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Arab Alevism

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Summary

Anatolia has long been home to a diverse range of ethnic and religious communities, and the Arab Alevis are among the ancient groups that have existed in this geography for centuries. Due to their faith and identity, they have been marginalised and oppressed by ruling powers throughout history, often forced to live in remote and inaccessible regions. A major turning point for the Arab Alevis occurred in 2024 with the overthrow of Bashar al-Assad's regime in Syria and the rise to power of the Sunni Islamist group Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham. Since then, Arab Alevis have once again faced massacres, some of which have been documented in UN reports. This ancient community, which has long struggled to survive while being repressed and othered—sometimes for their Arab identity, sometimes for their Alevi faith—has also endured exile and displacement, and has often been defined through the lens of various ideological perspectives. Written sources on Arab Alevis remain quite limited. Therefore, this study seeks to offer a general answer to the question: who are the Arab Alevis?

Overview

Arab Alevis—also known as Nusayris—are an ethno-religious community primarily residing in Turkey's Hatay, Adana, and Mersin provinces, as well as in major cities like Istanbul, Ankara, and Izmir; in Syria's Latakia and Tartus; and in Lebanon, particularly in the Jabal Mohsen region. While they are frequently referred to as "Nusayris" in academic literature and by outsiders, the community itself does not identify with this term, and its use is virtually nonexistent among community members. Arab Alevis describe themselves ethnically as Arab and religiously as Alevi (Mertcan 2012, 1). If Alevism is considered an overarching category, Arab Alevism should be understood as a branch of this broader framework.

Academic research on Arab Alevis is generally quite limited. According to records from the National Thesis Centre of Turkey, there are only twenty master's theses and six doctoral dissertations on the topics of Arab Alevis or Nusayris. While most of these are in the field of theology, others span disciplines such as anthropology, political science,

geography, history, sociology, and international relations (National Thesis Centre 2025). A review of academic articles on Arab Alevis in Turkey also reveals a heavy concentration in the theological field. These studies largely focus on defining Arab Alevism and attempting to categorise it within a broader belief system. In contrast, there also exist biased, unscientific publications and television programmes in Turkey that target Arab Alevis, occasionally descending into hate speech. Ultimately, two major issues can be identified in the current literature: first, the quantity of research in the field is severely limited; second, many existing studies lack academic rigour and neutrality. For all these reasons, there is a pressing need for impartial, scientific, and objective research on Arab Alevis.

Arab Alevis are known as a closed, secretive community—a condition referred to as *taqiyya*. Taqiyya is defined as “the concealment of one’s faith and the expression of its opposite in the face of threats to one’s life or property” (TDV Islamic Encyclopedia 2025). The reason Arab Alevis have historically practiced *taqiyya* lies not in the intrinsic nature of their faith, but in the oppression and pressures imposed by ruling authorities throughout history, which forced them to carry out their religious rituals in secrecy.

There is no scholarly consensus on the number of Arab Alevis. In a 1998 study, Aringber Laanatza estimated the Arab Alevi population in Turkey to be around one million (Laanatza 1998, 154). Hakan Mertcan, who has conducted significant research on this topic, also estimates their number at one million (Mertcan 2012, 9). There is a dense Arab Alevi population in the districts of Defne, Samandağ, Antakya, and İskenderun in the Hatay province. Including those who have migrated to Adana, Mersin, and major cities, the one-million estimate appears plausible. Nevertheless, it is important to emphasise that there are no official statistics available on this population.

In Syria, Arab Alevis are estimated to constitute 12–15% of the population (Goldsmith 2011, 35; Baltacıoğlu-Brammer 2019, 2). Considering that Syria’s population is 25,620,427 as of 2025 (Worldmeters 2025), it can be inferred that the Arab Alevi population there is approximately 3.5 million. Arab Alevis are heavily concentrated in coastal cities such as Latakia and Tartus.

Historical Context

The most significant rupture and divergence in the historical trajectory occurred during the event of Ghadir Khumm. On his return from the Farewell Pilgrimage, Prophet Muhammad appointed Ali as his successor and commanded allegiance to him. The emergence of Arab Alevism is essentially based on this event (Et-Tavil 2012, 35–36). For this reason, Ghadir Khumm holds special importance for Arab Alevis and is

regarded as their most sacred festival.

The founder of Arab Alevi doctrine is Muhammad ibn Nusayr. He lived in the 9th century and was a disciple of Hasan al-Askari, the eleventh Imam of the Ahl al-Bayt. Muhammad ibn Nusayr acted according to the teachings of the Ahl al-Bayt and trained students accordingly (Reyhani 1997, 22, 28–29). After him, leadership passed to Muhammad ibn Jundab, then to Abu Muhammad Abdullah al-Jannan al-Junbulani. Following Junbulani, leadership was assumed by Hamdan al-Khasibi (Et-Tavil 2012, 146, 148–149). Subsequently, Muhammad ibn Ali al-Jilli and then Makzun al-Sinjari led the community. These figures systematised the Arab Alevi doctrine and worked to lift Arab Alevis out of poverty (Karasu 2006, 117). Until Hamdan al-Khasibi consolidated the movement, Muhammad ibn Nusayr's followers remained a small and scattered group, facing the threat of extinction. Under al-Khasibi's guidance, the movement was organised and spread from Iraq to Syria under the protection of the Shi'i Hamdanid dynasty in Aleppo (Peterson 2019, 64). After the collapse of the Hamdanids in the 11th century, the movement dispersed into other cities and rural areas of Syria (Peterson 2019, 164). In the 12th century, they faced severe pressure from Kurdish groups, Crusaders, and Ismailis, leading once again to the threat of fragmentation. The movement was revived by Abu Muhammad al-Hasan ibn Yusuf al-Makzun al-Sinjari (Peterson 2019, 165; Bray 2019, 3).

With the arrival of the Mamluks in the 13th century and up until the end of the Ottoman period, Arab Alevis lived in poverty in mountainous and inaccessible regions (Peterson 2019, 165; Bray 2019, 3). The Ottoman era was a period of sustained oppression for Arab Alevis. The Ottoman authorities did not recognise Arab Alevis as part of the Islamic community, branding them instead as heretical. Moreover, they were not granted the millet status that was extended to other non-Muslim groups (Mertcan 2013, 89). In particular, the reign of Sultan Selim I is remembered by Arab Alevis as a dark chapter, marked by mass massacres. Those who survived these massacres fled to remote mountainous areas, where they continued to live for extended periods (Mertcan 2013, 46–51; Et-Tavil 2013).

During these oppressive periods, some Arab Alevis also migrated to countries such as Argentina, Chile, and Venezuela. While official data is lacking, it is known that approximately two million people of Arab Alevi origin reside in these countries. Under the reign of Sultan Abdulhamid II (1876–1909), missionary activities posed another challenge. In response, Abdulhamid established schools in these regions and implemented conversion (i.e., Sunnification) policies targeting Arab Alevis (Alkan 2012, 25).

Arab Alevis have been subjected to the oppression of ruling powers in every era, shaped by the prevailing conditions and political agendas of the time. Although they gained some visibility during the Republican period, like many other ethnic and religious communities in Turkey, they became targets of homogenising state policies (Alvanoğlu 2017, 178). In this period, efforts were made to assimilate Arab Alevis through Turkification. The use of the Turkish language was widely promoted, school staff were appointed accordingly, boarding schools were established in the region, and special emphasis was placed on ensuring that girls attended these schools (Mertcan 2013, 203–204).

Etymological Context: The Naming Problem of the Community (Translation)

Although the term *Nusayri* is virtually never used within the community today, it was the sole designation used instead of *Arab Alevism* up until World War I (Reyhani 1997, 21). The term *Nusayri* has often been used pejoratively to disparage the community. Etymologically, it derives from the name of the religious figure Muhammad ibn Nusayr, considered the founder of the faith. However, as noted above, the term is now almost entirely absent in the community's own self-identification.

Historically, they have also been referred to as *Arap Uşağı* and *Fellah*. Until the process of urbanisation, Arab Alevis typically worked as tenant farmers under Sunni and Christian landlords and engaged in agriculture. The word *Fellah* originates from *fallāḥ al-arḍ*, meaning "those who till the land." These designations stem from that agricultural background. Farming remains widespread within the community to this day, and a significant portion of Arab Alevis still sustain themselves through cultivating the land. Nonetheless, both terms—*Arap Uşağı* and *Fellah*—have historically been used to denigrate the group. Notably, the term *Fellah* has continued to be used in contemporary contexts. Arab Alevis are also referred to as *Çukurova Alevis* or *Mediterranean Alevis*.

General Characteristics, Rituals, and Customs (Translation)

LanguageAlevis in Turkey speak different languages and come from various ethnic backgrounds. Arab Alevis are those who are ethnically Arab and speak Arabic. Arabic is still the official language in Syria and Lebanon. Among Arab Alevis in Adana and Mersin, however, the Arabic language is on the verge of disappearing. In these regions, Arabic is spoken by very few people. In contrast, Arabic is still widely spoken in Hatay. Although the language spoken there has undergone some changes, it closely resembles the Arabic spoken in the Syrian city of Latakia.

The "Amcalık" Tradition In Arab Alevi communities, when a boy reaches puberty, he

is taught the principles of Arab Alevism. This instruction is provided by a person selected by the family, who is referred to as the “amca” (literally “uncle”). The amcalık tradition establishes a bond of kinship between two families, with the “amca” and his family considered the child’s second family. There is approximately a year-long process between choosing the amca and the child’s actual stay in the amca’s house. This process consists of three stages. At each stage, an animal is sacrificed and prayers are performed. The first stage is called “tığdeyi,” the second “mlek,” and the third “titliğa.” There must be at least forty days between the first two stages. The third stage must take place within a year at most. On the day the child goes to live with the amca, a sacrifice is made, prayers are offered, and food is distributed. The child lives in the amca’s home until he has learned the entire doctrine.

Shrine (Ziyaret) Belief Shrines hold an important place in Arab Alevi belief. In regions inhabited by Arab Alevis, one can find shrines nearly everywhere. These shrines are domed and painted white. They are dedicated to figures of religious significance in the Arab Alevi tradition. Shrines are not only visited on special occasions and holidays, but serve as regular places of worship. Arab Alevi holidays are celebrated both at home and at these shrines. Arab Alevis observe many religious holidays and vow ceremonies. On these occasions, sacrificial animals are offered, prayers are recited, and traditional foods such as *hırise* (a wheat-based stew), soup, or bulgur are prepared and shared with neighbours and relatives.

The belief in Hızır is particularly strong among Arab Alevis. The shrine of Hz. Hızır in the Deniz neighbourhood of Samandağ is one of their sacred sites and is also frequently visited by members of other communities. The religious affairs of the Arab Alevi community are overseen by a figure known as a “şeyh” (sheikh). Sheikhs are respected leaders who guide the community by example. During religious holidays, prayers are performed under their leadership.

Like many communities, Arab Alevis have experienced a decline in traditional practices due to urbanisation. Holiday celebrations, shrine visits, the amcalık tradition, and family visits during festivals have become less common in urban areas. Arabic is increasingly spoken only by the elderly in rural areas and is in danger of becoming obsolete. Until recently, marriages outside the community were rare. However, with growing urbanisation and rising levels of education, contact with the broader society has increased, and intergroup marriages have risen accordingly.

Conclusion (Translation)

In conclusion, Arab Alevis have historically been a persecuted and oppressed community due to their faith and identity. Despite the limited written sources

available, they appear to be one of the most speculated upon and misunderstood communities in academic literature. For this reason, there is a clear need for impartial and scholarly research in this field—studies that are grounded in empirical data and supported by fieldwork.

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