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The Diversity of the Alevi Diaspora

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Summary

Alevis have migrated to European countries through different migration patterns such as guest workers, the Maras Massacre, the 1980 military coup, as students, through marriage and so on. While these forms of migration differ significantly from one another, it is sometimes inadequate to attempt to explain the Alevi diaspora in terms of one of these migration movements. Although the Alevi diaspora as a transnational movement is the result of different migration experiences, the stigmatisation of Alevis from the Ottoman Empire to the Turkish Republic is the most crucial reason for the emergence of the Alevi diaspora. However, the different approaches in existing diaspora theories and Alevis' multiple migration patterns lead to problems in defining the Alevi diaspora. Whereas there is not even an agreed-upon basis for defining the concept of diaspora, it can be challenging to develop a consensus on the definition of the Alevi diaspora due to the divergent perspectives of existing diaspora theories. This entry will address the challenges of applying existing diaspora theories to Alevis through the limitations of trying to define diaspora from different perspectives in diaspora theories, and examine the main contexts that shape the Alevi diaspora.

Diaspora Theories

Defining the concept of diaspora and identifying who can be included within its scope has become one of the most critical issues in diaspora studies. Fundamentally, diasporas are analysed in terms of two main distinctions: forced and non-forced migration practices. Diasporas are also analysed in terms of voluntary or involuntary migration. While both uses are not mutually exclusive, they are used interchangeably (Safran 1991). When diasporas are examined as a practice of forced migration, it is basically a concept to define peoples who are dispersed outside their lands and forced to live in different geographies. Historically, the Jewish diaspora has been seen as the primary reference function for identifying diasporas that are victims of forced migration (Safran 1991). Indeed, from the early 1900s to the 1970s, a significant proportion of the literature on diaspora studies centred on the Jewish diaspora (Brubaker 2005). Despite this, the use of the concept was not limited to Jews but included peoples such as Armenians. However, in this context, diasporas have been

understood as the practice of forced migration and peoples who were not victims of forced migration were not included in the scope of diaspora. In this respect, peoples who have been traumatically dispersed from their homeland to foreign countries are included in the diaspora category, while non-forced migration is excluded.

The criticism against this is that diaspora could also include non-forced migrations. Accordingly, diasporas can occur as forced displacement from the homeland as a result of oppression encountered in the homeland, or they can emerge through non-forced migration practices. Trade, labour, imperial and cultural diasporas are examples of these (Cohen 2008). While these are analysed as voluntary factors, the economy is considered to be the driving force behind the formation of these diasporas. Another approach analyses both voluntary and involuntary migration by categorising diasporas of hope, terror and despair (Appadurai 1996). In this conceptualisation, diasporas of hope are the participation of labourers in the international labour migration to meet the capitalist system's need for labour, with guest workers being the most important example. Terror diasporas, on the other hand, include peoples who have been dispersed from their homeland by being terrorised through the political and military violence of the dominant power. The Circassian, Armenian, and Jewish diasporas are examples of this. Diasporas of despair, on the other hand, are migration movements of people who have been subjected to political, religious and ethnic oppression in their homeland, usually on an individual level. After the 1980 military coup, people from Turkey who left for Europe are among the examples (Bozkurt 2016).

Defining the Alevi Diaspora

As can be seen, the debate in diaspora studies about which peoples can and cannot constitute a diaspora is multifaceted and has different perspectives. These debates and their scope could easily be extended. In this sense, the question arises as to what kind of diaspora Alevis constitute and under which category they should be analysed. This is because the Alevi diaspora is a transnational movement with a visible presence in more than one country, and the migration of Alevis to these countries varies. Alevis first began to migrate to Western European countries, primarily Germany, as guest workers in the 1960s, but in the 1980s, as a result of the Maras Massacre and the 1980 military coup, they were forced to change their migration practices and began to migrate to these countries as asylum seekers. Thus, different migration movements reveal different categories of diaspora. For example, while Alevis who started to live in European countries as part of guest worker migration can be analysed in the category of diasporas of hope as an extension of voluntary migration, their mass and individual migration to European countries as a result of the Maras Massacre and the 1980 military coup makes Alevis part of diasporas of terror and despair as part of forced

migration.

One of the most important elements that has shaped the Alevi movement in Europe is the way Alevis have come together as a result of different migration practices. This began with guest workers' migration in a country like Germany and continued in Turkey in the form of terror and despair as the state terrorised Alevis in the 1970s and 80s. In the United Kingdom, it started as asylum seekers due to terrorisation in the homeland and continued, to a lesser extent, with the Ankara Agreement, in the context of hope that individuals saw as salvation (Bilecen 2022). The main factor shaping the Alevi diaspora in the UK is the terrorisation of Alevis in Turkey, even taking into account the Ankara Agreement and skills visa schemes (Cetin 2013; Emre 2023). As a result of the impact of oppression in Turkey, many Alevis continue to seek refuge as refugees in the United Kingdom. That is to say, the main structure shaping the Alevi diaspora in the United Kingdom is that Alevis are victims of terrorisation in Turkey (Hanoglu 2021).

Similar patterns of migration in Germany and the United Kingdom are also evident in other European countries (Bozkurt, 2016). Therefore, there is an Alevi movement that is a combination of different migration practices. In this context, the Alevi movement has been able to integrate both obligatory and non-obligatory migration practices. However, despite all this, there are some approaches to the placement of Alevis within the Turkish diaspora, most notably in Turkish Studies (Arkilic 2016). While these studies examine Alevis living in Europe, they primarily focus on Alevis who migrated to Europe as guest workers in the 1960s. However, it is not the guest workers and their families who created the Alevi diaspora in the 1960s. Even if the number of guest workers' families is considerable in terms of population, what gives the Alevi movement the shape of a diasporic organisation is the persistence of the massacres Alevis faced in the Ottoman Empire and the Turkish Republic. In other words, Alevis can easily fall within the scope of terror and victim diasporas (Bozkurt 2016, 2018; Hanoglu 2021).

In this context, an analysis of the Alevi organisations that emerged in Germany in the 1980s reveals that the main body of Alevi organisations is composed of guest workers who migrated in the 1960s. These people reacted to the non-recognition and oppression of Alevism in Turkey by supporting Alevism in the diaspora (Sökefeld 2008; Bozkurt 2016). This group, which migrated to Germany for economic reasons, started to come together around the Alevi identity more visibly in the 1980s, and their integration with their Alevism accelerated, especially after the Sivas Madimak and Gazi massacres. According to some studies, an overwhelming majority of this group tended to see themselves as part of the Turkish identity until the Sivas Madımak and

Gazi massacres (Kaya 1997, 140-144; Bozkurt 2016, 108-112). After the massacres, however, this perception gave way to a stronger defence of Alevi identity. This process, called the Alevi Revival, strengthened the Alevi identity from Turkey to Europe, expanded the sphere of influence of the diaspora, and caused Alevis to break away from the Turkish diasporic sphere and continue their organisation under the identity of Alevism (Bozkurt 2016). This means that Alevism, which was forgotten or wanted to be forgotten as a result of the oppression on Alevism in Turkey and the negative aspects of being seen as Alevi, has been replaced by the strengthening of the perception of Alevism, while the perception of 'lost homeland Turkey' has been ingrained in the minds instead of the longed-for 'homeland' Turkey (Kaya 1997; Bozkurt 2016; 2018). To the extent that the Sivas Madımak and Gazi massacres gave Alevis the perception that the Ottoman massacres against Alevis would continue in the future, even if they came to the diaspora for economic reasons, the Alevi diaspora emerged and expanded its sphere of influence (Bozkurt 2016; 2018).

In addition to these people, another important factor is that some of the left-socialist Alevis who fled Turkey to Europe after the 1980 military coup despaired of the left-socialist movement and turned to Alevism. Having distanced themselves from their Alevism in Turkey due to their mobilisation within the left-socialist movement in the 1970s, their organisational consciousness, which they transferred to the Alevism they had begun to integrate in Europe under diaspora conditions, has given the Alevi movement in the diaspora a significant momentum (Sökefeld 2008; Bozkurt 2016). To the extent that they began to attribute the rapid mass influx of Alevi youth to left-socialist ideas in the 1970s, to the already existing humanist, socialist, political collective identity in Alevism, Alevism was understood by them not as an escape from political struggle, but as a site of political challenge. The defence of the identity of Alevis, who had been subjected to massacres since the Ottoman Empire, naturally became important to them as members of a people who had been ignored.

Furthermore, Alevis who voluntarily come to Europe with various types of visas such as the Ankara Agreement, student visa, skill visa, marriage, and so on, tend to become a part of the Alevi diaspora to the extent that they encounter its power (Bozkurt 2016; 2018). The most important reason why these latter groups are components of the Alevi diaspora is the already existing strength of the Alevi movement to 'start a new life' in diaspora conditions. The most important reason for this is the self-confidence the Alevi movement has given them when starting life in a new country under immigration conditions. For these people, Alevism serves as a 'safe haven' against the fear of alienation and unfamiliarity with the new living space of immigrants in a new country. The fear of being seen as Alevi in Turkey and the stigmatisation of Alevism push Alevis to integrate with Alevism in diaspora conditions, even though Alevis arrive

in other countries through different migration practices (Bozkurt, 2016; 2018). In this regard, the main goal of the organisation of the Alevi diaspora is to be vigilant against the oppression faced by Alevis in Turkey, which has led to the entry of migrants into the Alevi diaspora's political sphere. Even if they migrate for economic reasons, these people are not independent from the collective identity to which they belong outside of their individual migration practices.

Conclusion

Alevis who left their homeland through different migration patterns came together in the diaspora under the Alevi identity to the extent that they had the chance to integrate their Alevism, which they had forgotten or had to forget in Turkey, in the free public space of European countries. Although Alevis individually migrate from their homeland to other countries through different migration processes, the Alevi diaspora that unites them is a critique of Turkish state policy and the main agenda of the diaspora Alevis is the recognition of Alevism in Turkey based on equal citizenship and the hope that Alevis will achieve religious freedom and live as free citizens in Turkey. In this respect, the diaspora that brings Alevis together in a transnational context is not a contextualisation in which different migration practices, individually or collectively, can be taken as a basis. Instead, it is the coming together of the intersectionalities of Alevis as a totality of these migration practices. This intersectionality itself makes the Alevi movement a political force in the diaspora in defence of the rights of Alevis in Turkey. Therefore, even if the main body of the Alevi diaspora in some countries is made up of the families of Alevis who emigrated in the 1960s, it is the coming together in opposition to the Turkish state's denialist attitude towards Alevis that gives the diaspora its shape. This is not only an aspect of the uniqueness of the Alevi diaspora, but also an indication of the inadequacy of existing diaspora theories to explain the Alevi diaspora as a whole. Rather than concluding the individual migration patterns of Alevis in the diaspora, the terrorisation and victimisation of Alevis in Turkey is a more relevant way of explaining the diaspora. Nevertheless, it is essential to consider the specificities of Alevis in different migration patterns and how they relate to the diaspora.

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References & Further Readings