

Erdogan, Iran, Syrian Alawites, and Turkish Alevi

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Turkish prime minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan has a habit of shifting positions toward his country's neighbors, while pursuing the "soft Islamist" political agenda of his Justice and Development party (AKP). Erdogan's Turkey was a close ally of Assad's Damascus clique until the Syrian massacres, and the escape of at least 17,000 Syrians across the border into Turkey, compelled the Turks to oppose Assad's grip on power. On Sunday, April 1, the "Friends of Syria" will hold their second meeting, grouping 80 countries, in Istanbul—the first was held in Tunisia in February. Turkey's current leaders are anxious for action on Syria, according to [The National](#), a newspaper based in Abu Dhabi. Erdogan has suggested that a "buffer zone" be established on the Turkish-Syrian border to handle an anticipated surge in refugees. As the Assad regime keeps its hold on the state, and continues slaying Syrian citizens, Turkey appears stymied, notwithstanding its anti-Assad rhetoric.

Erdogan has turned his frustrations over Syria against Turkey's heterodox Alevi religious community. Alevism represents a fusion of pre-Islamic Turkish shamanism, Shia Islam, and spiritual Sufism. Its followers are known for their commitment to gender equality and secular governance. Although the pre-Erdogan Turkish political system was militant in its secularism, it controlled Muslim observance by recognizing Sunnism as the only legitimate form of Islam in Turkey. Alevi, as non-Sunnis, have long been victims of discrimination in Turkish education, social services, and religious life.

Beginning last year, AKP leaders including Erdogan accused Kemal Kilicdaroglu, the Alevi leader of Erdogan's main political opponents, the secularist Republican People's party (CHP), of support for Assad, and alleged "sectarian solidarity" between Turkish Alevi and Syrian Alawites. With about 2.5 million believers, or 12 percent of the population in Syria, Alawites account for most of Assad's bureaucratic functionaries and military elite. Kilicdaroglu has been outspoken in his condemnation of Erdogan's alienation from Israel but has argued against military intervention in Syria. On March 22, the leading Turkish daily *Hurriyet* quoted Erdogan in a direct accusation that Kilicdaroglu and the CHP are Alevi, and therefore Alawites. According to Erdogan, "Don't 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."

Erdogan's allegation that Alevi and Alawites are co-religionists is inaccurate and irresponsible. Alevi, who speak Turkish and Kurdish, count up to 20 million adherents in Turkey and among its Western European émigrés, or one in four Turks at home and abroad. Less than half a million Alawites, speaking Arabic, live on the Turkish side of the border with Syria.

Alevi, unlike Sunnis, do not go to mosques and do not pray. Rather, they hold their rituals, featuring music and dancing and known as "cem," in Alevi meeting houses, or "cemevi." Alevi complain that they are excluded from the Turkish national budget for religious and educational activities. AKP finances large and overbearing mosques in Alevi villages in Turkey, where they typically remain empty, as well as in foreign cities such as Cologne, where they feed anti-Muslim resentment among German Christians. But Turkish government funding for construction of religious buildings is denied the Alevi. In addition, Erdogan supports Sunni-only Islamic instruction in public schools.

Turkish and Kurdish Alevi have almost nothing in common with Syrian Alawites. The similarity of their names is misleading; Alevi and Alawites both honor Ali Ibn Abi Talib, the cousin and son-in-law of Muhammad and the fourth caliph to succeed the Muslim prophet. Alevi and Alawites are offshoots of Shia Islam. Iran backs the Syrian regime, having proclaimed the Alawites as an accepted Shia variant. Tehran views the Turkish Alevi as Shias who have strayed, and should be induced to accept official Iranian Islam, known as "Twelver" Shiism because of its belief in 12 imams or outstanding religious authorities. Alevi honor the 12 imams, but lack the clerical apparatus visible in Iranian Shiism. And there are no resemblances between Alevi, Alawites, and Iranian Shias end.

The Alawites are more a cult than a sect. They appeared earlier in history than the Alevis. As described in an [article](#) by Daniel Pipes, published in 1989, Alawite “doctrines date from the ninth century A.D.” from within the “Twelver” Shia current. As Pipes wrote, “In about A.D. 859, one Ibn Nusayr declared himself the *bab* (‘gateway to truth’),” a major religious title in Shiism. Alawite religion appears to preserve elements of paganism and of the dualist religions of pre-Muslim Iran, of which the best-known is Manichaeism, positing a permanent, cosmic struggle between light and darkness.

According to Pipes, “The [Alawite] religion holds Ali, the fourth caliph, to be the (Jesus-like) incarnation of divinity... [Alawites] celebrate many Christian festivals... They honor many Christian saints... The specifics of the [Alawite] faith are hidden not just from outsiders but even from the majority of the [Alawites] themselves... Religious secrecy is strictly maintained, on pain of death and being incarnated into a vile animal... Women do most of the hard labor; they are prized ‘precisely because of the work they do that men will not do except grudgingly, finding it incompatible with their dignity.’ Women are never inducted into the mysteries (‘Would you have us teach them whom we use, our holy faith?’); indeed, their uncleanness requires their exclusion from all religious rituals.” Unlike the Turkish Alevis with their *cemevi*, Alawites “have no... places of worship; indeed they have no religious structures other than tomb shrines. Prayers take place in private houses, usually those of religious leaders,” Pipes noted.

The contrast between the Arabic-speaking Alawites and the Turkish-Kurdish Alevis could not be clearer to those who know the latter. Where the Alawites are esoteric, Alevism is an enthusiastically public faith. Its religious songs and texts are published and widely distributed. Alevi women not only are treated as equal to men, but take a leading role in Alevi rituals. Alevis are descendants of dissident Muslim mystics who found themselves at odds with the Turkish state in the 1300s. In the 1500s, the predecessors of the Alevis sided against the Ottoman sultans in a war with the Sufi-ruled Safavid Persian empire.

Syrian Alawites and Turkish Alevis are not the only Muslims named for Ali. The Ba’Alawi Sufis are a strict Sunni order found in south Arabia, east Africa, and southeast Asia. Similarly, conventional Sunni Sufis in the Balkans are known as “Aliites” or “Alevians.”

Kemal Kilicdaroglu, the Turkish opposition leader, is an Alevi, not an Alawite. Does this confusion between two lesser-known phenomena in global Muslim religious life matter to people outside Turkey and Syria? It should, if only because Erdogan’s charge that Alevis and Alawites are the same illustrates the same penchant for wild demagoguery the Turkish prime minister has shown in dealing with Israel.

Alevis deserve the support of foreign monitors of religious freedom in their demands for equal treatment by the Turkish government. The Syrian rulers have distorted religious freedom for Alawites, Christians, and other non-Sunnis to perpetuate a brutal tyranny. Alawites are, perhaps against the will of some among them, servants of the dictatorial order in Damascus. Alevis are partisans of democracy and the West; Alawites are exemplars of despotism and lackeys of Iran, Russia, and China.

Observers of the Syrian agony and Turkish intrigues in dealing with Syria should pay attention to these differences, and not be taken in by Erdogan’s propaganda.

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