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Mobilisation for Alevi Identity in Britain

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Summary

This entry presents the social and political conditions for Alevi mobilisation in Britain by drawing on the history, migration background and living conditions of the community after migrating to Britain. After a brief introduction to the social mobilisation theory I discuss the social context and the mobilisation for Alevi identity in Britain.

Social mobilisation theory

Tarrow (2011, 4) defines social movements as “collective challenges (to elites, authorities, other groups or cultural codes) by people with common purposes and solidarity in sustained interactions with elites, opponents and authorities.” This entails using all relevant social resources and incorporating all relevant parts of society to bring positive change towards social justice. While the ‘old’ social movements are mainly concerned with the matters of distribution, the “new” social movements focus on identity (Melucci 1994). There are both continuties between the old and new movements and some novel aspects of the new movements. While the movements of 1970s and 80s focus on LGBT+ rights, peace and environment, the movements in 1990s and 2000s focus on social problems and inequalities caused by globalisation (Topal Demiroğlu 2014).

Social mobilisation should not be regarded as merely reactive to a particular problem; they facilitate the building of collective identities in the process (Eyerman & Jameson 1991: 26). Polletta & Jasper (2001) also underlined the role of identity, stating that mobilisation should not be reduced to material incentives and that emotional aspect are crucial. They argue that activists should be regarded as people who have prior social ties bounded by norms of obligation and reciprocity, rather than atomised individuals (Polletta & Jasper 2001, 289-90).

Social movements are shaped by not only internal motivations and identities but also external conditions such as the ability to recognise and act upon institutional policies. Political opportunity structures refer to “the conditions linked to the state that allow

social movements and ease their organisations" (Tarrow 2011, 18). While these strains and opportunities cannot explain every aspect of social mobilisation, they are potent forces that influence contentious politics. Tarrow (1996) argues that these should be seen as conjuctoral effects rather than long-term state policies. Social and political opportunity structures include macro social processes such as "migration, urbanisation and industrialisation" (Şahin, 2005, p. 469).

Social and political mobilisation occurs within a "repertoire of contention": acts such as strikes, street protests, barricades are culturally inscribed, socially communicated and belong to "a society's public culture" (Tarrow, 2011, 20). The forms of protest may transform and incorporate the symbols of the movements' identity over time.

Migration to Britain

Migration from Turkey to Britain is grouped in three phases by Erbaş (2008): the first wave was a small group of '68 generation activists who arrived after the 1971 coup, a second wave comprised of a more heterogenous group after the 1980 coup and finally the third group was composed of mainly Kurdish population as a result of the intensification of armed conflict in the 1980s and 1990s. In the following decades chain migration continued and encouraged the migration of family members and fellow townsmen. As a response to the increasing asylum applications, the UK began to implement visa to Turkish nationals in 1989. The securitisation of migration policies made Ankara Agreement a more viable option for migration (Sirkeci et. al., 2016). This agreement was signed between Turkey and the European Economic Community (EEC) in 1963 and enabled the migration of entrepreneurs. It was active between Turkey and the UK from 1973 (UK's entry to the EEC) until after Brexit (end of 2020). Although it was signed much earlier, Turkish nationals began to use this agreement in 2002 after the legal struggles of Veli Tum and Mehmet Darı (Bilecen 2022, 893).

Alevis in Britain should be understood in the intersection of two marginalised identities that were discriminated in the country of origin. A unique demographic factor of the Alevi community in Britain is their ethnic background; while the majority of Alevis in Turkey are of Turkish ethnic origin, the majority of Alevis in Britain are Kurdish. As a result of chain migration, the majority of the Alevi immigrants came to Britain from specific regions such as Maraş, Sivas, Dersim and Kayseri. For example, in London there are nearly 3000 people from Tilkiler village in Maraş and around 750 families from a single village (Kırkısrak) in Kayseri (Akdemir 2022, 193).

While the exact numbers of immigrants from Turkey who reside in Britain are unknown, there are different estimations such as 250.000 people (Düvell, 2010) and 400.000 people (Bilecen, 2020). A combination of political constraints and economic

hardship in the country of origin account for the main motivations for migration (Akdemir 2016, Bilecen 2022). The asylum seekers within the community justified their applications through the fear of detention/persecution due to being Kurdish or being member to illegal political organizations. Consequently, the initial homeland politics concentrated on Kurdish, rather than Alevi, identity (Wahlbeck 1999, 158). Leftist organisations in London such as *Dev-Sol* (*Devrimci Sol*, Revolutionary Left), TKP/ML (*Türkiye Komünist Partisi/Marksist Leninist*, Turkish Communist Party/Marxist Leninist), Halkevi (People's House) and MLKP (*Marksist Leninist Komünist Parti*, Marxist Leninist Communist Party) were powerful in London (Zırh 2012). These community centres not only promoted political causes but also provided the Kurdish and Turkish immigrants with practical information on welfare, housing and asylum issues, language courses and cultural activities (Wahlbeck 1999, 156).

Social Mobilisation of Alevi Identity

The rise of Alevi identity politics, both in Turkey and abroad, developed simultaneously in a transnational social space but they followed the policies, institutional regulations and agendas of the countries where they developed (Massicard 2007, 313). Alevi identity politics was already on the rise in the late 1980s and 1990s both in Turkey (Ayata 1997; Celik 2003; Markussen 2005; Massicard 2003; Şahin 2005; Vorhoff 2003) and in diaspora (Sökefeld 2006, 2008; Zırh 2012, 2014) A potent factor that intensified the institutionalisation of Alevi mobilisation has been the Sivas massacre which targeted the participants of an Alevi cultural festival, killing thirty-three festival participants and two hotel staff in 1993. This and other violent attacks against Alevis raised awareness about the rising political Islam, state's attitude towards Alevi citizens and Alevi people's need for social organisation and solidarity. Combined with concerns over Alevi identity and practical needs such as regular ceremonies and funerals (Zırh 2014; Hanoğlu 2023) England Alevi Culture Centre and Cemevi (hereafter EACC) was established in London in 1993 in this social and political context. There are currently 18 community centres across Britain under the umbrella organisation of BAF (Britain Alevi Federation) (Alevinet 2025).

In its initial years, the EACC embraced a less politicised identity and aimed at distancing Alevi youth from Kurdish and leftist politics and thus it was regarded as apolitical (Akdemir 2022, 199). After a power struggle over constructing Alevi identity a new administration board was elected in 2008. While maintaining some distance with Kurdish identity politics, they aimed at constructing a more inclusive identity that appeals to a larger section of the community members (Akdemir 2017; Salman 2020).

In addition to the internal factors, formal relations with British public institutions has

been crucial in the social mobilisation of the community. Framing the British culture as a source of civic-political rights and freedom (Sales 2012) made it easier for the community to build positive relations with the British authorities. Multicultural policies in Britain acted as a political opportunity from which Alevis have vastly benefited to become visible, particularly in local politics. Especially Labour Party's positive attitude towards migrant communities is visible in the several community activities (Salman 2020). Also Enfield town council's annual opening ceremony in 2012 where they included Alevi gülbeng and the annual British Alevi Festival, which is celebrated since 2011, hosting local Labour MPs illustrate the community's willingness to integrate and use the political opportunities to gain visibility (Akdemir 2022). Furthermore, the festival in 2013 opened with a reception hosted by the then members of parliament Meg Hillier and Diane Abbott at the Parliament in 2013. The Labour MPs addressed the discrimination against Alevi community in Turkey, illustrating the transnational character of this mobilisation (Akdemir 2022).

Gradually the community also established an All-Party Parliamentary Group (APPG) for Alevis on 3 December 2015 (AleviNet 2016). This unofficial platform run by the members of Commons and Lords provides the community with a chance to express their social and political demands as well as their religious and cultural rights in Britain and overseas. Another important aspect of Alevi identity mobilisation has been the inclusion of the category of 'Alevi' as a faith group in the national census (Alevinet 2025). BAF's (British Alevi Federation) application to the authorities to be included as a faith community in the 2021 census was accepted and the category 'Alevi' has been included under the 'Others' option.

Another key achievement that strengthens Alevi community's public visibility on the local level and give them a positive example for claiming further rights is the inclusion of Alevi faith in Religious Education classes. This project is the direct result of the community's interest in fostering education and incorporating academics to finding solutions to community's problems as well as the British education system's openness to represent immigrant cultures. Alevi Cultural Centre and Cemevi, Prince of Wales Primary School in Enfield and the University of Westminster collaborated to incorporate Alevi faith into the school curriculum, which is reported to make positive impact on children from Alevi background, reducing the pupils' disruptive behaviour and making them feel more included in school (Jenkins & Çetin 2019; Jenkins 2020).

While dealing with identity issues, immigrants' structural problems (such as poverty, limited educational opportunities for the next generations, ghettoisation) may become blurred. As Kaya (1998) argued, 1990s' multiculturalist discourse reduced social problems and inequality to the culturalisation of differences. This is also a possible

source of tension in Britain; the unequal distribution of life chances is blended with the struggle for symbolic resources. Community centre leaders' public demands from British authorities include not only the recognition of Alevi culture but also solutions to real-life social problems such as high rates of suicide among the youth and involvement in gangs (Çetin 2016). The large scale Alevi demonstration in London Trafalgar Square on 16.02.2013, along with responses to the then prime minister Erdoğan's referring to Alevis as 'outside-related inside threats', also raised these social problems facing the community (Akdemir 2022).

Alevi mobilisation in Britain occurred in a short period of time for a relatively small population (compared to Germany and France) as a result of their being mainly political migrants and spatial concentration in London. By merging Alevi cultural symbols such as Alevi music and semah with political lobbying through representation in local and national political institutions, Alevis in Britain used a rich repertoire of contention (Tarrow 2011) and blended particularistic modes of activism with more universalist ones (Akdemir 2022).

Conclusion

To conclude, opportunity structures or constraints alone do not explain Alevi identity mobilisation; a strong identity and collective will formation defines whether or not people will engage in a social movement however the movement's characteristics are largely shaped by the available opportunity structures. For Alevi community in Britain a combination of multiple internal and external factors contributed to the emergence of a collective identity.

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