry the Alevis who see education as a vehicle for strengthening the Sunni bias in society. On 13 February 2015, secularist and religious minorities held a one-day school boycott in protest against the introduction of compulsory religion classes in primary schools. As is becoming the standard response, the police came down on the protestors with water cannons and pepper spray, detaining activists. The protest leaders were charged with insulting the Turkish President.

Abstract “Othering” of Alevi identity

Official discrimination against Alevis precedes AKP rule. There are few Alevis in prominent positions in the security forces or in the bureaucracy. Although among the Sunni population, there has not been an increase in animosity against Alevis as a whole, statements by AKP government elite, and in particular, Erdoğan, are contributing to the “othering” of Alevi identity through symbolically potent acts.

Within the past few years, there have been several such incidents. For example, during a party rally in August 2010, Erdoğan openly declared his admiration for the sixteenth century Sheikhulislam Ebussuud Efendi who notoriously called on Sunni Muslims to massacre Alevis. In the lead-up to the 2011 elections, AKP supporters’ jeered at the Alevi faith of the opposition candidate from the Republican People’s Party (CHP), Kemal Kılıçdaroğlu. (In fact, Alevi support for the CHP serves to reinforce the polarization between Alevis and Sunnis.)

In March of 2013, the AKP named the third Bosphorus bridge after the Ottoman Sultan Yavuz Sultan Selim (“Selim the Grim”) - notorious for killing tens of thousands of Alevis. Two months later, following a bomb attack in the town of Reyhanlı in Hatay on the Syrian border, Erdoğan referred to the victims as “53 Sunni citizens”. He also accused Turkish Alevi working with Syrian intelligence of carrying out the attack. (Despite the fact that Turkish intelligence in the weeks preceding had warned of a possible attack by militant Sunni groups in response to the clampdown on their activities in Turkey.) In Reyhanlı and nearby towns in the Hatay Province, Alevis fear that this kind of provocation encourages reprisals against their community.

One month later, Erdoğan linked the bombing to the Gezi park protests stating that the demonstrations were a “continuation of Reyhanlı”. These isolated acts, over time, serve to cast Alevis as the internal “Other”.

34 Ibid.
36 There have, however, been clashes between Sunni nationalist groups and Alevis in Turkey’s recent history. These include the massacres of Alevis in Malatya and Maras (1978), Corum (1980) and Sivas (1993).
However, the event that triggered the most vehement reaction in the past year (2014) has been the death of the Alevi schoolboy Berkin Elvan and the AKP’s responses to the incident. This case is worth detailing as it illustrates the Alevi communities’ perceptions of being marginalized as a result of the actions and attitudes of the government. A 13-year old Alevi schoolboy, Berkin Elvan buying bread in a predominantly Alevi neighbourhood, Okmeydani, near Taksim square was caught up in a confrontation between demonstrators and police during the Gezi riots. He was shot by a police gas canister and the injuries he suffered resulted in a coma lasting several months, leading to his eventual death on 11 March 2014. His funeral galvanized Alevis and ordinary Turks alike making it the largest funeral seen in Istanbul’s recent history. During an election campaign speech a day after the funeral, Erdoğan spoke disparagingly of the Elvan’s family’s Alevi identity and had the victim’s mother booed by thousands of his supporters. Commentators remarked on the callousness of Erdoğan’s attitude making a comparative reference to his televised tears following the shooting of a young female Muslim Brotherhood supporter in demonstrations in Egypt.

A few months later, on 22 May, at an observance ceremony in memory of Elvan in Okmeydani, police again opened fire and killed a 30-year old bystander, Ugur Kurt, who was attending a funeral - once again fuelling Alevi anger. Seven major Alevi organisations in Turkey organized demonstrations on 25 May in cities across Turkey including Istanbul, Ankara and Izmir. Alevis were also able to mobilise the diaspora in Europe and 45 000 protestors (primarily, but not exclusively, Alevis) marched in Cologne when the then Prime Minister Erdoğan was in Germany for an election rally.

The Elvan case has also mobilized more violent dissent. These include two terrorist attacks already in 2015 by the The Revolutionary People’s Liberation Party/Front (DHKP-C), a militant Marxist-Leninist group whose members are recruited significantly from the Alevi community. The first, on 1 January 2015 was at Istanbul's historic Dolmabahçe Palace, which houses offices for the Prime Minister It was targeted by a DHKP/C terrorist in an unsuccessful grenade attack. In claiming responsibility, the group said the attack was a vengeance action for Berkin Elvan. Once again, on 3 April, the DKHP-C went to action and took hostage the state prosecutor in the Elvan case. Attempts to identify the officer guilty of Elvan’s murder had proven futile and this was the ostensible reason given for the kidnapping of the prosecutor (who later died in the crossfire between militants and police.)

After a lull in their activities until mid-2000, the organization has made a comeback since 2012, propelled in part by the increased NATO presence in Turkey due to the Syrian crisis. The DHKP-C has since 2012 carried out nearly a dozen attacks including an attempted bombing of the US Embassy in Ankara in February 2013. External and internal grievances deriving from

42 Ibid.
the AKP’s sectarian approach to foreign and domestic affairs have become a platform for extremist action.

Abstract Globalising discourses and identity
The othering of Alevi identity described above is a political move intended to distinguish the Alevis as apart from Sunni Turks. The government’s external pressure may also have the effect of creating greater internal group cohesion and strengthening identity claims. But external factors may also take the form of international influences. As noted earlier, one of the striking aspects of the Gezi Park demonstrations was the high proportion of Alevis present, reflected unequivocally in the casualty figures – all of which were Alevi. A controversial police report released in November 2013 stated that 78% of those taken into custody were Alevi. (The controversy hinged on the admission of religious profiling by security forces). Thus, following the Gezi Park demonstrations in Turkey, one of the questions with regard to Alevi involvement was the extent to which Alevis were influenced by the dominant discourses of the Arab Spring, in particular the demands for greater freedoms and political representation. Hay and Smith (2005) note, “Discourses may play a powerful causal role in determining the trajectory of policy change when used strategically in articulating political demands.” If, as Yavuz states, “The cohesion of Alevi collective identity historically has been determined by external threats rather than a fully articulated shared code of theology or conduct”, then globalising discourses of resistance may be mobilized to articulate and reinforce Alevi resistance to the state.

The data provided by the research survey organization, KONDA, in their Gezi Report of June 2014 notes that when protesters were asked for the single demand fueling their participation, one out of every three protesters cited “freedom as the primary motivation (34.1%) while for one out of every five (18.4%) it was the “demand for their rights”. Furthermore, excluding those who were there for environmental reasons or simply in support of the protests, nine out of every ten protesters participated in the Gezi Park protests motivated by reasons directly related to the policies of the government (freedom, rights, oppression, resignation, democracy and police brutality) while 87% of the protestors identified themselves as a member of a group whose rights are violated or who suffers from injustice.

A historical precedent is found in examining how Alevi identity has been formed by earlier globalizing discourses of resistance. While the politicization of Alevi identity can be traced back to the rise of multiparty politics in Turkey and the emergence of the Democrat party in 1959, its internationalization occurs through the alliance between Alevi politics and the Left during the Cold War. The rapid urbanization of traditional rural Alevi communities in the 1970s strengthened Alevi identity. When military coups in Turkey in 1960 and 1971 polarized

45 Yavuz, H. (2003), op. cit., p. 66
Turkish politics along a left/right axis, Alevi sympathies resonated with the left and Alevi identity found its expression in the secularist leftist politics of the time. Support for revolutionary leftist ideology resulted in confrontations between Alevis and Sunni nationalists (ülkücüs) in the 1970s, most notably in the 1978 pogrom against Alevis in Kahramanmaraş in which more than a hundred Alevis was killed.\(^{47}\) In the 1980s, the mobilization of Alevi identity came to the fore with the growth of the conservative right. Following the 1980 coup, the secular military’s support of the Turkish Islamic synthesis mobilized Sunni Islam as a unifying force and a bulwark against radical left and far right politics. In Eligür’s words, the plan was intended to utilize Sunni Islam to create an “Islamic sense of community and prevent a recurrence of ideological clashes and the political violence of the 1970s.”\(^{48}\) For the Alevis, it had the effect of drawing them further to the left.

Turkey’s Europeanisation process is a second instance in which the globalizing discourse on human rights and democratisation reinforced Alevi political demands consolidating Alevi identity. The Copenhagen Criteria for membership in the European Union expressly state that candidate members must have “stable institutions guaranteeing democracy, the rule of law, human rights and respect for and protection of minorities”.\(^{49}\) While the focus in fulfilling these criteria has been dominated by Turkey’s Kurdish issue, ambitions for joining the union helped frame the Alevi issue within a globalizing discourse of human rights. In the opening of new channels of communication between Europe and Turkey, Ulusoy notes that “The more Alevi cultural politics becomes transnational, the more the interaction between state-centred Turkish identity and Alevi identity was marked by devising new strategies of resistance and acculturation”\(^{50}\)

These two key formative influences on Alevi identity, leftist politics followed by Europeanization, serve to complicate their identification with Arab Spring protestors. On the one hand, Alevis are sympathetic to the demands of the protestors whose calls for greater rights resonate with their own. On the other, by identifying with Arab protestors, they are implicitly supporting the AKP’s discourse of Turkey as a Middle Eastern power rather than a European state.\(^{51}\)

**The AKP and the Alevi opening**

As illustrated above, protests by Alevis have grown over the past two terms of AKP rule. The Alevi opening, launched in the summer of 2007 was seen as an attempt at reconciliation with the Alevi population. In the following months, AKP elite met with representatives of Alevi organisations but the suspicion remained that the AKP was more intent on assimilating Alevis.

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\(^{47}\) The Ülkücüs were also known by the name Grey Wolves. Eligür, B. (2010) *The Mobilization of Political Islam in Turkey*, Cambridge University Press, New York, USA, p. 86.

\(^{48}\) Ibid.


\(^{51}\) This comment is based on interview data presented by Özdemir, Z. and Akder, D.G. (2104) “The International Dimension of Social Movements”, World Middle East Studies Conference, 19 August 2014, Ankara, Turkey.
rather than recognizing their distinct religious identity. In 2008, 200,000 Alevi poured into the streets of Istanbul to protest against government policies and demand equal rights. A series of workshops with Alevi groups launched by the government in 2009 sought to address their concerns. 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. Among these was the Alevi demand for an exemption for their children from obligatory religious culture and ethics classes with a Sunni bias, unacceptable to the AKP. The failure of the process and consequent Alevi disappointment was capitalized on by the AKP’s nemesis, the Gülenist movement. The Gülenist Journalist and Writer’s association at the 30th Ablant platform meeting of Sunni and Alevi leaders/thinkers provided a platform for publically airing Alevi dissatisfaction with the AKP’s initiative which did not address the key demands of equal citizenship rights and religious freedom.

Despite the shortcomings (or perhaps because of them), Erdoğan made a symbolic effort in 2011 apologizing on behalf of the Turkish state for the 1936-39 massacres of Alevis in which 13000 were killed at Dersim (Tunceli). This was a historic statement by a Turkish state leader, the first of its kind.

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. The Syrian crisis has breathed life into the sectarian politics of the Middle East, raising the threat of domestic instability in countries such as Turkey. In the Turkish case, the primacy of Sunni identity in the AKP’s regional foreign policy has had consequences for Sunni-Alevi polarization domestically. It has also raised doubts about the future of the Kurdish peace process.

After the Arab Uprisings dealt the final blow to former foreign minister Davutoğlu’s “zero problems with neighbours” policy, the AKP adopted in its place an interventionist regional foreign policy with increasingly sectarian overtones. Among other things, the AKP developed links with Sunni elites in Iraq and supported the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt giving them a base in Turkey after the Egyptian military coup in 2013. In Syria, its financial and logistic

54 However, in his talk he squarely placed the blame on the ruling Republican People’s Party (CHP) at the time - pointing out that while he could apologize on behalf of the state, the CHP should also apologise for the actions of their party particularly of its leader İsmet İnönü. These comments led to accusations of insincerity and the CHP rebuttal that Erdoğan was less interested in the apology than in blackening his political opposition. CHP Istanbul deputy Safak Pavey’s comments to the European Parliament’s Dersim Conference, 7 June 2012, Brussels. Internet: http://www.safakpavey.com/wp-content/uploads/2012/06/Safak-Pavey-European-Parliament-Dersim-Conference-speech-English.pdf
assistance to the Syrian opposition and Sunni militants (including Al-Nusra) as well as President Erdoğan’s - over time, very personal - commitment to bringing down the Assad regime has led to accusations by leaders – both national and regional - that Turkey is fueling conflict in Iraq, Syria and Lebanon. Reinforcing the perception of sectarianism, Turkey has not made any attempt to assuage “the fears of Syrian Alawite, Christian and Kurdish minorities” in Syria. Furthermore, Turkey stands accused of allowing its sectarian preferences to impact its humanitarian policies. In February 2015, when ISIS militants attacked Christian Assyrians, Turkey faced accusations that it was unwilling to assist Christian Assyrian refugees.

This accusation stands in stark contrast to the open door refugee policy the Turkish government has had towards Syrian refugees seeking asylum from the Assad regime. In fact, Turkey’s humanitarian concern for fleeing Syrians has garnered praise from the international humanitarian community. The government has spent 4.6 billion USD, and received more than half the total refugees from Syria since October 2011. Due to a legal restriction on the definition of refugee, Syrian refugees are referred to as “guests” although the influx of “guests” has created tensions both in border areas and elsewhere in the country. Despite state-of-the-art refugee camps, less than 300,000 Syrian refugees live in them, with some 85% dispersed throughout the country. Turkey’s humanitarianism is complicated by the government’s fears over its own restive Kurds and the consequences of Kurdish unification against ISIS.

There are several constituencies within Turkey who oppose Erdoğan’s Syria policy fearing its consequences for their own communities. Among these are Turkish and Kurdish Alevis and Turkish Alawites. Although the primary motivation behind their resistance differs, there is a tendency to conflate the political position of the three groups because the result, resistance to the AKP’s Syria policy, is the same. However, their distinct positions are worth examining to understand the domestic repercussions of the AKP’s international engagement.

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61 Turkey is a signatory of the 1951 Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees but signed the document with a “geographical limitation” which makes its mandate only applicable to refugees from Europe. Hence, Syrians are referred to as “guests”. 
For the Turkish Alevi, resistance to Erdoğan’s policies in Syria is primarily a result of the fears of polarization within Turkish society along the Sunni/Alevi divide and its consequences for Alevi citizens of Turkey as discussed above. The Sunnification of Turkey’s foreign policy has implications for Turkey’s identity both internationally but also domestically. The discourse on the Turkish “model” since 2002 holds an implicit recognition of the AKP’s promotion of a version of Hanafi Islam which marginalizes and denigrates expressions of Alevi religious identity. The international promotion of this model for the Middle East following the Arab Uprisings is thus problematic for Alevi (as well as secular/liberal Turks). However, it is admittedly a model that has lost its attractiveness with the rise of authoritarianism in Turkey. In fact, the argument can be made that the primacy of Sunni identity at the expense of the minority Alevi identity damages Turkey’s potential as a model. Kurdish Alevis share the fears of polarization; additionally they are affected by the reinforcing cleavage of ethnicity through their kinship with threatened Kurds in Syria and Iraq. The rise of ISIS, the response of the AKP, and the Kurdish pesmerga’s resistance has hardened Kurdish positions against the AKP’s policies.

Turkey’s resolute stance on the removal of the Assad regime as a sine qua non for its participation in the coalition against ISIS stands as a barrier between itself and coalition partners. Turkey has illustrated time and again its refusal to be an active member of the anti-ISIS coalition. The government withheld military support from the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) as ISIS threatened Erbil after capturing Mosul in the summer of 2014. It furthermore refused to open the air base of Incirlik for the coalition forces bombing ISIS because, in one analysts estimation “AKP ideologues see ISIS as a “Sunni actor” and thus attribute the group a certain rationale.”

The lack of a clear plan for removing the Assad regime from power has distanced Turkey from the coalition partners. Instead, Turkish President Erdoğan has sought like-minded regional partners. The result is nascent collaboration between Turkey and Saudi Arabia in Syria with Saudi Arabian support for regime change although this is complicated by critical and conflicting foreign policy positions, particularly on the issue of Egypt and the Muslim Brotherhood.

The Kurdish Position

Turkey’s policies have served to strengthen the Kurdish position in the Middle East. The vacuum that was created by the collapse of the Iraqi Army in northern Iraq has yielded a key role for the Kurdish pesmerga fighters of which there are 100,000 according to the Halgurd Hikmat, a senior official at the Kurdistan Regional Government’s (KRG) Ministry of

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Peshmerga. While they are officially under the command of Iraqi Kurdistan’s president, Masoud Barzani, their loyalties lie with the leaders aligned with the competing Kurdish political factions, the Barzani-led Kurdistan Democratic Party and Iraqi President Jalal Talabani’s Patriotic Union of Kurdistan. Their common mandate to protect Kurdish territory from the onslaught of the ISIS has united these forces and strengthened their cause. The disintegration of the Iraqi army has meant that the KRG leaders now find themselves ruling 40% more territory than before the start of the battle against ISIS. Of particular importance was the establishment in June 2014 of Kurdish control over Kirkuk as a result of fleeing Iraqi troops. Kirkuk has particular political and symbolic value - often referred to by Iraqi Kurdish nationalists as their "Jerusalem". The city is also the centre of one of Iraq’s biggest oil fields, key to the development of an economy to sustain a future state.

In Syria as well, the civil war and the development of Kurdish self-administered areas has erased the border between Syrian and Iraqi Kurds in the northeast of the country. Kurdish solidarity in the fight against ISIS raises concerns in Turkey. The AKP’s reticence towards opening it borders for the passage of Kurdish pesmerga into the border town of Kobane in September-October 2014 to protect local Kurds from ISIS militia angered Turkey’s Kurdish youth in particular. Protests between pro-Kurdish youth and police led to 14 deaths and dozens of injuries, raising tensions in Turkey. Despite the ongoing peace process between the government and the PKK, Turkey’s main pro-Kurdish party, the People’s Democratic Party (HDP) called for street protests “against ISIS attacks and the AKP’s stance on Kobane”.

As with Kirkuk in Iraq, Kobane in Syria is symbolically important. Sirwan Kajjo, a Syrian Kurdish analyst explains: “Kobane symbolises the Kurdish resistance, not only in Syria but in other parts of the Middle East. Its loss would translate into a defeat for the entire Kurdish nation. The city has gained strategic importance now, partly because it is the first Syrian town to stand against ISIL for such a long time. Other Syrian towns and cities fell into ISIL hands without any resistance.”

Despite its own hand in it, the strengthening of the Kurdish position regionally is a red flag for Turkey. The AKP regards both the Kurdish movement and ISIS as threats to national security – even at a time in which there is an ongoing Turkish-Kurdish peace process. This perception of threat was apparent after the Turkish parliament’s vote on 2 October 2014 sanctioning Turkish troops crossing its southern border into Syria. They were justified due to “risks and

67 Middle East Eye (2014) "14 dead in Turkey as Kobane brings pro-Kudish protesters to streets”, 7 October. www.middleeasteye.net.
threats against our national security along Turkey’s southern land borders”. Although the action would appear to be aimed specifically at ISIS, the threat from the Kurdistan Workers’ Party (PKK) was the key rationale as emphasized in the preamble to the authorization which does not mention ISIS and refers rather to the threat posed by the PKK.⁶⁹ On 4 October, Turkish President Erdoğan defended the authorization stating: “ISIS and PKK are the same”.⁷⁰ The siege on the Kurdish town Kobane and the refusal of the Turkish government to intervene is illustrative of the unwillingness the AKP to come to the assistance of Kurds in Syria. The government has been accused of complicity with the result that the leader of the PKK, Abdullah Öcalan, openly warning that the fall of Kobane would end the Turkish-Kurdish peace process initiated in 2012.⁷¹

**Turkish Alawites concerns**

Finally, Turkish Alawite concerns focus more particularly on Turkey’s anti-Assad policy in Syria and its implications for the future of their ethnic community – the Syrian Alawites and their leader Bashar Al-Assad. The Syrian crisis has renewed ties between Syria and the Turkish district of Hatay (that only became a part of Turkey in 1939, 15 years after the declaration of the Republic). Many living on either side of the border came from Alawite clans that were divided as a consequence of Hatay’s inclusion into Turkey. Some are now reunited through the upheaval of war. However, Turkish Alawites are afraid to express their solidarity with those Alawites across the border who suffer from jihadi violence. As an example, on 9 February 2014, al-Qaeda and Islamic Front groups massacred people in the Alawite village of Maan near Hama. The Syrian Observatory for Human Rights stated that half of the 40 victims were civilians. Thirty-two of the victims were from the Haddur clan.⁷² Across the border, in the Turkish village of Hancagiz near Samandag, their clans’ people were afraid to grieve openly for fear of becoming targets of militant Sunni groups. However, Alawites in Hatay, Mersin, Istanbul and elsewhere in Turkey protested as they also did following the 2013 massacre in Latakia.

In sum, since the beginning of the Gezi protests, the AKP has faced increasing unrest from the Alevi community – Turkish and Kurdish - and a simmering Alawite revolt. Thus, in a “boomerang effect”, Turkey’s pursuit of a sectarian foreign policy in the Middle East has served to increase polarization at home.

**Conclusion**

The activist foreign policy of Turkey’s former Foreign Minister, now Prime Minister Ahmet Davutoğlu, raised Turkey’s international standing from regional power to an aspiring rising power. Much of this is due to the combined factors of international investment and domestic stability with the former dependent on assessments of the latter. In particular, the diminution

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⁷⁰ Ibid.

⁷¹ For more on the Kurdish peace process, see Tank, P. (2013) “Between Turkey’s AKP and the Gülen movement: Perspectives on the Kurdish peace process”, IKOS Report 3, Department of Culture Studies and Oriental Languages, University of Oslo.

of hostilities between the Kurdish PKK and the Turkish state over the past decade has contributed towards domestic stability.

However, the AKP’s third election victory in 2011 brought with it an increasingly tighter grip on power. The Gezi Park protests in 2013 came as a response to the narrowing of the political space for opposing views. A disorganized and ineffective political party opposition coupled with Erdoğan’s understanding of majoritarian democracy as a legitimate form of governance has created fissures in society now exacerbated in a powder keg of sectarianism, polarization, and nationalism.

The war on Turkey’s doorstep, while not a territorial threat, has the potential to impact security domestically and this is in large part due to the ideological underpinnings of Turkish foreign policy under the AKP. Even as Turkey has had resurgence both economically and politically on the international stage, the AKP’s policy in Syria risks undermining these gains.

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.