

Refugee Review Tribunal

AUSTRALIA

RRT RESEARCH RESPONSE

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This response was prepared by the Country Research Section of the Refugee Review Tribunal (RRT) after researching publicly accessible information currently available to the RRT 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.

Questions

1. Does the Syrian government encourage educated Alevi Muslims from Turkey to settle in Syria?
2. If so, do they have any legal right of entry and residence in Syria?
3. Please provide information on the current situation of Alevi Muslims in Turkey.

RESPONSE

1. Does the Syrian government encourage educated Alevi Muslims from Turkey to settle in Syria?

A paper on Turkey's minorities dated 2001 includes information on the Alevi Muslims in Turkey. It is stated in the paper that:

'Alevi' is a blanket term for a large number of different Shia communities, whose actual beliefs and ritual practices differ. The Arabic speaking Alevi communities of southern Turkey (especially Hatay and Adana) are the extension of Syria's Alawi (Nusayri) community and have no historical ties with the other Alevi groups,... their numbers are small and their role in Turkey has been negligible. The important Alevi groups are the Turkish and Kurdish speakers (the latter still to be divided into speakers of Kurdish proper and of related Zaza); both appear to be the descendants of rebellious tribal groups that were religiously affiliated. (Karimova, Nigar and Deverell, Edward 2001, 'Minorities in Turkey', Occasional Papers No. 19, The Swedish Institute of International Affairs website, pp 8 & 15 <http://www.ui.se/texter/op19.pdf> – Accessed 11 November 2002 – Attachment 1).

The paper mentions that "Almost all of the Arabs in Turkey are *Alevi Moslems*,... and most have family ties with the Alevis living in Syria." The paper also indicates that "Since the mid-1960s, the Syrian government has tended to encourage educated Alevi to resettle in Syria, especially if they seem likely to join the ruling Baath Party." It is stated in the paper that:

The Arabs are heavily concentrated along the Syrian border. Almost all of the Arabs in Turkey are *Alevi Moslems*,... and most have family ties with the Alevis living in Syria. They are a distinct religious community from the Turkish Alevis but have in common reverence for Ali, the Prophet's son-in-law. The Arabs of Turkey believe they are subjected to state-condoned discrimination. Fear of persecution actually prompted several thousand Arab Alevis to seek refuge in Syria following the incorporation of the Hatay province into Turkey in 1939. Since the mid-1960s, the Syrian government has tended to encourage educated Alevi to resettle in Syria, especially if they seem likely to join the ruling Baath Party. Alevi Arabs have uneasy relationships with Sunnis and are more comfortable with Christians

An earlier country study of Turkey dated 1996 by the US Library of Congress Federal Research Division also refers to the Syrian government tending "to encourage educated Alevi to resettle in Syria". It is stated in the country study that:

The Arabs are heavily concentrated along the Syrian border, especially in Hatay Province, which France, having at that time had mandatory power in Syria, ceded to Turkey in 1939. Arabs then constituted about two-thirds of the population of Hatay (known to the Arabs as Alexandretta), and the province has remained predominantly Arab. Almost all of the Arabs in Turkey are Alevi Muslims, and most have family ties with the Alevi (also seen as Alawi or Alawite) living in Syria. As Alevi, the Arabs of Turkey believe they are subjected to state-condoned discrimination. Fear of persecution actually prompted several thousand Arab Alevi to seek refuge in Syria following Hatay's incorporation into Turkey. The kinship relations established as a result of the 1939-40 emigration have been continually reinforced by marriages and the practice of sending Arab youths from Hatay to colleges in Syria. Since the mid-1960s, the Syrian government has tended to encourage educated Alevi to resettle in Syria, especially if they seem likely to join the ruling Baath Party ('Linguistic and Ethnic Groups – Arabs' in Metz, Helen Chapin (ed) 1996, 'Turkey, a country study', Federal Research Division, Library of Congress, The Library of Congress website <http://lcweb2.loc.gov/frd/cs/trtoc.html> – Accessed 10 July 2006 – Attachment 2).

2. If so, do they have any legal right of entry and residence in Syria?

A search of the sources consulted found no reference to information regarding whether educated Alevi Muslims from Turkey who have been encouraged to settle in Syria by the Syrian government have legal right of entry and residence in Syria.

3. Please provide information on the current situation of Alevi Muslims in Turkey.

The US Department of State 2005 report on religious freedom in Turkey notes that according to the Turkish government, it is estimated that "99 percent of the population is Muslim, the majority of whom are Sunni." The report also indicates that:

In addition to the country's Sunni Muslim majority, there are an estimated 7-million Alevis, followers of a belief system that incorporates aspects of both Shi'a and Sunni Islam and draws on the traditions of other religions found in Anatolia as well. Some Alevis practice rituals that include men and women worshipping together through oratory, poetry, and dance. The Government considers Alevism a heterodox Muslim sect; however, some Alevis and radical Sunnis maintain Alevis are not Muslims (US Department of State 2005, *International Religious Freedom Report 2005 – Turkey*, November, Section 1 – Attachment 3).

An article dated 26 July 2006 by Dr Otmar Oehring, the "head of the human rights office of Missio", notes that in May, Professor Ali Bardakoglu, who is the head of the Turkish government's Diyanet, "which controls all official Muslim life in Turkey," had "declared

once again that Alevi are de facto Sunni Muslims.” The statement “means that in practice, the government does not recognise that Alevi and Sunni are different.” It is stated in the article that:

For almost a quarter of a century, Alevi Muslims have been pushing for recognition as a distinct community able to organise themselves in accordance with their own beliefs. But in May, Professor Ali Bardakoglu, the head of the government’s Diyanet <http://www.diyamet.gov.tr/english> – which controls all official Muslim life in Turkey, despite the claimed secularism of the state – declared once again that Alevi are de facto Sunni Muslims. This is like saying that all Protestants are Catholics. Predictably, Alevi were unhappy over this statement, which means that in practice, the government does not recognise that Alevi and Sunni are different. The government maintains that Cem Houses, where Alevi worship, are not considered places of worship but cultural centres. “We’re not against Cem Houses, but they’re no alternative to mosques,” is the government message.

The Alevi are divided as to how to respond to the government’s attitude – some groups are broadly pro-government, some anti-government and some pro-Kurdish. The Republican Education Foundation, which is under Alevi control, is regarded as more ready to work with the government. It says it does not want to see a separate government body to handle Alevi affairs, but argues that taxes from Alevi are being used (or misused) solely on Sunni mosques and imams. It insists that as Alevi are Turkish citizens and taxpayers it wants to see their taxes used to support Alevi structures.

According to the article, “there is no chance that the government will recognise Muslim differences, even though Turkey has Sunni, Alevi and a small Shia minority. This indicates that the government is not just Muslim, but specifically Sunni Muslim, despite its proclaimed secular nature.”

In relation to education, it is stated in the article that:

Discussion continues over changing the school curriculum to treat all faiths in Turkey in a new way. The Alevi – like other religious minorities – complain that no progress has been reached for their teachings to be mentioned in school curricula. Further, Alevi have warned that if the government does not introduce separate religious education for Alevi children, they will lodge a case against it at the European Court of Human Rights in Strasbourg – to which Turkey is subject, as a member of the Council of Europe.

The article indicates that “The prospect of Turkey’s EU accession seems to be the only thing capable of driving change in the area of religious freedom and human rights more widely. Yet the government is now not willing to enact change.” The article also notes that if the present ruling Justice and Development Party (AKP) wins the next elections and if “current Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan – or a puppet – succeeds in becoming President, the Ataturk legacy could be changed. There will then not be a President willing to veto laws that contradict this legacy. This would definitely lead to a worsening climate for religious freedom. The position for Sunni Muslims would improve, while for Alevi the situation would remain as restrictive as it is now” (Oehring, Dr. Otmar 2006, ‘Turkey: Little progress on religious freedom’, *Forum 18*, 26 July – Attachment 4).

An article dated 13 June 2006 mentions comments in a common position paper issued after a Turkey – EU Partnership Council meeting. The paper indicates that the European Union called “on Turkey to address the situation of the Alevi community which continues to experience difficulties in terms of recognition of places of worship, representation in relevant

state bodies as well as in relation to compulsory religious education” (‘EU criticizes human right violations in Turkey, urges normal ties with Cyprus’ 2006, *BBC Monitoring European*, source: Anatolia news agency, Ankara, 13 June – Attachment 5).

Another article dated 24 May 2006, refers to a journalist ascribing “Alevi activism to the 2002 election victory of the Justice and Development Party (or AKP, in its Turkish initials), a party of religious Sunnis.” It is stated in the article that:

Persecuted under the Ottoman Empire, most Alevis remain loyal to Mustafa Kemal Atatürk’s secularist revolution of the 1920s. But they have long had doubts about the nature of Turkey’s secularism, and those doubts are beginning to be converted into action.

Tunceli journalist Haydar Toprakci ascribes Alevi activism to the 2002 election victory of the Justice and Development Party (or AKP, in its Turkish initials), a party of religious Sunnis.

“Every one of the AKP’s 360-odd members of parliament is a Sunni,” he observed, adding: “It’s the Alevis, not the Kurds, who are Turkey’s true second-class citizens.”

The same attitude spurred Izzettin Dogan, head of Turkey’s most influential Alevi group, to take the Education Ministry to court in December over obligatory religious classes in school, which he says teach only Sunni Islam.

“We had no choice,” he said. “At least we could talk to previous governments. With the present government, all contact has been lost.”

Individual Alevis have taken their complaints further. The European Court of Human Rights is scheduled to rule on a case brought by parents demanding that their children be excused from religious education. In a landmark decision last month, a Turkish court ruled in favor of parents with a similar demand.

...In an apparent effort to stave off further legal challenges, Education Minister Huseyin Celik announced in February that the curriculum had been changed to include a discussion of Alevi beliefs.

The move leaves Alevis, who say they were not consulted, unconvinced. In any case, their main grievance lies elsewhere, with the Diyanet, the powerful state foundation of religious affairs.

“Every belief group is our partner,” said Diyanet leader Ali Bardakoglu, who is responsible for maintaining Turkey’s 80,000 mosques and monitoring their state-employed preachers.

But then he argues that Alevis are actually Sunni. “It’s not that we are opposed to cemevis,” he said, “but they are not an alternative to mosques. Alevis can have their semah [ritual dances], but they should fast, too.”

...Alevis are particularly irked that the state denies them the right to describe their cemevis as places of worship. The few cemevis there owe their existence to private donations. Sunni mosques and preachers, meanwhile, are funded by the state.

The article also notes that “the European Union’s representative for Turkey, Hansjoerg Kretschmer,” had “argued in January that the Diyanet “has no place in a secular country”” (Birch, Nicholas 2006, ‘Doubts grow for Alevis in Turkey; As party of religious Sunnis holds sway, minority sect fights back’, *The Washington Times*, 24 May – Attachment 6).

An Economist Intelligence Unit risk briefing on Turkey dated 23 May 2006 refers to “Hansjoerg Kretschmer, the representative of the EU in Ankara” complaining on 3 February 2005 “that the government had failed to stop the police harassing the Alevi community” (‘Turkey risk: Political stability risk’ 2006, *Economist Intelligence Unit*, 23 May, p 19 – Attachment 7).

A UK Home Office operational guidance note on Turkey dated 16 January 2006 includes information on the treatment of Alevis in Turkey, and sufficiency of protection and internal relocation for Alevis in Turkey (UK Home Office 2006, *Operational Guidance Note – Turkey*, 16 January, pp11-12 – Attachment 8).

An article dated 5 December 2005 indicates that a television station “Cem TV, the first television channel aimed at Alevis,” had begun test broadcasting in Turkey and it was planned to commence normal broadcasting during February (‘Turkey: New station Cem TV aimed at Alevi community’ 2005, *BBC Monitoring Media*, source: Radikal website, Istanbul, 5 December – Attachment 9).

According to the previously mentioned US Department of State 2005 report on religious freedom in Turkey:

Alevis freely practice their beliefs and build “Cem houses” (places of gathering), although Cem houses have no legal status as places of worship. Alevis in the Kartal district of Istanbul continued to fight a court battle against a decision by local authorities to deny them permission to build a Cem house. In January, Alevis in the Cankaya district of Ankara applied to acquire property to open a Cem house. Municipal authorities consulted the Diyanet, which issued a letter stating that Alevis in Cankaya did not need a Cem house because they could worship at a local mosque. Also in January, the Diyanet issued a letter to authorities in the Sultanbeyli district of Istanbul stating that Cem houses violate Islamic principles and Turkish law.

Many Alevis allege discrimination in the Government’s failure to include any of their doctrines or beliefs in religious instruction classes in public schools. They also charge a bias in the Diyanet, which does not allocate specific funds for Alevi activities or religious leadership (US Department of State 2005, *International Religious Freedom Report 2005 – Turkey*, November, Section II – Attachment 3).

The European Commission’s 2005 progress report on Turkey notes that with respect to freedom of religion in Turkey, “only very limited progress has been made since October 2004 in terms of both legislation and practice.” It is stated in the report that:

As far as the situation of non-Sunni Muslim communities is concerned, there has been no change. In particular, Alevis... continue not to be officially recognised as a religious community and they are not officially represented in the Diyanet. They still experience difficulties in opening places of worship – their places of worship, ‘Cem’ houses, have no legal status – and they receive no funding from the authorities. In January 2005 the Alevi community was refused permission to build a ‘Cem’ house in Ankara on the grounds that it could not be considered as a place of worship. Although Alevis have been increasingly vocal in their demands, the authorities, in particular the Diyanet, have not accepted the need to change current practice.

Alevi children are subject to compulsory Sunni religious instruction in schools, which fails to acknowledge their specificity. The parents of an Alevi child currently have a case regarding compulsory Sunni religious education pending before the ECtHR. In February 2005, the Ministry of Education indicated that Alevism and other faiths such as Christianity and Judaism would be included in compulsory religious education from next year (European Commission 2005, *Turkey 2005 Progress Report*, 9 November, pp 29 & 31 – Attachment 10).

An article dated 1 May 2005 indicates that “Turgut Oker, head of the Confederation of Alevi Associations in Europe” had “been detained at Istanbul Atatürk Airport.” Oker “was detained on the basis of a decision to arrest him passed by a Martial Law court and the Interior Ministry in 1982. Oker came to Turkey several times in the past but was never detained” (‘Leader of Turkish ethno-religious minority association detained’ 2005, *BBC Monitoring European*, source: Ozgur Politika website, Neu-Isenburg, 1 May – Attachment 11). Another article dated 28 March 2005 refers to comments by Turgut Oker in relation to a conference jointly sponsored by the Confederation of Alevi Associations in Europe, which was held in Turkey by the Alevi Muslim community to discuss Alevi issues (‘Alevi Muslim community holds conference in Turkey’ 2005, *BBC Monitoring European*, source: Anatolia news agency, Ankara, 28 March – Attachment 12).

An Immigration and Refugee Board of Canada response to information request dated 14 April 2005 provides information the treatment of Alevis in Turkey, societal attitudes towards Alevis, common complaints by Alevis, measures taken to improve the situation of Alevis, government reforms, and cases before the judiciary regarding Alevi rights (Immigration and Refugee Board of Canada 2005, *TUR43493.E – Turkey: The situation of Alevis (January 2002 – April 2005)*, 14 April – Attachment 13).

Another article dated 7 March 2005 refers to the capture by Turkish police of “two fugitive Islamist extremists convicted in absentia for a 1993 arson attack that killed dozens of people at a gathering in eastern Turkey of liberal artists and intellectuals, officials said Monday.” Those captured had been sentenced for their involvement in the attack on a hotel in Sivas city, in which 37 people died. “Thousands of conservative Muslims rioted that day, attacking the hotel housing a poetry festival organized by the Alevi community, followers of a liberal Turkish version of Islam long scorned by the Sunni majority.” Thirty-one people were sentenced to death, commuted to life imprisonment, for taking part in the attack (‘Islamist extremists captured 12 year after arson killings’ 2005, *Agence France-Presse*, 7 March – Attachment 14).

An Immigration and Refugee Board of Canada response to information request dated 20 September 2004 includes information on the response of the police and judicial system to complaints by Alevis of religious violence or harassment in Istanbul and other parts of Turkey (Immigration and Refugee Board of Canada 2004, *TUR42995.E – Turkey: Response from the police and judicial system to complaints of religious violence or harassment filed by Alevis in Istanbul and other parts of Turkey; whether there is any difference in the situation of Alevis in Istanbul and other parts of Turkey (September 2001 – September 2004)*, 20 September – Attachment 15).

The previously mentioned paper on Turkey’s minorities dated 2001 includes information on the treatment of Alevis at that time (Karimova, Nigar and Deverell, Edward 2001, ‘Minorities in Turkey’, Occasional Papers No. 19, The Swedish Institute of International Affairs website, pp 8, 9 & 15 <http://www.ui.se/texter/op19.pdf> – Accessed 11 November 2002 – Attachment 1).

List of Sources Consulted

Internet Sources:

Copernic search engine

Amnesty International website www.amnesty.org

Human Rights Watch website www.hrw.org

UNHCR *REFWORLD* UNHCR Refugee Information Online

Databases:

Public	<i>FACTIVA</i>	Reuters Business Briefing
DIMA	<i>BACIS</i>	Country Information
	<i>REFINFO</i>	IRBDC Research Responses (Canada)
RRT	<i>ISYS</i>	RRT Country Research database, including Amnesty International, Human Rights Watch, US Department of State <i>Country Reports on Human Rights Practices</i> .
RRT Library	<i>FIRST</i>	RRT Library Catalogue

List of Attachments

1. Karimova, Nigar and Deverell, Edward 2001, 'Minorities in Turkey', Occasional Papers No. 19, The Swedish Institute of International Affairs website <http://www.ui.se/texter/op19.pdf> – Accessed 11 November 2002.
2. 'Linguistic and Ethnic Groups – Arabs' in Metz, Helen Chapin (ed) 1996, 'Turkey, a country study', Federal Research Division, Library of Congress, The Library of Congress website <http://lcweb2.loc.gov/frd/cs/trtoc.html> – Accessed 10 July 2006.
3. US Department of State 2005, *International Religious Freedom Report 2005 – Turkey*, November.
4. Oehring, Dr. Otmar 2006, 'Turkey: Little progress on religious freedom', *Forum 18*, 26 July. (CISNET Turkey CX158700)
5. 'EU criticizes human right violations in Turkey, urges normal ties with Cyprus' 2006, *BBC Monitoring European*, source: Anatolia news agency, Ankara, 13 June. (FACTIVA)
6. Birch, Nicholas 2006, 'Doubts grow for Alevis in Turkey; As party of religious Sunnis holds sway, minority sect fights back', *The Washington Times*, 24 May. (FACTIVA)
7. 'Turkey risk: Political stability risk' 2006, *Economist Intelligence Unit*, 23 May. (FACTIVA)
8. UK Home Office 2006, *Operational Guidance Note – Turkey*, 16 January.
9. 'Turkey: New station Cem TV aimed at Alevi community' 2005, *BBC Monitoring Media*, source: Radikal website, Istanbul, 5 December. (FACTIVA)

10. European Commission 2005, *Turkey 2005 Progress Report*, 9 November.
11. 'Leader of Turkish ethno-religious minority association detained' 2005, *BBC Monitoring European*, source: Ozgur Politika website, Neu-Isenburg, 1 May. (FACTIVA)
12. 'Alevi Muslim community holds conference in Turkey' 2005, *BBC Monitoring European*, source: Anatolia news agency, Ankara, 28 March. (FACTIVA)
13. Immigration and Refugee Board of Canada 2005, *TUR43493.E – Turkey: The situation of Alevi (January 2002 – April 2005)*, 14 April. (REFINFO)
14. 'Islamist extremists captured 12 year after arson killings' 2005, *Agence France-Presse*, 7 March. (FACTIVA)
15. Immigration and Refugee Board of Canada 2004, *TUR42995.E – Turkey: Response from the police and judicial system to complaints of religious violence or harassment filed by Alevi in Istanbul and other parts of Turkey; whether there is any difference in the situation of Alevi in Istanbul and other parts of Turkey (September 2001 – September 2004)*, 20 September. (REFINFO)