



## **Turkey – Researched and compiled by the Refugee Documentation Centre of Ireland on 24 January 2018**

### **Information today on how Erdogan and the Turkish government's treatment of the Alevi Kurds and what discrimination is faced by them in relation to practising their religion.**

A report from the Norwegian religious freedom organisation Forum 18, in a paragraph headed “An opening for Alevis?”, states:

“The AKP government's ‘Alevi opening’, which started in 2010, has failed to produce any concrete result to protect the freedom of religion or belief of Turkey's Alevi community – which may be as large as one third of the population. The Alevis' basic demands have remained the same for decades. They include: recognition of Alevi cem houses (cemevi) as place of worship; abolishing compulsory school RCKE courses (also required by the ECtHR in Strasbourg); and elimination of discrimination and freedom of religion or belief violations caused by the Diyanet. This is a community whose freedom of religion or belief problems the government has repeatedly claimed it will resolve.” (Forum 18 (16 January 2014) *Turkey: Religious freedom survey, January 2014*)

A report published by the Washington Institute states:

“The Alevi community's concerns stem not only from the AKP's Syria policy -- which is seen as largely pro-Sunni -- but also from the AKP's straightjacket socially conservative views. The Alevis are simply not represented in the upper echelons of the AKP. In the past, any Alevis who did end up joining the AKP found themselves largely secluded, which led them to abandon the party. Reha Camuroglu, an Alevi intellectual who joined the Turkish parliament on an AKP ticket in 2007, resigned from his post in June 2008, citing bigotry against the Alevis by AKP officials.

The AKP has adopted a liberal attitude towards Turkey's religious diversity. Indeed, compared to their predecessors, the rights of non-Muslims in Turkey have been advanced. For instance, last year the government restored property confiscated by the Turkish state in the twentieth century from Christian churches back to their rightful owners.

The Alevi community, however, has seen little advancement from the government. Turkish legislation stipulates that the government must pay for the upkeep of mosques. The AKP has introduced legislation to extend assistance to also include churches and synagogues. The Alevi community was notably left out of such legislation regarding the upkeep of *cemevis* -- their houses of worship. For decades, the Alevi community has been campaigning for government subsidy to maintain cemevis. Not only has the AKP rejected such demands, but Mustafa Albayrak, an AKP member of parliament, has gone as far to suggest that ‘allowing government subsidies to

*cemevis* would open the path for subsidies to devil worshippers.’ The AKP leadership too does not appear to have warm feelings towards the Alevis. The Alevis (and equally heterodox Alawites) want little to do with the country's ruling party.” (The Washington Institute (24 March 2014) *Turkey's Slow-Burning Alevi Unrest*)

The 2017 Freedom house report for Turkey states:

“In April 2016, the European Court of Human Rights ruled that Alevis were subject to discrimination because the state refused to recognize their faith and provide support for their houses of worship, as it does for Sunni mosques.” (Freedom House (15 April 2017) *Freedom in the World 2017 – Turkey*)

The 2017 US Commission on International Religious Freedom report for Turkey, in a paragraph headed “Alevis”, states:

“Alevis make up 20 to 25 million of Turkey's total population. Alevis worship in *cemevis* (gathering places), which the Turkish government does not consider as legal houses of worship and thus are denied legal and financial benefits available to other houses of worship. In April 2016, the ECtHR held that the Turkish government was violating the European Convention by not recognizing Alevi places of worship and religious leaders. However, in 2016 the Turkish government designated 126 Alevi dedes (faith leaders), located in several European countries, as ‘field experts.’ While stopping short of deeming them as religious leaders, the designation provides them some recognition so they can advocate for the community's interests. The court also ruled that only Alevi leaders could determine which faith (Islam or not) their community belonged to.” (US Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF) (26 April 2017) *USCIRF Annual Report 2017 - Tier 2 countries – Turkey*)

The 2016 US Department of State report on religious freedom in Turkey, in a section headed “Government Practices”, states:

“The government continued to limit the rights of non-Muslim minorities, especially those it did not recognize as being covered by the 1923 Lausanne Treaty. It continued to consider Alevism a heterodox Muslim group and continued not to recognize Alevi houses of worship (*cemevis*). As part of a larger shut down of television and radio stations by government decree on allegations of spreading terrorist propaganda, the government closed an Alevi-owned television station in September. Alevis expressed concerns about security and said the government failed to meet their demands for religious reforms. (US Department of State (15 August 2017) *2016 Report on International Religious Freedom – Turkey*)

This report also states:

“In September the government shut down 20 television and radio stations that authorities said were spreading terrorist propaganda. One of the shuttered stations was Alevi-owned TV10. In December the Radio and Television High Council shut down Alevi television channel Yol TV for ‘insulting President Erdogan, promoting discrimination in society, and praising terrorist organizations.’ (ibid)

Referring to a ruling by the ECHR this report states:

“At year's end, the government still had not complied with a 2013 ruling by the ECHR which found that the government's compulsory religion courses in public schools violated educational freedoms, even though the ECHR had denied the government's appeal of the ruling in 2015. The ECHR ruling upheld the Alevi community's claim that the courses promoted Sunni Islam and were contrary to their religious convictions. Although authorities added material on Alevism to the religious course curriculum in 2011 after the ECHR decision, many Alevis stated the material was inadequate and, in some cases, incorrect. Construction began in March 2015 on an Alevi school, which then-National Education Minister Nabi Avci said the government would build in cooperation with the NGO Helping Hands Foundation as a venue for teaching Alevi-Bektashi beliefs. According to the government, construction of 40 percent of the school's main building and 15 percent of the annex buildings had been completed by the end of the year.

In June Alevi organizations issued a statement protesting a Ministry of National Education memorandum that mandated teachers to read and study a book that the Alevis said described the Alevi Muslim faith as ‘distorted’ and ‘decayed.’” (ibid)

In an article published in the Turkey Analyst the author Gareth Jenkins states:

“According to its constitution, the modern Turkish Republic is a secular state. However, even before the AKP first came to power in November 2002, Alevis experienced widespread discrimination. It was very rare to find an Alevi in a prominent position in the bureaucracy or security forces. The compulsory religious lessons in Turkish schools consisted solely of the inculcation of Sunni Islamic beliefs and practices and textbooks inveighed against what was described as the divisive nature of religious heterodoxy. The state-funded Directorate of Religious Affairs focused exclusively on providing services to Sunni Muslims: building and paying for the upkeep of mosques and paying the salaries of Sunni Muslim clergy. Unlike mosques, cemevis – where Alevis hold their religious ceremonies – were not even recognized as places of worship.” (Jenkins, Gareth (11 June 2014) *Watching the Horizon: Turkey's Beleaguered Alevis*, The Turkey Analyst, Vol.7, No. 11))

This article also states:

“In August 2010, during a party rally in Çorum, Erdoğan expressed his admiration for the sixteenth century SheikhuIslam Ebussuud Efendi, who is notorious for calling on Sunni Muslims to massacre Alevis. In February 2012, more than 40 houses belonging to Alevis in Adıyaman were identified by being daubed with paint – something that historically has been the prelude to a pogrom. AKP officials dismissed the incident as ‘the work of children’. However, over the last two years, there have been more than one dozen similar incidents across the country. In March 2012, when seven suspects who were being tried for their alleged involvement in the Sivas massacre were released under the statute of limitations, Erdoğan responded by declaring: ‘May it be propitious.’” (ibid)

Referring to an event known as the Gezi Park Protests this article states:

“For many Alevi, it began to feel as if not just some houses but their entire community was being singled out in preparation for persecution. Not surprisingly, Alevi formed a large proportion of the estimated three million protestors who took to the streets in summer 2013 in what have become known as the Gezi Park Protests. Significantly, all six of the people killed as a result of police action during the summer protests came from Alevi families. Erdoğan not only refused to express his condolences to the families of the slain but repeatedly praised the actions of the police.

On March 11, 2014, 15 year-old Berkin Elvan, who had been struck on the head by a police gas canister when he went out to buy bread for his family during the Gezi Park Protests, died after nine months in a coma. His distraught mother blamed Erdoğan for her son’s death. Erdoğan responded by describing Elvan – who was only 14 at the time he was struck – as a terrorist and led a rally of AKP supporters in booing the boy’s mother. Few Alevi believe that Erdoğan would have displayed such callousness if Elvan and his family had been Sunni.” (ibid)

An article from the New York Times states:

“Wary of Sunni dominance of public life, Alevi are key stakeholders in the secular Turkish state, and yet have suffered under staunchly secular governments, too. They exemplify the parts of Turkey that feel most threatened by Mr. Erdogan — secularists and minorities like the Kurds and Alevi — while highlighting both the authoritarianism and religious nationalism that predated him, as well as the disparate nature of the coalition that opposes him.

‘Secularists talk about Erdogan as an Islamist, whereas Alevi often look at him as explicitly Sunni,’ said Howard Eissenstat, a Turkey expert at St. Lawrence University and nonresident senior fellow at the Project on Middle East Democracy, a think tank in Washington.

Under Mr. Erdogan, Mr. Eissenstat said, average Alevi feel ‘they’re being pushed further to the edge.’ And yet throughout Ottoman and Turkish history, ‘there has never been a moment when they felt utterly secure,’ Mr. Eissenstat added.” (New York Times (22 July 2017) *Turkey’s Alevi, a Muslim Minority, Fear a Policy of Denying Their Existence*)

A report from the Germany-based NGO the Society for Threatened Peoples states:

“On the occasion of the beginning of a court hearing regarding a broadcasting ban on the Cologne-based Alevi TV channel ‘Yol’ next Wednesday in Ankara, Turkey, the Society for Threatened Peoples (STP) accuses the Turkish government of trying to silence this independent critical voice of the approximately 15 million Alevi. The human rights organization demanded that ‘Yol TV’ should be able to broadcast its program via the Turksat satellite again. On December 21, 2017, the Turksat operating company had shut off Yol TV’s transmission frequency, claiming that the TV station had insulted the President of the Republic of Turkey.” (Society for Threatened Peoples (18 December 2017) *Alevi protest against being silenced by Erdogan*)

This response was prepared after researching publicly accessible information currently available to the Research and Information Unit within time constraints. This response is not and does not purport to be conclusive as to the merit of any particular claim to refugee status or asylum. Please read in full all documents referred to.

### References:

Forum 18 (16 January 2014) *Turkey: Religious freedom survey, January 2014*  
[http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article\\_id=1916](http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=1916)  
(Accessed 22 January 2018)

Freedom House (15 April 2017) *Freedom in the World 2017 – Turkey*  
<http://www.refworld.org/docid/58ff3e19f.html>  
(Accessed 22 January 2018)

Jenkins, Gareth (11 June 2014) *Watching the Horizon: Turkey's Beleaguered Alevi*, *The Turkey Analyst*, Vol.7, No. 11)  
<http://www.turkeyanalyst.org/publications/turkey-analyst-articles/item/240-watching-the-horizon-turkeys-beleaguered-alevis.html>  
(Accessed 22 January 2018)

New York Times (22 July 2017) *Turkey's Alevi, a Muslim Minority, Fear a Policy of Denying Their Existence*  
<https://www.nytimes.com/2017/07/22/world/europe/alevi-minority-turkey-recep-tayyip-erdogan.html>  
(Accessed 23 January 2018)

Society for Threatened Peoples (18 December 2017) *Alevi protest against being silenced by Erdogan*  
<http://www.ein.org.uk/members/country-report/alevis-protest-against-being-silenced-erdogan>  
(Accessed 22 January 2018)  
This is a subscription database

US Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF) (26 April 2017) *USCIRF Annual Report 2017 - Tier 2 countries – Turkey*  
<http://www.refworld.org/docid/59072f3913.html>  
(Accessed 22 January 2018)

US Department of State (15 August 2017) *2016 Report on International Religious Freedom – Turkey*  
<http://www.refworld.org/docid/59b7d82a13.html>  
(Accessed 22 January 2018)

The Washington Institute (24 March 2014) *Turkey's Slow-Burning Alevi Unrest*  
<http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/turkeys-slow-burning-alevi-unrest>  
(Accessed 22 January 2018)

**Sources Consulted:**

Electronic Immigration Network  
European Asylum Support Office  
European Country of Origin Information Network  
Google  
Human Rights Watch  
Immigration and Refugee Board of Canada  
Lexis Nexis  
Refugee Documentation Centre Query Database  
UNHCR Refworld  
US Department of State