

## **Migration, Migrant Policies and Changing Cultures of Belongings: Alevi from Turkey in Germany and the United States**

By Asiye Kaya

Most migration studies tend to ignore the extent to which formal immigration and integration policies of the receiving countries affect the formation of feelings of collective belonging among immigrants. This is an aspect of particular importance when examining the experiences of migrants who came from countries where they had already existed as minority groups. Members of ethnic groups who were defined and sometimes persecuted as minorities in their countries of origin may face double jeopardy in the receiving states, becoming a minority within a transplanted minority. One example of this experience centers on the Alevi, a social and religious minority group from Turkey, many of whom now live in Germany and in the United States. To understand their different feelings of “belonging” in new homelands, we must first examine the contexts provided by immigration policies in both countries of residence, as well as by policies defining such minority groups in the respective country of origin.

### **Understanding Alevism**

It is essential to note that historically, socially, and politically, Alevi have always constituted a religious minority group in Turkey, where followers of the Sunni faith still constitute an established majority group today. The Alevi community comprises about 25 percent of the national population. Alevism consists of a mixture of religious persuasions; as a mainly Anatolian faith, it includes Shamanistic elements and Zoroastrian beliefs predating the onset of monotheistic religions. In other words, it offers an unorthodox interpretation of Islam which is based on oral tradition, as opposed to the written religion of the Sunni faith. Furthermore, Alevism is defined through shared historical and social memories and socio-cultural and religious traditions, as well as through a shared system of symbols. Since the difference between mainstream Islam and Alevi theology and rituals is so large, some Alevi see themselves, as do more orthodox Muslim groups, as non-Islamic.

Regardless of whether they belong to a Turkish or to a Kurdish ethnic group, the primary historical experience of most Alevi has been grounded in stigmatization. They were often subject to persistent discrimination and persecution in Turkey. Alevi did not openly profess their faith or identify themselves to others, nor did they publicly cultivate a separate community. Within the family, however, all members were well aware of their minority status and passed this awareness on from generation to generation. The (forced) assimilation politics of the Turkish state and its official refusal to accept them as an autonomous faith (dating back to the time of the Ottoman Empire) usually led Alevi to conceal their identities in the face of political and social pressure (*takiya*, holding one’s identity secret in case of persecution). In 2007, Turkish Prime Minister Tayyip Erdogan (AKP) undertook the highly symbolic act of celebrating a significant religious Alevi holiday with representatives from different Alevi organizations. This was seen, in part, as a significant act of recognition with regard to the Alevi’s collective identity in Turkey.

### **Context Matters: Alevi Consciousness in America**

Migration from Turkey to the United States goes back to the nineteenth century, including a small number of Alevi as well as (persecuted) Christian minorities. Alevi began emigrating in larger numbers from Turkey to Europe (especially to Germany), Australia, and the United States in the 1960s. Although their initial reasons were essentially economic, political problems became the dominant push-factor for migration in the 1980s. Over the last fifteen years, access to greater educational opportunity, opportunities to obtain Green Cards, and special diversity programs have also played an important role in their resettlement to the U.S.

In contrast to Germany, Turkish migrants have never been central to U.S. migration concerns—in contrast to Hispanics. Persons from Arabic countries are the target group in terms of Muslim issues, Islam, and integration rather than migrants from Turkey. The post-9/11 debate in the

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United States has focused increasingly on the security aspects of immigration, which were already being discussed in the mid-1980s, along with irregular (illegal) immigration. Most debates regarding the integration of newcomers concentrates on Latin Americans, especially on Mexicans.<sup>1</sup> Since the beginning of the war in Iraq, however, more attention has been paid to Kurdish people and to Turkey, home to millions of Kurdish, where they are often labeled “terrorists” by the government.

Based on my research—limited to groups in Washington, DC, New York, and New Jersey, to date—Alevi consciousness is closely connected with the issues of Turkish nationalism, Kurdish movements in Turkey and the Kurdish state in Iraq.

Given that most immigrants from Turkey living in Washington, DC, consider themselves as highly skilled, modern, and Western-oriented, the claim of Aleviness within Turkish communities is seen as backward and self-isolating or segregationist. Although Turkish born residents do not have any official or public significance for migrant politics in the U.S., there are Turkish organizations, particularly in Washington, DC, trying to develop a political voice in pluralist U.S. society. Washington symbolizes the center where important, global decisions are made. Since the political landscape in Washington is significant both for policymaking in the U.S. and for impacting political strategies in Europe, mobilization in America is particularly significant for Turkey’s efforts to join the European Union.

This also means, however, that differences among the immigrants from Turkey are seen as a threat. Ethnic claims made by Kurdish minorities are met with accusations that they are pursuing national division. Turkishness as an overall definition represents the mainstream; that prevents most Alevis, particularly in Washington, from defining themselves in terms of some other religious or ethnic forms of belonging. This involves a reproduction of the majority structures of Turkey in the U.S., including a reproduction of ideological structures concealing the Alevi belonging of members within these Turkish communities. Partly because of the role of Washington, as mentioned above, many people from Turkish organizations—through whom I hoped to find more Alevis at the beginning of my field work—were surprised by this question and merely assumed that there were very few Alevis to be found in the Washington metropolitan area.

The interviews I conducted in Washington, DC, led me to assume that reflections on feelings of Alevi “belonging” are quite different, depending on whether one lives in the nation’s capital, in globalized New York City, or in peripheral areas like New Jersey. In Washington, members of the community discuss the question mostly with regard to political awareness and events. The more distanced they feel themselves to be from the Turkish majority, the more these individuals highlight Alevi identity in regard to their Kurdishness. The *Newroz*<sup>2</sup> celebration, for example, offers them a significant moment to situate themselves in consideration of belonging.

During my stay in the U.S., I participated as an observer in two different *Newroz* celebrations. For self-ascribed members in and around Washington, the *Newroz* celebration made it clear that Kurdishness was a dominant element in defining Alevi belonging; it further represented a transnational belonging beyond Turkey and Iraq. However, the *Newroz* celebration I witnessed in New Jersey tended to be dominated by persons identifying with the Kurdish movement within Turkey, and thus had a kind of dividing function for the non-organized Alevi communities. In other words, many Alevis who could not or would not identify themselves with the claims of the Kurdish movement in Turkey did not take part in this *Newroz* celebration.

As a faith, Alevism has been practiced among groups who distance themselves from political debates. Generally the debates over the Kurdish or Turkish dimensions of Alevi belonging have hindered Alevis from building their own organization(s); there are no Alevi organizations in the United States. In contrast to groups in Germany or in other parts of Europe, they do not demonstrate/protest and do not react to political change in Turkey as *Alevis*. Because the

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various forms of immigration and migration procedures are quite different from those in Europe, chain migration seldom occurs; the Green Card lottery plays a significant role because it enables people to migrate with their families. People live accelerated lives: since the United States is not known for its generous social benefits, economic concerns are a top priority: everybody has to find his/her own way in terms of belonging. In the United States, the Alevis—as a minority group—have a chance to live as they wish. But then it becomes a personal question of how they do wish to live—a question of individual self definition.

### **Migration Law Matters: Alevis in Germany**

The genealogy of contemporary Alevi belonging and collective identity in Germany differs strongly from that witnessed in the United States. Historically populated by immigrants since its founding, the U.S. has long recognized itself as a destination country for migration from all over the world. Germany first officially declared itself a country open to immigration in 2005, after several decades of vehement societal and political debate. Beginning with the guest worker labor migration wave in the 1950s and extending through 9/11, Germany refused to acknowledge that Turkish migrants could be anything but “foreigners”—now referred to as “people with migrant background.” “Turks” represented a group of people who were thought of as unable to be integrated into the Western world, ostensibly because of their Islamic beliefs. Since 9/11 the debates regarding migrants and integration has increasingly concentrated on “Muslims”—although as noted above, Alevis are not recognized as such by Sunni and other Islamic denominations.

The attacks of September 11 have conflated and intertwined debates about immigration and integration with national security issues, especially in relation to Muslims in Germany. Mixing the two has also led politicians and the public to question, whether (or not) Islam can really be “naturalized” (*Einbürgerung des Islams*), as part of a democratic German society.<sup>3</sup> Debate regarding the integration of Muslims has been reduced to a single variable—religion—symbolized by issues such as headscarf use, so-called honor killings, and forced marriages. There is a great deal of ethnic and cultural heterogeneity among Muslims—including people from Turkey, Bosnia, Arabian countries, and Albania—as well as wide variety regarding types of community organization with divergent religious rituals and interpretations of Islam (Sunnis, Shias, Alevis, Ahmadi). Yet in Germany they are viewed publicly as a more or less homogeneous group.

The year 1993 marked a turning point for migrants of Turkish origin in Germany, based on two core events evoking differentiated debates on “belonging”: the first centered on arson attacks against Turkish families in Mölln and Solingen, Germany, the first big xenophobic (*“ausländerfeindlich”*) incidents in the West after the fall of the Wall. The second took place in Turkey, involving a major assault on Alevis in Turkey. While the first experience brought together the migrants from Turkey, the second attack raised a huge discussion about situation of Alevis as a minority group in the homeland. European-wide demonstrations condemning historical and contemporary attacks on the Alevi brought the first awareness about the existence of Alevis as a separate group among migrants from Turkey.

The question of belonging in Europe is strongly linked with the development of ethnic associations. My interviews in Germany suggest that the families have passed the main responsibility of explaining what Alevism is on to the established Alevi organizations.

Political and public awareness about conditions facing the Alevi people has increased gradually in recent years, especially in relation to gender issues, since it is mostly reduced to the knowledge that Alevi women do not have to wear headscarves. Alevis are generally compared with the mainstream of Sunni Islam in order to highlight an allegedly different form of belonging that “presents a culture, philosophy and version of Islam that is perfectly compatible with, and in some respects even exemplary of, the ideals of western democratic societies.”<sup>4</sup>

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Because Turks in general are targeted as the main example of “failed integration” in German society and because they have come to symbolize (erroneously) the non-integratable “Muslim” migrant, Turkey now faces difficulty in trying to join the EU. This leads Alevis in Germany to insist on their Alevi identity as a way of distancing themselves from the “non-integratable” Muslims—that is, from Turkish people who are practicing Sunnis.

Different experiences among Alevis both in the country of origin as well as in their countries of resettlement show that there is no single “other” for Alevis: belonging depends on their context-specific experiences in Turkey, in the U.S., and in Germany. There are different “others,” depending on whether Alevism is seen as a personal faith, as a formal religion, as political belonging, or as a collective ethnic identification. From a religious perspective, “the other” could be a puritan Sunni, or a religious fanatic. This “other” could also be a political or ethnically oriented Alevi. To the extent that Alevism is considered as a form of political belonging, it is mostly mentioned in conjunction with the Kurdish movement, leaving open the question whether one is a leftist, a Turkish nationalist, or a right-wing extremist. A Turkish or Kurdish nationalist, or a right-wing activist, in turn, might represent the political “other.” It is important to highlight the content and conditions of the society in which Alevis live as a minority group or have arrived in as permanent immigrants in order to understand how their (collective) belonging is continually being re-formed.

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<sup>1</sup> Focus Migration, Country Profile, 08/2007.

<sup>2</sup> Newroz (new day), the first day of spring which usually takes place on March 21, is also the first day of the Iranian year as well as a Zoroastrian holiday.

<sup>3</sup> The new study on Muslims in Germany in 2007 was titled “Muslime in Deutschland - Integration, Integrationsbarrieren, Religion sowie Einstellungen zu Demokratie, Rechtsstaat und politisch-religiös motivierter Gewalt.”

<sup>4</sup>Kira Kosnick, “Speaking in One’s Own Voice: Representational Strategies of Alevi Turkish Migrants on Open-Access Television in Berlin,” *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies* Vol. 30, No. 5 (1 September 2004).