A Historic Turning Point and the Will to Safeguard the Future of Alevi Knowledge

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Summary

The Alevi Encyclopedia is a vital project enabling Alevis to combat centuries of physical and epistemic violence and assimilation. It seeks to document their cultural heritage using their own voice and concepts, establishing a scientifically grounded and unmanipulated reference for the future.

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The Alevi community is a faith community that has struggled for centuries against ongoing oppression and violence. In addition to physical violence, Alevis have also been subjected to epistemic violence throughout history. They have endured various forms of persecution while simultaneously fighting to protect their faith and culture against assimilation. It is precisely at this juncture that the project of the Alevi Encyclopedia emerges as a historic turning point.

Alevis in the Vortex of Violence and the Domination of Knowledge

From the first Islamic states in Anatolia to the present day, the Alevi faith has been openly rejected and continuously suppressed. While Alevis have been subjected to forced conversion on the one hand, they have also faced constant and systematic policies of violence on the other. From the late 19th century until the Dersim Massacre of 1937–38, these pressures persisted, later taking on new forms and content from the 1960s onward, and once again culminating in massacres targeting the Alevi community.

The uprooting of Alevis from their homelands through pogroms, their forced migration

to large cities or abroad, the confiscation of their places of worship and properties, the plundering of their archives, the distortion of their written sources, and the assimilation of Alevi children through compulsory religious education—all of these are but one dimension of the systematic erasure of memory to which they have been subjected.

The 1993 Sivas massacre, the 1995 massacres in Istanbul-Gazi and -Ümraniye, and the forced depopulation of Dersim in 1994 pushed the Alevi community into an unexpected "Alevi Awakening," leading to rapid organization both in Western Europe and throughout Turkey. Cemevis, as Alevi houses of worship, together with the federations and foundations that subsequently emerged, formed the backbone of these networks of organization. Supported by the Alevi diaspora in Europe, Cemevis in Turkey benefited from the reciprocal sharing of experience, which in turn fostered the visibility of a strong Alevi community and opened the way for Alevis to become actors in international politics.

The most significant outcomes of this process can clearly be observed in the context of EU–Turkey relations. In 1999, Turkey was accepted as a candidate for full membership in the European Union, and accession negotiations began in 2005. During this process, the Alevi community gained a strong political platform from which to voice its demands for recognition and democratic rights. Alevi institutions in both Europe and Turkey played crucial roles in supporting policies aimed at improving the living conditions of unofficial ethnic and religious minorities in Turkey, thereby drawing increasing international political and academic attention to their cause.

The Necessity of the Alevi Encyclopedia

While the Alevi community continues to face obstacles such as prevention, silencing, forced suppression, and prosecution in its struggle for democratic rights, today it is also confronted with systematic policies of transformation and manipulation carried out by the AKP. Particularly during the so-called "openings" process, the establishment of "Alevism–Bektashism Research Centers" at various universities aimed at a deliberate and systematic erosion of knowledge. It can clearly be observed that the construction of an "Islamicized Alevism," framed by the AKP, has become a serious objective. Most recently, with the establishment of the "Alevi–Bektashi Culture and Cemevi Presidency" within the Ministry of Culture, Cemevis and other Alevi institutions have been specifically targeted, and there are attempts to intervene in their socio-cultural activities.

In this politically tense process, the various initiatives carried out within the "Alevi

academies" in Turkey and Europe over the last decade can also be seen as attempts to find solutions. With the emergence of Alevi Studies as a scholarly field in the international academic arena, a serious new generation of scholars—especially Alevi academics and researchers working on Alevism—has also come into being. Therefore, it is today an important necessity for this accumulated knowledge to prepare a fundamental reference source on Alevism, using scientific methods and tools, in line with present needs and future expectations.

The Alevi Encyclopedia should be understood as the will of the Alevi community to claim ownership of its own history, faith, culture, and memory in its own language and with its own emotions, and in this respect it is of great value. It is a powerful initiative of knowledge production from within, in response to the manipulations, erasures, and forced transformations directed at Alevi memory and knowledge by states and external actors. Around the world, this also resonates with the centuries-long experiences of minority and indigenous communities who have been subjected to colonial and external approaches. By reshaping their relations with research and researchers through "self-determination and inclusion in research governance," these communities have challenged the colonial legacy of knowledge production. This approach has deeply influenced debates on the decolonization of knowledge politics. For Alevis to define their culture within their own concepts, meanings, and emotional worlds, and to transmit it to future generations, can thus be regarded as a development of historical importance.

The Alevi Encyclopedia, in this sense, aims to be a functional platform for the transmission of both historical and contemporary knowledge distilled directly from the hands and voices of the Alevi community, arranged in line with the needs of society and the age. At the same time, it constitutes a strong epistemological source of self-knowledge against the manipulations of external actors who pursue different agendas and plans concerning Alevism. With its focus on the history, sociology, anthropology, folklore, geography, theology, politics, and other fundamental dimensions of Alevism, the Alevi Encyclopedia seeks to carry the Alevi reality from the past to the present, into the 21st century and beyond. It will be a long-term project breathing with the Alevi community, offering possibilities to grow with new generations and to open the way to new knowledge.

The Alevi Encyclopedia initiative also aims to strengthen its academic and intellectual efforts by sharing them with the Alevi public and the academic world through annual workshops, conferences, and seminars. It can also be seen as a knowledge platform that takes into account the multi-lingual and multi-cultural composition within the Alevi

community, seeks to depict the full spectrum of Alevism in all its dimensions, and prioritizes Alevi communities that have until now been ignored. By addressing Alevism as a historical and social cultural phenomenon, this initiative aims to be a multi-lingual knowledge source accessible to anyone who wishes to understand Alevism’s unique place within human culture—especially for the younger generations of the European diaspora. In this sense, it carries the ambition not only of including articles prepared by academics, but also of becoming a rich ethnographic resource that incorporates first-hand works and records contributed by community leaders, religious figures, and intellectuals from within the Alevi society itself.